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NIRF Excellence 2030: A Five-Year Strategic Roadmap for Institutional Transformation and Ranking Enhancement

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Abstract: India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has, over its nine editions, evolved from a modest benchmarking exercise into the most consequential domestic instrument for measuring institutional quality in higher education. Yet participation growth, rising average scores, and expanding category coverage have not been matched by a coherent, forward-looking strategy that helps individual institutions convert annual ranking exercises into durable capability. This paper develops a five-year strategic roadmap, spanning 2026 to 2030, that translates the five NIRF parameters Teaching, Learning and Resources; Research and Professional Practice; Graduation Outcomes; Outreach and Inclusivity; and Perception into a phased programme of institutional transformation. Drawing on recent scholarship on NIRF methodology, global ranking systems, the National Education Policy 2020, and accreditation reform, the paper argues that sustainable ranking improvement depends less on short-term data optimization than on structural investment in research capacity, faculty development, governance, and quality assurance. A three-phase roadmap diagnostic baselining, capacity building, and global consolidation is proposed, together with a governance model, a risk register, and a set of institution-level recommendations. The paper concludes that NIRF Excellence 2030 is achievable only where ranking is treated as a by-product of genuine quality improvement rather than as an end in itself.

Keywords: NIRF, higher education, institutional ranking, strategic planning, NEP 2020, NAAC, quality assurance, India

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in India has expanded at a pace that few national systems have matched, and with that expansion has come an equally rapid demand for credible, comparable measures of institutional quality. Launched by the Ministry of Education in September 2015, the National Institutional Ranking Framework was designed to provide a standardized, India-specific methodology for ranking universities, colleges, and specialized institutions across disciplines such as engineering, management, law, medicine, and agriculture (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2023). Nine editions later, the exercise has grown from roughly 3,500 institutions in its inaugural year to more than 6,500 unique participants across sixteen categories, an increase of about 86 per cent (KPMG in India, 2024). This growth is a genuine policy achievement, yet it has also exposed a structural gap: most institutions treat NIRF participation as an annual compliance exercise rather than as one output of a longer strategic cycle. Average scores across most categories have risen year on year, driven disproportionately by improvements in the Teaching, Learning and Resources parameter rather than by deeper gains in research productivity or graduate outcomes (KPMG in India, 2024). Meanwhile, independent analyses continue to document structural concentration in ranking outcomes persistent regional clustering, limited mobility between rank bands, and the continued dominance of a small set of long-established, well-resourced institutions (Chauhan

& Singh, 2026). These patterns suggest that without a deliberate multi-year strategy, the gap between a small group of globally visible Indian institutions and the much larger population of aspiring institutions is likely to widen rather than close.

