

Accreditation Frameworks and Sustainable Development in Indian Management Education: A Literature Review

Ms. Maitreyee Koranne¹, Prof. Dr. Kavita Kalyandurgamath²

¹PhD Scholar, LIUTEBM University, Zambia, (Enrolment No. GG19037).

²Professor at Prin. L. N. Welingkar Institute of Management Development and Research (PGDM), Mumbai

ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) today is facing pressure not only to include sustainability in their teaching and research but also in the way they govern, manage their campuses, and engage with local communities. Accreditation, which was used for quality assurance (QA) purposes, is now seen to help HEIs systematically integrate sustainable development into their systems and document sustainability practices. Based on 122 references, this paper explores the potential of international accreditation bodies (AACSB, ACBSP, IACBE, AMBA, EFMD/EQUIS, and SAQS) and Indian accreditation agencies (NAAC and NBA) in advancing the goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promoting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Key themes include (i) accreditation criteria and external QA, (ii) governance and reform challenges in India, (iii) sustainability/ESD integration, and (iv) comparability across frameworks. The review identifies five gaps operationalization of indicators, effect-pathway clarity, data preparedness, harmonization, and equity, and proposes a PhD framework to develop an auditable, SDG aligned Sustainable Development Framework through Accreditation for Indian HEIs...

Keywords: sustainable development, higher education, accreditation, NAAC, NBA, quality assurance, SDGs, Education for Sustainable Development, NEP 2020, Indian higher education

INTRODUCTION:

Introduction: Sustainability, ESD, and the role of accreditation

ESD is a transformative approach that equips learners to make informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and social justice (Jangde, 2025). UNESCO emphasises that ESD is not merely environmental knowledge transfer but a shift in thinking and practice towards a feasible, and environmentally sound world (Siraj-Blatchford, 2024). In higher education, ESD is best understood as a whole institution approach influencing learning outcomes (cognitive, socio-emotional, behavioural), pedagogy, and the learning environment itself.

Accreditation offers a system of governance and proof through which sustainability commitments can be transformed from mere statements of intent to quantifiable activities. Several international accreditation agencies like AACSB, ACBSP, IACBE, AMBA, EFMD/EQUIS, and SAQS lay down stringent quality standards, measurable outcomes, and continuous enhancement, frequently leading to better job prospects and increased global recognition of the accredited institutions (Jafarov, 2024; Bieker, 2014; Ndubuka-McCallum, 2025). India has designated NAAC and NBA as its main accreditation authorities. NAAC primarily accredits institutions whereas NBA accredits programs (Kumaravelu, 2021). NAAC's evaluation of higher education institutions (HEIs) is based on seven criteria such as curriculum, teaching-learning, research, infrastructure, governance, student support and innovation (Gautam, 2024). NBA decides on the program level outcomes and was given

operational independence in 2010; then, it further got empowered in relation to AICTE (Tuli, 2021). Policy context is the very essence. NEP 2020 directly attaches educational reform to achieving SDGs and lays stress on a holistic and multidisciplinary education that includes ethics and civic responsibility (Aithal, 2024). Regulatory proposals (e.g. the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill 2025) are indicative of a move towards less fragmentation, more autonomy, and effective regulation, in tune with the principles of NEP 2020 (Fullan, 2016).

Process and scope of the literature review

The review is a methodical locating, assessment, and integration with the main aim of introducing sustainability via accreditation in India. The data set consists of 111 items out of which fifty are research articles, thirty-three are books/handbooks, and twenty-eight are annual reports/accreditation manuals. The article integrates scholarly research along with standards, manuals, and policy documents that serve as a basis for accreditation practices.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This literature review is framed around these goals:

Analyze how accreditation can foster in promoting sustainability in Indian HEIs.

Review the sustainability standards, present in NAAC, NBA, and the selected international accreditation frameworks (AACSB, ACBSP, IACBE, AMBA, EFMD/EQUIS, and SAQS) and assess how these can be implemented in Indian HEIs.

Investigate the prospect of including sustainability-related documentation in the accreditation standards of the major

institutional areas, like governance, teaching and learning, research, campus management, and community engagement.

Suggest a sustainability framework for Indian HEIs based on accreditation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aims at answering the following questions:

To what extent, accreditation is a tool for enhancing sustainability in Indian higher education institutions?

Which sustainability-related standards are included in NAAC, NBA, and a few international accreditation frameworks (AACSB, ACBSP, IACBE, AMBA, EFMD/EQUIS and SAQS), and to what extent are they useful for Indian higher education institutions?

What are the ways of introducing sustainability related evidence in accreditation standards for governance, pedagogy, research, campus administration, and community engagement?

