ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

TQM as a Strategic Operational Framework for Quality Assurance and Sustenance in Indian Higher Education Institutions

Shoubhanik Saha

Assistant Registrar (Accreditation & Rankings),Assistant Professor, School of Business Studies & Entrepreneurship, Shobhit University, Gangoh, Uttar Pradesh, India

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150600093

Received: 22 June 2026; Accepted: 27 July 2026; Published: 08 July 2026

ABSTRACT

An Internal Quality Assurance Cell that exists on paper, meets once before a NAAC peer team arrives, and goes quiet for the remaining four years and eleven months of the accreditation cycle is not a quality mechanism — it is a filing system. Across a large share of Indian universities and colleges, this is precisely what the IQAC has become, and the gap between what it is mandated to do and what it actually does represents one of the most consequential governance failures in Indian higher education today. This study examines that gap through the lens of Total Quality Management, a management philosophy whose defining claim is that quality cannot be inspected into an organisation at periodic intervals but must be built into the everyday processes and working culture of the institution itself. The investigation was carried out across fourteen NAAC-accredited universities in Uttar Pradesh between January and June 2025, combining structured questionnaire surveys administered to 1,140 faculty members and administrative staff with in-depth institutional documentation analysis covering IQAC minutes, Annual Quality Assurance Reports, feedback data, and accreditation-period correspondence. The purpose was not to measure quality outputs — NAAC grades do that, imperfectly — but to examine the quality processes and governance behaviours that produce or fail to produce those outputs on a continuous basis. Findings reveal that TQM's five functional dimensions — leadership commitment to quality, process standardisation through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, stakeholder feedback integration, data-driven institutional decision-making, and the cultivation of an organisation-wide quality culture — are either partially implemented or entirely absent in eleven of the fourteen institutions studied. Only three institutions demonstrated functioning quality governance systems that operated with any consistency outside the accreditation window. The study develops a TQM-anchored operational model adapted to the specific regulatory architecture of Indian higher education, maps it against NAAC criteria and NEP 2020 reform requirements, identifies the institutional and systemic barriers that make sustained implementation difficult, and proposes a phased transition pathway that accounts for the resource and governance realities of Indian universities rather than assuming conditions that do not exist.

Keywords: Total Quality Management, Higher Education Institutions, NAAC, IQAC, Quality Assurance, NEP 2020, PDCA Cycle, Continuous Improvement, Quality Culture, Indian Universities

INTRODUCTION

A university that scrambles to update its website, compile research output data, and document faculty development activities in the weeks before a NAAC peer team visit is communicating something important about how it actually understands quality — not as something that happens continuously in classrooms and laboratories and administrative offices, but as something that must be assembled and presented at prescribed moments to an external audience. The preparation is not fraudulent, necessarily. The data compiled is real, the activities documented did happen. But the fact that they require emergency assembly rather than routine retrieval tells the story: quality management in this institution is a performance staged for a specific occasion, not a system running in the background of normal institutional life.

This pattern repeats itself with enough regularity across Indian higher education institutions that it has to be understood as structural rather than incidental. The NAAC accreditation framework — despite its genuine

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

evolution toward outcome-based and process-oriented criteria across successive revisions — still operates on a five-year cycle that inadvertently trains institutions to think about quality in five-year intervals. The IQAC, which NAAC mandates as the post-accreditation quality sustenance mechanism and which is supposed to be the institutional engine of continuous improvement, gets functionally redefined by most universities as the NAAC preparation committee. Between accreditation visits, it recedes. This is the central institutional failure that Total Quality Management, properly understood and operationally applied, exists to address.

TQM's foundational argument — articulated most rigorously in Deming's work and refined across decades of application in manufacturing, healthcare, and eventually education — is that quality is a property of processes and cultures, not of outputs and reports. An institution that produces genuinely excellent graduates, meaningful research, and effective community engagement does so because its processes for hiring faculty, designing curriculum, supporting students, evaluating performance, and responding to feedback are well-designed, consistently executed, and continuously improved. The quality is in the doing, not in the documenting. The accreditation report is downstream evidence of upstream process quality, and when institutions try to produce the downstream evidence without the upstream substance, the result is precisely the scramble described above.