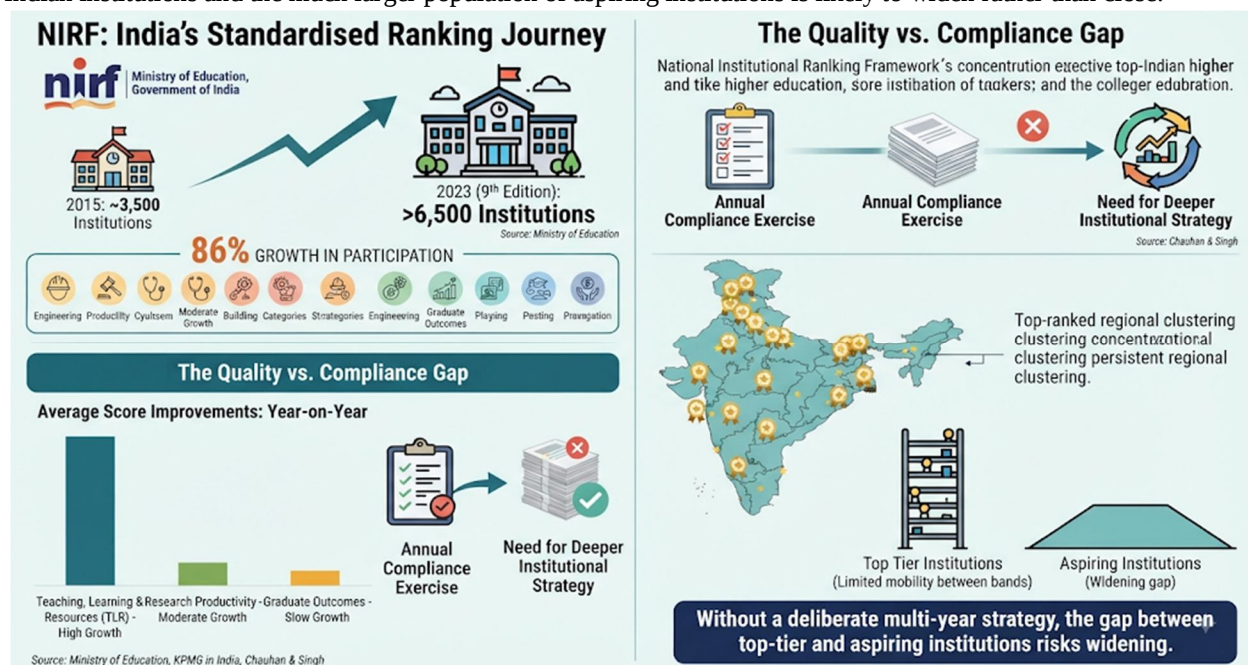


Fig 1: The NIRF Paradox: Growth Versus Strategic Quality

This image illustrates India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) growth from 3,500 to over 6,500 institutions. Despite rising participation and teaching resources, it highlights a structural gap: institutions treat rankings as compliance rather than strategy, leading to regional clustering, limited rank mobility, and a widening divide between top-tier and aspiring institutions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Evolution and Methodology of NIRF

NIRF ranks institutions using five broad parameter groups: Teaching, Learning and Resources (TLR); Research and Professional Practice (RP); Graduation Outcomes (GO); Outreach and Inclusivity (OI); and Perception (PR) (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2024). Ali (2022) provides one of the earliest systematic reviews of the framework's uncertainty and sensitivity, observing that even modest changes in self-reported institutional data can produce disproportionate swings in final rank, particularly for institutions clustered near band boundaries. Sivakumaren and Rajkumar (2019), in an early bibliometric study of NIRF-ranked universities, similarly found that publication and citation counts sourced from Scopus and Web of Science explained a substantial share of variance in research-parameter scores, underscoring how heavily the framework leans on bibliometric productivity even outside the formally labeled research categories. More recent institutional-level analysis by Chauhan and Singh (2026) tracked 164 universities appearing in the NIRF Top-100 list between 2016 and 2024 and applied a Herfindahl–Hirschman concentration index to ranking outcomes. Their results showed that South Indian institutions accounted for 42.68 per cent of Top-100 places, with an HHI value indicating moderate-to-high geographic concentration, and that only 41.46 per cent of institutions sustained their ranking position across cycles. This finding is significant for the present paper because it demonstrates that ranking volatility is not randomly distributed: it correlates with regional research infrastructure, institutional age, and funding history, all factors that a multi-year roadmap must explicitly address rather than treat as background noise.

B. Critiques of Ranking Methodologies

NIRF does not operate in isolation from the broader global ranking ecosystem, and the methodological critiques levelled at international systems are instructive for Indian institutions pursuing both domestic and global visibility. Fauzi et al. (2020) reviewed five major global ranking tools QS, Times Higher Education, the Academic Ranking of World Universities, the Leiden ranking, and Webometrics and identified recurring problems of indicator inconsistency, disciplinary bias toward the sciences, and limited comparability across methodologies.

Kochetkov (2024), in a state-of-the-art review of rankings in the context of research evaluation, similarly cautioned that global rankings were originally designed as marketing and benchmarking tools rather than as instruments of research assessment, and that governments launching "excellence initiatives" tied to ranking position risk distorting institutional research priorities toward metrics rather than substance.