In what ways can accreditation standards and implementation approaches contribute to the creation of a comprehensive sustainability framework for higher education in India?

Scope of the Review

This literature review explores the potential of accreditation systems as a leverage for sustainable development in the context of Indian higher education. It highlights NAAC and NBA as the two main Indian accreditation bodies, but through a few selective and purposive references, it also introduces some international accreditation agencies (AACSB, ACBSP, IACBE, AMBA, EFMD/EQUIS and SAQS) to present a global perspective. The review is primarily conceptual and comparative in nature that, apart from other issues, examines the scope of institutionalizing sustainability in various areas of a higher education institution such as governance, teaching and learning, research, campus facilities, and community outreach. Overall, the paper points out the potential of accreditation in driving through the continuous improvement of quality as well as the sustainable development of an institution.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

This review has certain limitations that should be acknowledged.

The study relies completely on secondary data, including published literature, policy documents, and various accreditation reports and manuals.

Primary research involving surveys, interviews, field visits, or audits is not part of the study.

Content analysis refers only to the formal standards and criteria as specified by accreditation agencies and does not consider the institutional implementation based on direct evidence.

Institutional practices tend to differ even in the same implementation of an accreditation standard due to factors

such as availability of resources, leadership, and internal quality culture. These differences can also affect how stakeholders view and understand an accreditation standard.

Since accreditation frameworks are revised from time to time, some of the interpretations and alignments made in this assessment may be changed in the future.

Research Gaps

The review identifies the following important gaps in the existing literature:

Operationalization gap: Sustainability is a topic on everyone's lips, however, the clear and quantifiable accreditation metrics for evaluating it remain scarce.

Effect pathway gap: There is the lack of studies that demonstrate how accreditation can play a part in boosting sustainability in aspects like governance, curriculum, and resource allocation.

Data preparedness gap: Different institutions vary in their proficiency to gather, systematize, and highlight sustainability-related statistics.

Harmonization gap: Only a few sustainability indicators align with the demands of NAAC, NBA, and international accreditation frameworks.

Equity gap: Little research has examined whether accreditation-based sustainability frameworks can help to reduce differences across regions and among diverse types of institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative and involves a review of secondary data to assess the scope for accreditation to promote sustainability in Indian higher education. The methodology is a four-step process: sources, screen and organize, thematic, and synthesize to develop an integrated framework. Sources of information are peer-reviewed publications, books, policy documents, handbooks and accreditation manuals, with a focus on NAAC and NBA accreditation in India and international accreditation frameworks such as AACSB, EQUIS/EFMD, AMBA, SAQS, ACBSP, and IACBE.

Once the sources are organized, a thematic model is employed to identify common themes such as quality assurance, outcome-based education, governance, and information systems, sustainability/ESD integration, and accreditation impact. This is followed by a crosswalk model that compares common and contrasting requirements of accreditation framework to determine the scope for sustainability indicators to be integrated into accreditation evidence. Gaps and a pathway for accreditation to promote sustainability in Indian HEIs are identified.

International accreditation and quality assurance: Structures and lessons

Key bodies and evolving emphases

International literature explains the evolution and legitimacy of accreditation in business and professional

education. Applegate (2025) traces early twentieth-century debates about business schools and the role of accreditation in establishing credibility. AACSB, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, was founded in 1916 and by 2024 it has grown its list of accredited schools to include more than 1,000 institutions in over one hundred countries (Hawawini, 2025). AMBA and EQUIS are commonly positioned as signifiers of post-graduate and institution-level excellence respectively, with EQUIS additionally examining aspects such as governance, academic programmes, faculty, research, physical resources, commitment to ethics, and level of external engagement (Osbaldeston, 2023).

Practitioner discussions illustrate a few differences between the two organizations' philosophies and approaches. The AACSB is frequently considered to be the more selective and reputation-focused accreditation while the IACBE is viewed as being more inclusive; the time frames also vary as AACSB usually takes about 5 to 7 years and reaccreditation is done through continuous improvement reviews, whereas IACBE takes 2 to 4 years with a longer cycle (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025; Hilla Back, 2025). One of the pieces of evidence points out that accreditation has a significant impact on students' decisions. In France, AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA accredited schools independently attracted more students. However, the "triple crown" combination resulted in an additional premium that was more than the sum of each separate accreditation (Jacquimy & Lefebvre, 2021). The authors note that reaccreditation can become a bureaucratic exercise if the leaders view it as a one-off event rather than continuous quality management. In this respect, the Continuous Improvement Review (CIR) is conceived as a comprehensive assessment of strategy, innovation, learning assurance, engagement, and societal impact and is not merely a checklist (McIntyre & Gilbert, 2021; Querini, 2025).