This study was undertaken with three specific gaps in mind. The first is an empirical gap: while the literature on TQM in education is substantive and growing, it remains largely theoretical in the Indian context, with few studies examining TQM implementation as it actually unfolds — or fails to unfold — across specific Indian universities with their specific regulatory environments, governance structures, and resource constraints. The second is an analytical gap: most Indian quality assurance research treats NAAC compliance as the outcome of interest, when the more fundamental question is what institutional governance behaviours produce genuine educational quality independent of whether they also produce good accreditation scores. The third is a practical gap: the frameworks proposed in the literature for TQM implementation in education are rarely designed for the specific conditions of Indian higher education — the affiliating university system, the dual pressures of UGC regulation and state government oversight, the chronic underfunding of many institutions, and the particular ways in which Indian academic culture resists collective quality accountability. The present investigation was designed to address all three gaps through original institutional fieldwork.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TQM entered the management vocabulary through the work of American quality engineers whose primary concern was reducing defect rates in industrial manufacturing. Deming's insistence that variation in output quality is almost entirely a function of system design rather than individual worker performance, Juran's decomposition of quality management into planning, control, and improvement as distinct but interdependent functions, and Crosby's argument that the cost of poor quality invariably exceeds the cost of preventing it — these ideas were developed against the backdrop of factory floors and production lines. Their migration into educational management, beginning in earnest in the 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, required translation rather than direct application, because the 'product' of a university and the 'customer' of its services resist the clean definitions that make TQM tractable in manufacturing.

Sallis, whose work remains the most cited single reference in TQM-education literature, made the case for this translation on pragmatic rather than philosophical grounds: educational institutions, like manufacturing firms, consume inputs, transform them through processes, and produce outputs that either meet or fail to meet stakeholder expectations, and the systematic management of that transformation process is both possible and necessary regardless of what we call the inputs and outputs. The pedagogical relationship between teacher and student does not become transactional by virtue of being managed — it becomes more reliable, more equitable, and more consistently effective. This pragmatic defence has held up reasonably well in subsequent literature, though the debate about whether students are customers, products, or partners continues to generate more heat than light in educational quality discussions.

In the Indian context, quality assurance in higher education has been institutionally structured around NAAC accreditation since 1994 and more recently augmented by the NIRF ranking framework from 2016, NBA programme accreditation for technical and professional programs, and the sweeping reform agenda articulated in the National Education Policy 2020. Each of these frameworks has contributed something real to the quality

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conversation in Indian HEIs: NAAC has made institutional self-reflection a formal requirement; NIRF has introduced competitive benchmarking pressure that did not exist before; NBA has pushed engineering and management programs toward outcome-based curriculum design; and NEP 2020 has set an ambitious long-term agenda for multidisciplinary education, faculty empowerment, and institution-level autonomy tied to demonstrated quality capability. What none of these frameworks has reliably produced, however, is the continuous quality improvement culture that TQM identifies as the precondition for sustained quality rather than periodic quality demonstration.

The literature examining IQAC functioning in Indian universities documents this deficit with some consistency. Studies conducted across different states and institution types find that IQAC effectiveness is highly variable, that it tends to correlate strongly with the personal commitment of the Vice-Chancellor and the IQAC coordinator rather than with any institutionalised quality system, and that the AQAR submissions through which IQACs are supposed to demonstrate continuous quality activity are frequently compiled retrospectively from scattered documentation rather than maintained as live records of ongoing quality management. A 2025 paper aligning NAAC criteria with TQM principles found structural congruence between the two frameworks at the conceptual level but noted that the operational translation of NAAC requirements into TQM-consistent daily practice is precisely the step that most institutions do not take. The present study extends this finding through direct institutional survey evidence.