Szluka et al. (2023) offered an empirical test of this concern, examining the top 300 universities across four major rankings and finding that the weight of bibliometric indicators ranged from 20 per cent in the QS methodology to 75 per cent in the U.S. News Best Global Universities ranking. Their results confirmed that institutions with fewer students and a narrower research base could nonetheless achieve strong positions on size-independent bibliometric indicators, a pattern with direct relevance for smaller, research-intensive Indian institutions weighing whether to compete on breadth or on depth. Taken together, this literature cautions that any roadmap for ranking improvement must avoid what Kochetkov (2024) terms metric-driven behavior gaming indicators without improving the underlying quality they are meant to represent.

C. Policy Context: NEP 2020 and NAAC Accreditation

The roadmap proposed in this paper cannot be separated from two parallel policy instruments shaping Indian higher education. The first is the National Education Policy 2020, which set an ambition of raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education to 50 per cent by 2035 and repeatedly frames quality enhancement, research investment, and multidisciplinary restructuring as preconditions for global competitiveness (Kulal et al., 2024). Kulal et al.'s (2024) survey of students, teachers, and experts found broadly positive perceptions of NEP 2020's objectives but persistent concern about implementation capacity, particularly around faculty readiness and the pace of curricular restructuring concerns that bear directly on how quickly institutions can realistically move NIRF-relevant indicators. The second instrument is accreditation through the National Assessment and Accreditation Council. Pathak (2023) and Singh (2023) both document NAAC's central role in institutionalizing continuous quality improvement through the Self-Study Report and, since 2020–21, the Annual Quality Assurance Report process. Because NAAC accreditation status functions as an eligibility gate for many higher education schemes and increasingly correlates with NIRF eligibility and perception scores, the two frameworks are best treated as complementary rather than competing quality signals (Fernandes & Singh, 2022). Fernandes and Singh (2022), in a review of accreditation and ranking practice for the Indian higher education system, recommend that institutions align their internal quality assurance cycle with both frameworks simultaneously rather than treating NAAC and NIRF as separate, sequential compliance exercises a recommendation that directly informs the governance model proposed in Section 7 of this paper. NAAC's own credibility has also come under scrutiny; a 2026 review of the accreditation system's grading transition notes that the council moved away from its long-standing A++ to D letter-grade scale following well-publicised integrity concerns in the peer-review process, reinforcing the case for institutions to anchor improvement in verifiable outcomes rather than in grade-chasing (Teachers Institute, 2026).