MAPPING AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Comparative mapping research is indispensable for India in its global moves. Mathew (2018), by mapping NBA and AACSB, discovers a substantial overlap but a few key differences (e.g., research requirements, faculty credential standards, and outcome structures). European QA reports, based on minimum criteria and pass/fail outcomes, draw a line between accreditation and "reviews"; however, self-evaluation and peer review, which are evidence based, are also part of the set. Think about the fact that compliance versus development dilemma, if acknowledged, can cause tensions (Omar et al., 2005; Dobbins, 2017). A gradually evolving step towards a complete understanding of sustainability which can be trusted only when the evidence systems and continuous improvement mechanisms are extremely well integrated.

Accreditation in Indian higher education: NAAC, NBA, and systemic constraints

NAAC: data centric external quality assurance and recent reforms

One of the ways NAAC's work is changing is going toward using ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and data for evaluation. Patil (2019) talks

about a 'paradigm shift' and mentions the Revised Accreditation Framework (RAF) that was introduced in July 2017 to make the processes more objective, transparent, and capable of being scaled. Reforms include quantitative indicators, increased use of ICT, reduced indicators/questions, benchmarking, third-party Data Validation and Verification (DVV), online Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS), and System Generated Scores (SGS) which is a combination of online evaluation and peer assessment (SIBI, 2019). In addition, these changes are very timely because the evidence required for SDG/ESG is heavily based on reliable data capture, validation, and disclosure processes.

Recent proposals around binary or minimum-benchmark accreditation aim to increase participation and reduce "grade anxiety", but they may also reduce granular differentiation and risk becoming a compliance check unless supported by credible data systems and capacity-building (Nikhil, Vijesh & Shefeeque, 2025; Henderson, 2024). Historical accounts explain why NAAC emerged: mass expansion, accountability demands, and limited improvement resources, requiring a national EQA system adapted to Indian diversity (Stella, 2010; Stella, 2002; Jagannath Patil, 2015; Prasad, 2005; Adhikari & Shreshtha, 2023).

NBA: OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION (OBE) AND EVIDENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

NBA accreditation is framed as an evidence-based OBE process rather than a one-time event. Institutions must demonstrate programme outcomes, curriculum alignment, faculty adequacy, and student performance data (Babu et al., 2021). Digital evidence systems are increasingly advocated centralized data platforms to store and retrieve accreditation information creating an opportunity to integrate sustainability metrics (e.g., SDG outcomes, community engagement evidence, resource-use metrics) so that sustainability becomes auditable within routine QA (Divyansh Bansal, 2025; Selvakumar, 2025). Critical analyses also note challenges: voluntary participation, complexity, and limitations in criteria weighting and self-assessment, particularly for technical education seeking parity with Washington Accord signatories (Prasad & Bhar, 2010; Hemlata Parmar, 2025).

GOVERNANCE AND REFORM CHALLENGES

NEP's concept of "light but tight" means accreditation becoming the main source of trust in the system, and a National Accreditation Council (NAC) will supervise a network of accrediting agencies (Sharma & Inda, 2021; Sangeet, 2024). Field researchers find that the problems mentioned above still exist lack of proper infrastructure, not enough funding, limited interdisciplinary activities, research capacity deficiency, and employability issues, while diverse groups of stakeholders have different perceptions (Gupta et al., 2021; Agarwal, 2006). Besides that, the authors show that accreditation serves as a "quality brand" that affects student decisions, thereby indicating a remarkably high market salience (Kumar, Shukla & Passey, 2020). The literature on institutional

massification, also points out the simultaneous growth and increasing gap in terms of resources, faculty, and research productivity (Bhagwan, 2019; Donaghy, 2026; Krishna, 2024).

SUSTAINABILITY AND ESD IN HIGHER EDUCATION: FROM COMMITMENT TO EVIDENCE

Conceptual work points to a common “implementation gap” between sustainability plans and demonstrable change. Caeiro and Azeiteiro (2020) argue that institutions often report sustainability goals without performance evidence, recommending long-term assessment that captures internal reform and external impact (Bosevska, 2020; Levatino, 2024). The SDGs mark a policy shift by explicitly including higher education in development agendas, requiring research, partnerships, and contextualised action (Owens, 2017; Chankseliani, 2021). In India, scholars argue that sustainability is urgent due to demographic pressure, urbanisation, and environmental-social challenges; recommended strategies include ICT-enabled access, learner centred transformation, curriculum greening, stronger research orientation, interdisciplinary themes, and improved financing (Sehgal & Khanna, 2017; Emina, 2021; Ciriello, 2025). Higher education quality is presented as foundation for sustainable development, especially in a system shaped by private expansion and uneven access (Tripathi, 2016; Purvis, 2019).