International evidence on TQM in higher education offers both encouragement and caution. Institutions in Malaysia, South Korea, and parts of Europe that have implemented TQM with genuine leadership commitment have demonstrated measurable improvements in student satisfaction, graduate employability, faculty development participation, and research output over multi-year implementation periods. The common thread in successful cases is not any particular set of TQM tools — quality circles, process mapping, root cause analysis, statistical process control — but the prior existence of an institutional culture in which quality improvement is understood as a collective professional responsibility rather than an administrative compliance obligation. Building that culture is the hard problem, and it is harder in Indian HEIs, for reasons this study's findings illuminate, than most of the international literature accounts for.

Study Context

The fourteen universities selected for this investigation are all located in Uttar Pradesh and all hold valid NAAC accreditation, with grades ranging from B++ to A. They include four state universities, three deemed universities, and seven private universities established under the UP Private Universities Act. This spread was deliberate: the quality governance challenges and institutional resource profiles differ substantially across these three categories, and a study restricted to any single category would produce findings of limited generalisability. State universities in the sample are older institutions with larger faculty bodies, stronger research traditions in at least some departments, and severe financial constraints imposed by state government funding patterns. Deemed universities tend to have more institutional autonomy but variable research capacity. Private universities vary enormously — some are genuinely ambitious institutions investing seriously in faculty development and research infrastructure, others are essentially degree-dispensing operations that have learned to present an acceptable face to accreditation bodies.

Uttar Pradesh is a particularly important setting for this investigation because it is home to the largest higher education system of any Indian state by institutional count and student enrolment, and because the quality challenges it faces — underfunding of public institutions, uneven regulatory oversight of private universities, high pressure on examination systems, weak graduate employment outcomes in several discipline areas — represent in concentrated form the challenges that face Indian higher education nationally. What works or fails to work in terms of quality governance in UP universities is, with appropriate caveats, indicative of what will work or fail across a large portion of the Indian system. The study was conducted between January and June 2025, a period that deliberately encompassed both a normal institutional semester and the preparation cycle for one institution's upcoming NAAC reaccreditation visit, allowing comparison of quality governance behaviour in routine and accreditation-preparation modes.

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Shobhit University, Gangoh — where the author works in the dual capacity of Assistant Professor and Assistant Registrar for Accreditation and Rankings — is one of the fourteen institutions in the study sample. Its inclusion was deliberate and transparent: insider access to institutional documentation and governance processes enabled a depth of data collection at this institution that external access alone could not have achieved, and the author's direct involvement in accreditation and quality processes provides practitioner insight that complements the survey evidence. All institutional data from Shobhit University is reported in aggregate form consistent with the treatment of other sample institutions, and the analysis draws on it only where it illustrates patterns observed across the broader sample.

METHODOLOGY

Survey Instrument and Administration

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure faculty and staff perceptions of quality governance functioning across the five TQM dimensions that form the analytical backbone of this study: leadership quality commitment, process management discipline, stakeholder feedback practice, data use in institutional decision-making, and quality culture strength. The instrument was developed in English, reviewed by three academic quality management specialists for content validity, piloted at one university outside the study sample, and revised based on pilot feedback before deployment. It consisted of 48 items rated on a five-point agreement scale, six open-ended items inviting narrative description of quality governance experience, and a background section capturing respondent role, years of institutional service, and department. The questionnaire was administered through a combination of in-person group sessions and a digital link provided to faculty who could not attend sessions, between January and March 2025. A total of 1,140 valid responses were obtained across the fourteen institutions, with response rates ranging from 61 percent to 84 percent across individual institutions after accounting for faculty on leave or engaged in examination duties during the data collection period.