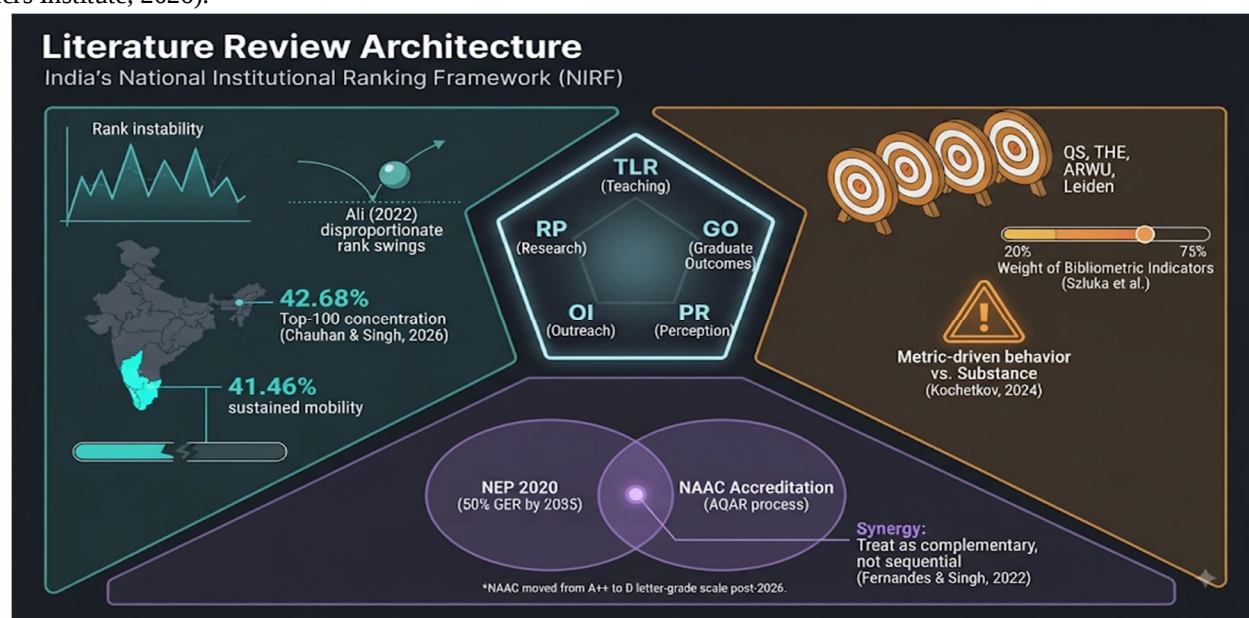


Fig 2: Analyzing the NIRF Landscape: Metrics, Stability, and Strategic Alignment

This infographic illustrates the architectural complexity of India's National Institutional Ranking Framework. It centers on the five core ranking parameters, while the surrounding zones analyze critical literature: left, regional concentration and rank volatility; right, global metric critiques and behavioral gaming; and bottom, the necessary synergy between NIRF, the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), and NAAC accreditation processes for holistic institutional growth.

III. THE CURRENT PERFORMANCE LANDSCAPE

The most recent editions of India Rankings offer a useful baseline against which to design a forward roadmap. The ninth edition, released in August 2024, recorded applications from institutions across an expanded set of sixteen categories, including three added that year: Open University, Skill University, and State Public University (KPMG in India, 2024). Category-level analysis shows uneven progress: Agriculture, University, Engineering, and Law categories recorded the largest gains in average score compared with the previous cycle, while Architecture and the College category saw slower growth or slight declines (KPMG in India, 2024). The tenth edition, released in September 2025, again placed the Indian Institute of Technology Madras first overall, with the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and IIT Bombay following in continuity at the very top of the table that stands in contrast to considerable churn further down (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2025).

At the system level, the government has pointed to gains in global visibility: the number of Indian institutions appearing in the QS World University Rankings top 500 is reported to have risen from eleven in 2014 to fifty-four in the most recent cycle, and India's position in the Times Higher Education rankings has reportedly improved from 49th to 113th over the same period on a comparative basis (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2025). These figures are encouraging, but they should be read alongside Chauhan and Singh's (2026) finding that fewer than half of Top-100 NIRF universities sustain their position across cycles, and alongside KPMG's (2024) observation that publication share from NIRF-eligible institutions has risen to over 94 per cent of India's total research output in the Overall category: evidence that ranking-eligible institutions are pulling further ahead of the wider system rather than the wider system catching up.

Three structural weaknesses recur across this literature and motivate the roadmap that follows. First, score gains are concentrated in the parameter Teaching, Learning and Resources that is easiest to influence through infrastructure and enrolment reporting, while Research and Professional Practice and Graduation Outcomes improve more slowly because they depend on multi-year investment cycles (KPMG in India, 2024).

Second, regional and institutional concentration means that a large share of aspiring institutions, particularly newer state universities and colleges outside the traditional research hubs, face a widening gap rather than a narrowing one (Chauhan & Singh, 2026). Third, accreditation and ranking systems, though formally distinct, are converging in practice, and institutions that treat them as separate compliance tracks duplicate effort and dilute strategic focus (Fernandes & Singh, 2022).