ESD is emphasized in UNESCO frameworks as SDG 4 and a facilitator of other SDGs. ESD should encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, values, and participation; it is not a separate subject but a cross-cutting pedagogy and institutional approach (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2012; UNESCO, 2011; Giangrande, 2019; Holman, 2023; Ahmad, 2025). Policy papers emphasize that, besides other factors, enabling conditions like collaboration among stakeholders, consistent policy, and continuous political commitment are important (Whitby, 2019; Eichberg, 2024). Guides contend that project-based efforts alone cannot bring about whole institution changes (Purcell & Haddock- Fraser, 2023). These publications, taken together, provide a convincing case for accreditation as a lever in the sense that it makes self-study, peer review, evidence submission, and systematic improvement planning.

STANDARDS, MANUALS, AND REPORTS: WHERE SUSTAINABILITY IS BEING EMBEDDED.

Standards are a clear indication of the way "impact" and "responsibility" are institutionalized in a formal manner. AACSB standards (2020; update Feb. 2025) are gradually raising the bar for achieving a positive societal impact as a key element across strategic management, learner success, and thought leadership/engagement. Ethics and integrity requirements contribute to sustainability while also the provision of proof linking the strategy, curriculum, intellectual contributions, and engagement to the outcomes (McIntyre, 2021). EQUIS Standards and Criteria (2025) are centered around Ethics, Responsibility,

and Sustainability (ERS) as a cross-cutting theme, necessitating that ERS be integrated into mission and strategy and the implementation supported by policy and resources (Iwogbe, 2025).

ACBSP standards (Revision D, January 2026) based on Baldrige logic and ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results, Improvement), directly connect the accreditation to the quality management that is ongoing rather than compliance at one time only (JS Reddy, 2023). IACBE manuals focus on mission and outcomes-based accreditation with multiple-year evidence cycles (IACBE, 2019; Gaston, 2023). AMBA criteria see the MBA as a tool for grooming responsible leaders who will be able to make positive contributions to society and lead the sustainable development (Rajakrishnan Manivel, 2024).

Indian manuals offer parallel hooks for sustainability. NBA's General Manual (2019) gives a comprehensive explanation of OBE assessment and its continuous improvement in which differentiated criteria for institution types and global recognition pathways through Washington Accord signatory status are also included (Dinh, 2025). NAAC manuals (2020) emphasize data driven evaluation, use of ICT, third-party validation, and building quality culture through continuous cycles (Bejan, 2015). Besides, national development frameworks suggest SDG aligned focus areas (Government of India, UN Sustainable Development Framework 2018, 2022) that can inform indicator creation (Alok Kumar Srivastav, 2024). Evaluation Reforms of UGC (2019) encourage student-centred evaluation, learning outcomes, flexibility, and OBE ideas that are in line with ESD and sustainability-oriented learning (Sangeet, 2024; GG Kumar, 2020).

Bibliographic patterns and thematic clusters

The corpus intensifies from 2017–2025, reflecting rising accountability, data governance, outcomes orientation, and SDG integration. It has four thematic dominant clusters: (i) accreditation criteria and external QA; (ii) governance and reform issues in Indian HE; (iii) sustainability and ESD integration; and (iv) comparability and mapping across accreditation frameworks. Manuals reinforce these clusters by operationalising evidence expectations (learning assurance, peer review, disclosure) and by introducing sustainability through ERS/impact language and SDG aligned priorities.

PROPOSED PHD FRAMEWORK: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACCREDITATION

To address the gaps, the proposed framework focuses on (i) an auditable SDG aligned indicator set spanning governance, teaching-learning, research and innovation, campus operations, and community engagement; (ii) compatibility mapping across NAAC, NBA, and international standards while maintaining Indian context; (iii) testable implementation logic examining how self-reporting, peer review, action plans, and follow-up shape sustainability integration; and (iv) capacity-building

guidance using maturity levels and evidence processes to support low-capacity institutions.

CONCLUSION

The literature shows that the two philosophies of sustainability and accreditation have already become a 'discursive field'; however, their implementation in the Indian higher education sector has been quite limited. Accrediting agencies such as AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA are increasingly turning their attention to these two main components of sustainability and accountability. The influence of accrediting agencies in India, such as the

data-driven approach of NAAC and the outcome-based approach of NBA, is promising. However, at the same time, there have been identified gaps in terms of indicators and so forth. Therefore, it is possible to say that these accrediting agencies in India can transform the entire exercise from a rarely to a regular, ongoing process that would be instrumental in bringing about organizational changes. Nevertheless, the study has pointed out the need for the development of a framework that would be the instrument for linking environmental sustainability, social sustainability, and economic sustainability with the strategic development process.

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