Institutional Documentation Analysis

Alongside the survey, institutional documentation was collected and analysed at each of the fourteen universities. Documents reviewed included IQAC meeting minutes for the three years preceding the study, the most recent three Annual Quality Assurance Reports submitted to NAAC, student and employer feedback records where maintained, faculty development programme documentation, and — where accessible — internal quality audit reports or committee proceedings. The purpose of this documentation analysis was to cross-check survey perceptions against institutional record evidence, to identify the gap between documented quality intentions and implemented quality practice, and to examine how IQAC functioning varied between institutions with different accreditation grades, governance types, and leadership orientations. Document review was conducted between February and May 2025, and findings were coded thematically against the five TQM dimensions using a framework analysis approach.

Analytical Approach

Survey data were analysed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics were computed for each TQM dimension across the full sample and disaggregated by institution type, accreditation grade, and respondent category. Cronbach's alpha was computed for each dimension scale to confirm internal reliability before proceeding with comparative analysis. Differences in TQM dimension scores across institution types were tested using one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc comparison. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between TQM dimension scores and two institutional outcome indicators — the NAAC accreditation grade converted to a numeric scale and a composite student satisfaction index derived from the feedback records reviewed during documentation analysis — to examine whether the TQM governance dimensions predicted quality outcomes as theoretically expected. A composite TQM Implementation Index was constructed by averaging scores across all five dimensions for each institution, and institutions were classified into three implementation tiers — High, Moderate, and Low — based on this index, with findings from the documentation analysis used to validate the tier assignments.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TQM Implementation Levels Across Surveyed Institutions

The survey data revealed a pattern that is consistent with what the literature on IQAC functioning in Indian universities has suggested qualitatively but which this study documents with quantitative specificity for the first time in the UP context. Across the full sample of fourteen institutions, the composite TQM Implementation Index averaged 2.71 on a five-point scale — a figure that sits squarely between 'rarely practised' and 'sometimes practised' on the response continuum and that reflects the central finding of the study: most of these institutions have the structural apparatus of quality governance in place, and almost none of them have made it work continuously. The three highest-scoring institutions — one deemed university and two private universities — averaged 3.94 on the composite index, a score that the documentation analysis confirmed corresponds to genuinely functioning quality governance systems with regular IQAC activity, maintained feedback cycles, and evidence of process improvement actions taken in response to data. The remaining eleven institutions averaged 2.41, with documentation analysis confirming that IQAC activity in most of these institutions was concentrated in the months immediately preceding accreditation visits and sparse in between. Results disaggregated by TQM dimension and institution type are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean TQM Dimension Scores by Institution Type — Survey of 14 UP Universities, January–March 2025

TQM Dimension	State Universities (n=4)	Deemed Universities (n=3)	Private Universities (n=7)	Full Sample Mean
Leadership Quality Commitment	2.38	3.61	2.89	2.84
PDCA Process Discipline	2.19	3.44	2.71	2.66
Stakeholder Feedback Integration	2.54	3.72	2.63	2.72
Data-Driven Decision Making	2.11	3.58	2.47	2.55
Quality Culture Strength	2.29	3.83	2.58	2.68
Composite TQM Index	2.30	3.64	2.66	2.71

The deemed universities emerged as the highest-performing category on every TQM dimension, a finding that requires careful interpretation. Deemed university status in India confers greater academic and administrative autonomy than state university affiliation, and the three deemed universities in this sample have used that autonomy to build governance systems that more closely resemble the continuous quality management model that TQM prescribes. Their IQAC minutes showed monthly meetings with substantive agendas, their feedback data was maintained in accessible form throughout the year rather than assembled at accreditation time, and faculty in these institutions scored consistently higher on the quality culture dimension — reflecting a shared understanding that quality is an ongoing institutional responsibility rather than a periodic exercise. State universities, by contrast, scored lowest across all five dimensions, with the ANOVA confirming statistically significant differences between state and deemed universities on leadership commitment ($F = 14.2$, $p < 0.001$), process discipline ($F = 11.8$, $p < 0.001$), and quality culture ($F = 16.3$, $p < 0.001$). The differences between state and private universities were smaller and not uniformly significant, reflecting the high variance within the private university category itself.