IV. RATIONALE FOR A FIVE-YEAR ROADMAP

A single-year improvement plan cannot address the structural weaknesses identified above, for a simple reason: the indicators that carry the greatest long-term weight in NIRF's methodology—research output and citations, PhD output, graduate outcomes, and placement and higher-studies rates—respond to investments made years earlier, not to the current reporting cycle (Ali, 2022; Sivakumaren & Rajkumar, 2019). A faculty member recruited and supported today will not show measurable research productivity in the Research and Professional Practice parameter for two to three years; a curricular reform intended to lift graduation and placement outcomes will not appear in the Graduation Outcomes parameter until the affected cohort actually graduates. Planning horizons therefore need to match the underlying maturation cycle of the indicators being targeted, not the annual rhythm of the ranking exercise itself.

A five-year window aligns with several external planning cycles already familiar to Indian institutions: the typical NAAC accreditation cycle, most institutional strategic and perspective plans, and the broader implementation timeline envisaged for NEP 2020 reforms such as the four-year undergraduate programme and multidisciplinary restructuring (Kulal et al., 2024). Structuring the roadmap in three distinct phases—rather than five undifferentiated annual steps—also reflects the pattern documented by Kochetkov (2024) and Chauhan and Singh (2026): meaningful ranking mobility tends to occur in bursts following periods of sustained underlying investment, not through smooth annual increments. The phases proposed below are therefore designed around distinct strategic objectives rather than around the calendar alone.

V. THE FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC ROADMAP (2026–2030)

Table 1 summarizes the three-phase structure of the roadmap; the sections that follow elaborate the activities, responsible actors, and expected indicator movement within each phase.

Table 1

Phase	Timeframe	Strategic Objective	Primary NIRF Parameters Targeted
Phase I — Diagnose and Baseline	Year 1 (2026)	Institutional data audit, gap analysis against peer institutions, and establishment of a governance structure for continuous improvement.	All parameters (baseline); TLR data hygiene
Phase II — Build Capacity	Years 2–3 (2027–2028)	Faculty recruitment and development, research infrastructure investment, curriculum and pedagogy reform, and quality-assurance alignment with NAAC.	Research and Professional Practice; Teaching, Learning and Resources
Phase III — Consolidate and Benchmark Globally	Years 4–5 (2029–2030)	Graduate outcome tracking, outreach and inclusivity expansion, international visibility and perception-building, sustained ranking mobility.	Graduation Outcomes; Outreach and Inclusivity; Perception

A. Phase I: Diagnose and Baseline (Year 1, 2026)

The roadmap opens with a diagnostic year rather than an action year, because Ali's (2022) sensitivity analysis shows that institutions frequently misdirect early effort toward indicators that are already near their ceiling while under-investing in indicators with the greatest room for movement. Phase I activities should include: a parameter-by-parameter audit comparing the institution's self-reported NIRF data against verified internal records; a peer-benchmarking exercise against five to ten institutions of comparable size and category that have demonstrated sustained rank improvement; and the formal establishment of an institutional ranking and quality cell reporting directly to the head of the institution, with representation from academic affairs, research, student services, and the internal quality assurance cell mandated under NAAC (Fernandes & Singh, 2022). Because self-reported data errors and definitional inconsistencies are among the most common sources of score volatility identified by Ali (2022), Phase I should also standardise data-collection templates well before the next reporting window opens, and reconcile them with the documentation already maintained for NAAC's Annual Quality Assurance Report so that a single evidence base serves both exercises (Pathak, 2023; Singh, 2023).

B. Phase II: Build Capacity (Years 2–3, 2027–2028)

Phase II is the investment-heavy core of the roadmap and targets the two parameters that both the literature and current NIRF data identify as slowest-moving: Research and Professional Practice, and the qualitative dimensions of Teaching, Learning and Resources. On the research side, institutions should prioritise structured faculty recruitment in identified thrust areas, protected research time for early-career faculty, seed funding for interdisciplinary projects, and formal mentoring linked to doctoral supervision capacity investments whose effect on publication and citation counts typically becomes visible only after a two- to three-year lag (Sivakumaren & Rajkumar, 2019; Szluca et al., 2023). Institutions should resist the temptation to pursue publication volume alone; Kochetkov's (2024) caution against metric-driven behaviour applies directly here, and Szluca et al. (2023) show that citation impact, not raw output, is what differentiates institutions across most global and domestic ranking systems.