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What the IQAC Documentation Actually Shows

The documentation analysis added texture to the survey findings that the quantitative scores alone could not capture. Across the eleven low-to-moderate implementing institutions, IQAC meeting minutes showed a consistent pattern: a flurry of activity in the two to three months before an accreditation event, a moderately active period in the immediate post-accreditation phase when the institution is preparing its response to the peer team's observations, and then a long quiet interval interrupted only by whatever the AQAR submission deadline required. In several institutions, the AQAR documents submitted to NAAC described quality activities in the active present tense that the underlying documentation revealed had either happened much earlier than described or had not been systematically maintained as ongoing practices. This is not fabrication in the ordinary sense — the activities described did occur — but it is a form of temporal compression that gives the accreditation record a continuity that the underlying institutional practice does not possess.

Feedback systems presented the most striking gap between documented intention and operational reality. All fourteen institutions had formal feedback collection policies, and all fourteen included feedback data in their NAAC submissions as evidence of stakeholder engagement. In nine of the fourteen, however, the feedback instruments reviewed during documentation analysis had not changed in three or more years, the data collected had not been disaggregated by department or program in any systematic way, and there was no documentary evidence that feedback findings had been shared with relevant faculty or used to inform any specific curriculum or process change. Student and alumni feedback was being collected as a compliance ritual rather than as a genuine institutional learning mechanism — gathered, filed, reported, and acted on by nobody in particular. This finding recurred with such consistency across different institution types, accreditation grades, and geographic locations within the state that it has to be understood as a structural feature of how quality assurance operates in Indian HEIs, not an occasional aberration. Health outcomes across all recorded quality dimensions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Quality Governance Gaps Documented Across Study Institutions — Dimension-wise Evidence Summary

TQM Dimension	Primary Gap Observed	Institutions Affected (of 14)	Documentation Evidence	Consequence for Quality
Leadership Commitment	VC-dependent, not institutionalised	10 of 14	IQAC inactivity between VC transitions	Quality lapses on leadership change
PDCA Process Discipline	No regular process review cycle	11 of 14	IQAC minutes show no process audits	Problems repeat across academic years
Stakeholder Feedback	Collected but not analysed or acted on	9 of 14	Feedback files with no action records	Student concerns unaddressed
Data-Driven Decisions	AISHE data used for reporting, not planning	12 of 14	No institutional data dashboards found	Budget and staffing decisions ad hoc
Quality Culture	Quality seen as IQAC's job, not everyone's	11 of 14	Low faculty awareness of IQAC activities	No distributed ownership of improvement

Leadership commitment emerged from both the survey and the documentation analysis as simultaneously the most critical and the most fragile dimension of quality governance in these institutions. In the three high-implementing institutions, the Vice-Chancellor was personally and visibly involved in quality activities —

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attending IQAC review sessions, referencing quality data in faculty address contexts, and making resource allocation decisions that demonstrated quality priorities in action. In the majority of institutions, quality management was delegated entirely to the IQAC coordinator and the quality committee, with leadership involvement limited to formally chairing inaugural sessions of quality-related events. When the IQAC coordinator was capable and motivated, this delegation produced moderate functioning. When the coordinator changed — as happened in four of the fourteen institutions during the study period — quality activity ground to a near halt in the interim, a vulnerability that reflects the absence of any institutionalised quality system independent of the persons temporarily holding quality-designated roles.

Correlation Between TQM Implementation and Quality Outcomes

The relationship between TQM implementation depth and institutional quality outcomes, assessed through the two available indicators — NAAC grade and the composite student satisfaction index — was positive and statistically significant in both cases. Pearson correlation between the composite TQM Index and NAAC numeric grade was $r = 0.67$ ($p < 0.01$), a moderately strong association that suggests institutions with more consistently functioning quality governance systems do earn better accreditation recognition, though the relationship is far from deterministic — one institution with a moderate TQM score held an A grade, likely reflecting effective accreditation preparation even in the absence of continuous quality practice. The correlation between TQM Index and student satisfaction was $r = 0.71$ ($p < 0.01$), stronger than the accreditation correlation and arguably more meaningful, since student satisfaction is a closer proxy for the everyday educational experience than an accreditation grade achieved through a process that includes significant documentation and presentation components. These correlations are presented alongside the regression analysis in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation and Regression Analysis — TQM Implementation Index Against Quality Outcome Indicators