On the teaching and resources side, Phase II should focus on faculty–student ratio improvement, digital and physical infrastructure aligned with NEP 2020's emphasis on flexible, multidisciplinary learning, and financial aid mechanisms that support the Outreach and Inclusivity parameter without waiting for Phase III (Kulal et al., 2024). This phase should also complete the alignment of the institution's quality assurance cycle with NAAC's post-2024 framework, which moved away from the legacy A++ to D grading scale toward a more outcome-oriented model, making early alignment a source of comparative advantage rather than a compliance afterthought (Teachers Institute, 2026).

C. Phase III: Consolidate and Benchmark Globally (Years 4–5, 2029–2030)

The final phase shifts attention to the outcome-facing parameters Graduation Outcomes, Outreach and Inclusivity, and Perception that depend on the earlier phases having matured. Graduate outcome data, including placement, higher-studies progression, and examinations such as GATE or NET qualification rates, will only reflect Phase II curricular and faculty investment once the affected cohorts complete their programmes, typically three to four years after enrolment. Institutions should therefore use Phase III to systematise alumni tracking and employer engagement rather than to introduce new curricular change, since new interventions begun this late in the cycle will not register within the 2030 horizon.

Perception, the parameter most exposed to the reputational biases documented in the global ranking literature (Fauzi et al., 2020; Kochetkov, 2024), should be addressed through substantive visibility measures international collaboration, conference hosting, alumni success communication, and transparent public reporting of verified outcomes rather than through promotional messaging disconnected from underlying performance. This is consistent with Fauzi et al.'s (2020) broader finding that reputation-based indicators in global rankings correlate most strongly with sustained, multi-year visibility rather than short-term campaigns. By the close of Phase III, institutions following the roadmap should expect measurable movement in Research and Professional Practice and Graduation Outcomes scores accumulated from Phase II investment, alongside early but genuine gains in Perception grounded in that same underlying improvement.



Fig 3: NIRF Five-Year Strategic Roadmap: Aligning Investment with Indicator Maturity

This infographic outlines a five-year strategic roadmap for Indian higher education institutions from 2026 to 2030. It divides the timeline into three phases: diagnosing baselines, building research and teaching capacity, and consolidating global benchmarking. Crucially, it highlights structural "lag effects" in research investments and curricular reform, showing how sustained long-term inputs drive institutional mobility.

VI. STRATEGIC PILLARS FOR INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Table 2 maps each of NIRF's five formal parameters onto a corresponding institutional pillar and a set of concrete, five-year actions drawn from the literature reviewed in Section 2. The mapping is intended to prevent the common failure mode identified by Ali (2022) and Kochetkov (2024), in which institutions pursue whichever indicator is easiest to move in a given year rather than maintaining balanced investment across all five parameters.

Table 2

NIRF Parameter	Institutional Pillar	Key Five-Year Actions
Teaching, Learning and Resources (TLR)	Faculty capacity and learning infrastructure	Improve faculty–student ratios, invest in digital learning infrastructure, and standardise data reporting across departments (Ali, 2022).
Research and Professional Practice (RP)	Research ecosystem and doctoral capacity	Fund interdisciplinary seed research, protect early-career research time, and track citation impact rather than volume alone (Sivakumaren & Rajkumar, 2019; Szluka et al., 2023).
Graduation Outcomes (GO)	Curriculum, employability, and progression	Align curricula with NEP 2020's multidisciplinary model and formalise alumni and placement tracking systems (Kulal et al., 2024).
Outreach and Inclusivity (OI)	Access, equity, and regional reach	Expand financial aid, regional outreach, and gender and diversity representation, addressing the concentration patterns identified by Chauhan and Singh (2026).
Perception (PR)	Reputation and visibility	Build sustained international collaboration and transparent public reporting rather than short-term promotional activity (Fauzi et al., 2020).

Two cross-cutting observations follow from this mapping. First, the Research and Professional Practice pillar carries disproportionate strategic weight because its improvement compounds: stronger doctoral output feeds faculty recruitment, which in turn strengthens future research capacity, in a cycle that Sivakumaren and Rajkumar (2019) trace across successive NIRF cycles for the highest-performing Indian universities. Second, the Outreach and Inclusivity pillar deserves more deliberate institutional attention than it typically receives, given Chauhan and Singh's (2026) finding of pronounced regional concentration in Top-100 outcomes; institutions outside the traditional research hubs of southern and metropolitan India may find outreach and access-oriented investment a comparatively faster route to measurable score improvement than research investment alone.

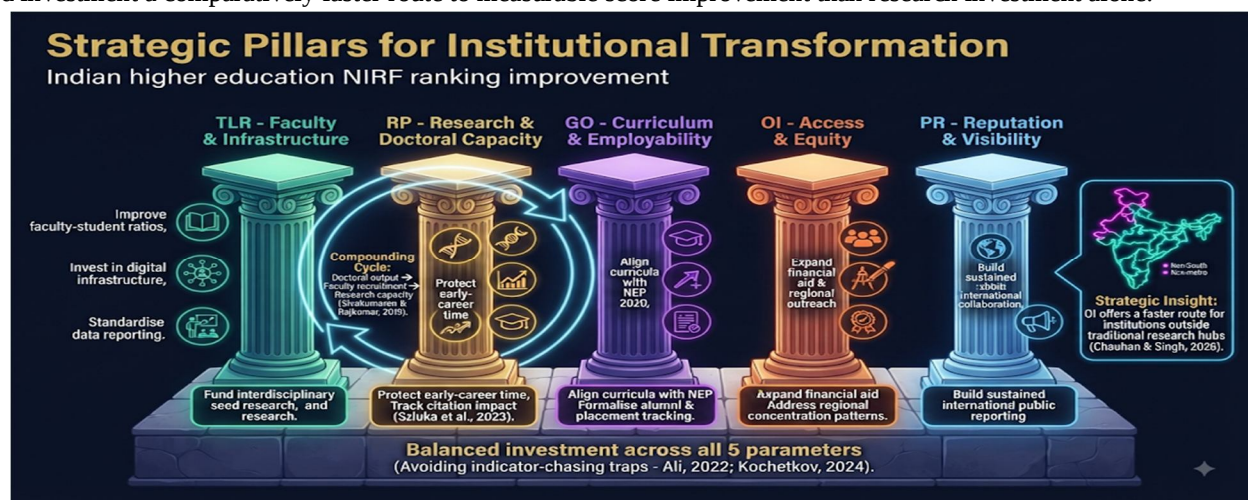


Fig 4: Strategic Pillars for Indian Institutional Transformation: A NIRF Improvement Roadmap

This infographic outlines five strategic pillars for improving Indian higher education NIRF rankings: Teaching (TLR), Research (RP), Curriculum (GO), Access (OI), and Reputation (PR). It highlights a compounding cycle between doctoral output and research capacity. A strategic insight suggests that focusing on Access & Equity (OI) offers a faster route for institutions outside traditional research hubs. The foundation emphasizes balanced investment across all areas to avoid indicator-chasing traps.