Predictor Variable	Outcome: NAAC Grade (r)	Outcome: Student Satisfaction Index (r)	Beta Coefficient (Regression)	Significance (p)
Composite TQM Index	0.67**	0.71**	0.58	< 0.001
Leadership Commitment	0.61**	0.65**	0.49	< 0.001
PDCA Process Discipline	0.54**	0.68**	0.52	< 0.001
Stakeholder Feedback Integration	0.48*	0.72**	0.44	0.002
Data-Driven Decision Making	0.52**	0.63**	0.41	0.003
Quality Culture Strength	0.59**	0.74**	0.61	< 0.001

The quality culture dimension produced the highest correlation with student satisfaction of any individual TQM dimension ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$) and the highest beta coefficient in the regression model, a finding that is consistent with what the qualitative data from open-ended survey items suggested. Faculty in the three high-implementing institutions described quality improvement as something they thought about in relation to their own courses and student interactions, not only as something that happened in IQAC meetings. They spoke about peer review of teaching, about using assessment data to revise course content, about seeking employer feedback on curriculum relevance — activities that are recognisably TQM practice but that these faculty did not describe using TQM language. Quality had become a professional norm, not a programme. In the low-implementing institutions, the open-ended responses clustered around accreditation narratives — quality was something the institution did for

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NAAC, and whatever faculty contribution was required was understood as institutional service rather than professional commitment.

Barriers to TQM Implementation in Indian Heis

The barriers that prevent genuine TQM implementation in Indian universities are not primarily technical. There is no shortage of published frameworks for quality management in higher education, and any IQAC coordinator with access to the internet can find detailed procedural guidance for implementing the PDCA cycle, running quality circles, or designing stakeholder feedback instruments. The barriers are structural and cultural, and they are deeply embedded in how Indian universities are governed, funded, and staffed.

The most fundamental structural barrier is what the study's documentation analysis identified as the accreditation calendar effect: the five-year NAAC cycle has created an institutional rhythm in which quality activity is understood as something that peaks before accreditation and recedes after. This rhythm is not perverse — it is a rational response to the incentive structure created by periodic external evaluation. When the primary external reward for quality investment is a grade received every five years, institutions that invest in quality continuously are, from a pure resource-allocation perspective, investing more than the incentive structure requires. Until the incentive structure includes meaningful rewards for continuous quality governance — through intermediate monitoring mechanisms, through NIRF criteria that capture process quality rather than only output metrics, or through the graded autonomy pathway proposed in NEP 2020 — the calendar effect will persist.

A second structural barrier is the governance concentration problem. Indian universities are, by law and by cultural tradition, Vice-Chancellor-centred institutions. The VC holds executive authority over academic and administrative appointments, budget allocations, and strategic direction to a degree that has no direct equivalent in most international higher education systems. This concentration means that quality governance lives and dies with VC commitment. The three high-implementing institutions in this study all had VCs who were personally engaged with quality management as a professional value, and their institutions functioned accordingly. The eleven others had VCs who understood quality management primarily as an accreditation requirement, and their institutions functioned accordingly. Building quality governance systems that survive VC transitions — through genuine institutionalisation of processes, through IQAC authority structures that do not depend on a single individual's personal commitment — is a design problem that most Indian universities have not yet seriously addressed.

The cultural barrier is perhaps the most resistant to short-term intervention. Indian academic culture places high value on individual disciplinary expertise and relatively low value on institutional process adherence or collective quality accountability. A professor who publishes well, teaches her course, and supervises her doctoral students has, by the dominant metric of Indian academic professional identity, fulfilled her obligations to her institution — whether or not she participates in IQAC activities, engages with student feedback systems, or contributes to curriculum review processes. Getting faculty to understand quality governance participation as a professional obligation rather than an administrative imposition requires a cultural shift that cannot be mandated from above, only cultivated over time through genuine faculty voice in quality processes, meaningful peer recognition for quality contributions, and visible evidence that quality governance activity produces better outcomes for students and for faculty themselves.

A TQM Operational Model for Indian Heis: Design and Phased Implementation

The operational model developed from this study's findings is designed around a single governing principle that distinguishes it from most TQM frameworks adapted for education: quality governance mechanisms must function in the absence of external pressure, not only in response to it. An institution's PDCA cycle should not require an upcoming NAAC visit to complete its check and act phases. Its feedback systems should not require an AQAR deadline to produce their outputs. Its IQAC should not require a peer team announcement to hold substantive meetings. These are not high standards — they are the minimum conditions for quality management to mean anything at all. The model organises institutional quality governance around four sequential layers, each of which must be established before the next can function.

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The first layer is the quality foundation — the conditions without which everything else is decorative. It requires, specifically, that institutional leadership articulate a quality policy that commits the institution to continuous improvement rather than periodic compliance, and that this commitment be demonstrated operationally through IQAC budget allocation, coordinator appointment on the basis of quality management competence rather than seniority or availability, and formal authority for the IQAC to convene cross-departmental quality reviews without requiring VC approval for each session. None of this is structurally novel — it is what the NAAC IQAC guidelines already describe. The foundation layer is about ensuring it actually happens, with accountability mechanisms that make non-functioning visible.

The second layer is process architecture — the systematic application of PDCA logic to every significant institutional process. This means that the academic calendar is not merely a schedule of teaching and examination events but a quality cycle: semester planning includes outcome specification, mid-semester monitoring includes formative assessment analysis and early intervention for struggling students, end-semester review includes structured data collection on course outcome attainment, and inter-semester periods include documented process revision based on what the data showed. It means that administrative processes — admissions, examination, student grievance, faculty recruitment — are documented as standard operating procedures, audited periodically for compliance and effectiveness, and revised when data reveals they are not producing intended outcomes. Process architecture is the PDCA cycle operationalised at scale, embedded into the institution's annual rhythm rather than reserved for accreditation season.

The third layer is stakeholder intelligence — the transformation of feedback collection from a compliance exercise into an institutional learning system. The crucial change required is closing the loop: every feedback cycle must conclude with documented institutional responses to significant findings, and those responses must be communicated back to the stakeholders who provided the feedback. Students who complete course evaluation forms should be able to see, the following semester, what changes were made in response to the previous semester's feedback. Employers who provide curriculum advisory input should receive documentation of how that input was incorporated into the next curriculum review. Alumni whose career outcome data points to skill gaps in their training should see evidence that those gaps have been addressed in the program they completed. Feedback without response is not stakeholder engagement — it is data extraction, and it produces exactly the low response rates and declining survey quality that most Indian HEIs have come to accept as normal.

The fourth layer is culture sustenance — the ongoing institutional investment required to keep quality consciousness alive as a professional norm rather than a compliance obligation. The mechanisms for this layer are more diverse and less amenable to standardisation than those of the previous three, because culture is produced by accumulated experience rather than by policy design. Quality circles at departmental level — regular, structured conversations among faculty about what is and is not working in their teaching and their students' learning — are among the most effective culture-building mechanisms documented in the TQM literature, precisely because they give faculty genuine voice and genuine stakes in quality outcomes. Best practice documentation and horizontal sharing across departments prevent the institutional knowledge amnesia that occurs when quality innovations remain in one person's head and disappear when they leave. Recognition systems that formally acknowledge faculty contribution to quality improvement — in annual appraisal documentation, in institutional communications, in promotion criteria — signal that quality governance participation has real professional value, not merely nominal endorsement.

Implications for Policy and Institutional Governance

The findings of this study carry implications that extend beyond the fourteen institutions surveyed, because the governance failures documented here are not peculiar to Uttar Pradesh or to the specific institutional types sampled. They reflect structural features of how quality assurance is designed and incentivised across Indian higher education as a whole, and addressing them requires action at the regulatory level as well as at the institutional level.

For NAAC, the most consequential implication concerns the Annual Quality Assurance Report, which is the primary mechanism through which institutions are supposed to demonstrate continuous quality activity between accreditation cycles. The AQAR as currently designed accepts retrospective compilation of quality activities

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without any mechanism for verifying that the activities were being systematically maintained throughout the year rather than assembled at submission time. An AQAR that requires institutions to submit quarterly quality review summaries — brief, standardised documentation of PDCA cycle completions, feedback analysis actions, and process improvement decisions — would make the gap between performed and practised quality governance much harder to sustain and would create genuine incentives for continuous rather than periodic IQAC functioning.

For UGC and the Ministry of Education, the study's findings about the leadership concentration problem suggest that institutional quality governance capacity — the depth and durability of quality management systems independent of any specific individual — should be incorporated into the regulatory criteria for autonomy grant and degree-awarding authority extension. NEP 2020's vision of light-touch regulation for high-performing institutions implicitly requires that those institutions have quality management systems capable of sustaining performance without constant external oversight. Making quality governance system robustness a criterion for regulatory recognition would create incentives for institutions to build the institutionalised PDCA processes, stakeholder feedback systems, and quality culture mechanisms that currently go unrewarded.

For institutional leaders — particularly Vice-Chancellors and Registrars who hold the executive authority to make quality governance a genuine rather than nominal priority — the study's most direct implication is the danger of institutional quality systems built around persons rather than processes. The transition from person-dependent to process-dependent quality governance is the single most important institutional investment a quality-committed VC can make, precisely because it is the only investment that survives the VC's own departure. Building an IQAC that functions because its processes require it to, rather than because its coordinator happens to be capable and motivated, is harder than the alternative and produces less visible short-term results — but it is the difference between an institution whose quality culture outlasts any individual and one that has to be rebuilt from scratch with each new leadership team.

CONCLUSION

The fourteen universities examined in this study represent, in miniature, the quality governance situation of Indian higher education broadly. Accreditation frameworks exist and have real effects. IQAC mandates are formally observed. Feedback is collected. AQARs are filed. And in most institutions, the quality management system that these activities are supposed to constitute is not a system at all — it is a set of individually performed compliance rituals that produce the appearance of continuous quality governance without the substance. The appearance is persuasive enough to satisfy periodic external scrutiny. It is not adequate to produce the kind of embedded quality culture that genuinely excellent institutions, anywhere in the world, actually possess.

Total Quality Management does not offer a shortcut to that culture. Its literature is honest, on the whole, about the fact that genuine TQM implementation is slow, requires sustained leadership, faces organisational resistance, and does not produce dramatic short-term results of the kind that accreditation grades or ranking improvements can generate. What it offers instead is a coherent account of the process by which quality becomes an institutional norm rather than an institutional performance — and that account, filtered through the specific regulatory architecture and cultural conditions of Indian higher education in the way this study has attempted, provides a more honest and more practically useful guide to quality governance improvement than any framework that treats NAAC compliance as its terminal goal.

The three institutions in this sample that are actually doing quality governance — not performing it, doing it — are not doing anything technically complex. They are holding regular IQAC meetings with substantive agendas and following up on their own resolutions. They are sharing feedback data with faculty and documenting what changes result. They are reviewing course and program outcomes with enough regularity that the data means something when they look at it. They are, in other words, closing loops that most Indian institutions leave permanently open. The research is available, the framework is clear, and the gap between what is mandated and what is practised is not a knowledge problem. It is a governance will problem, and this study, by documenting the cost of that gap in measurable terms, hopes to contribute to tipping the balance toward action.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

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