VII. GOVERNANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

A five-year roadmap fails without institutional machinery capable of sustaining it across leadership transitions and annual budget cycles. This paper recommends a three-tier governance structure. At the apex, an Institutional Ranking and Quality Council, chaired by the head of the institution and meeting quarterly, should hold overall accountability for roadmap delivery and should explicitly integrate NAAC's Internal Quality Assurance Cell rather than operate as a parallel body, consistent with Fernandes and Singh's (2022) recommendation that ranking and accreditation functions be unified administratively. At the operational tier, parameter-specific working groups—one each for TLR, RP, GO, OI, and PR—should be responsible for translating the Table 2 actions into department-level annual targets and for maintaining the verified data trail needed for both NIRF submission and NAAC's Annual Quality Assurance Report. At the departmental tier, individual academic units should hold responsibility for data accuracy and for cascading research and teaching targets to faculty-level annual review, ensuring that the roadmap's five-year horizon is broken into reviewable annual milestones without losing the multi-year orientation that Sections 4 and 5 identify as essential. Regular, independent data audits—ideally conducted by the same office responsible for NAAC documentation—should be scheduled ahead of each annual NIRF submission window to reduce the data-quality volatility that Ali (2022) identifies as a major source of unpredictable rank movement.

VIII. RISKS AND MITIGATION

No five-year plan in a system as dynamic as Indian higher education can be risk-free, and several risks identified in the literature warrant explicit mitigation rather than being left implicit. Table 3 summarises the principal risks and corresponding mitigations that this roadmap builds in by design.

Table 3

Risk	Likely Effect	Mitigation
Metric-driven behaviour (chasing indicators rather than quality)	Short-term score gains that reverse once scrutiny increases; reputational damage.	Anchor targets in verified outcomes; apply Kochetkov's (2024) caution against gaming bibliometric and reputational indicators.
Leadership and governance discontinuity	Loss of momentum across the five-year horizon, particularly at Phase transitions.	Institutionalise the Ranking and Quality Council independent of any single leadership term; document targets in writing.
Uneven resource capacity across institution types	Widening gap between well-resourced and aspiring institutions, mirroring current concentration patterns.	Prioritise Outreach and Inclusivity and TLR investment where RP gains are structurally slower (Chauhan & Singh, 2026).
Data-quality and reporting errors	Volatile or unpredictable rank movement unrelated to actual performance.	Standardise data templates in Phase I; align NIRF and NAAC evidence trails (Ali, 2022; Fernandes & Singh, 2022).
Methodology change at the national or global level	Roadmap targets become misaligned with a revised framework mid-cycle.	Build in an annual methodology review step; design pillar investments around durable capability rather than specific formulae.



Fig 5: The Fortress of Quality: Institutional Governance and Defense Against Higher Education Risks

This cinematic conceptual illustration portrays a university's governance structure as a fortified fortress under stormy skies. It depicts three structural tiers: a foundational departmental layer, an operational tier featuring parameter working groups, and an apex ranking council. Glowing golden energy shields deflect incoming lightning bolts representing higher education risks, highlighting how robust institutional machinery sustains strategic roadmaps.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the roadmap and the risk analysis above, this paper offers five concrete recommendations for institutions and system-level policymakers pursuing NIRF Excellence 2030.

First, institutions should commission an independent Phase I diagnostic before making any Phase II investment decisions, since Ali's (2022) sensitivity analysis shows that resources directed without a clear baseline are frequently misallocated toward indicators already close to their ceiling.

Second, institutions should formally unify their NIRF and NAAC data and governance processes, following Fernandes and Singh's (2022) finding that treating accreditation and ranking as separate compliance tracks duplicates administrative effort without improving either outcome.

Third, research investment should be evaluated against citation impact and doctoral output rather than publication count alone, in line with Szluca et al. (2023) and Kochetkov's (2024) warnings against metric-driven behaviour that inflates volume without improving quality.

Fourth, institutions outside India's established research hubs should weight Outreach and Inclusivity and Teaching, Learning and Resources investment more heavily in the early phases of the roadmap, since Chauhan and Singh (2026) show that regional concentration, not merely institutional age, structures much of current NIRF Top-100 mobility.

Fifth, at the system level, the Ministry of Education and NIRF secretariat should continue to publish category-specific analytical detail of the kind KPMG (2024) has produced, since transparent, disaggregated benchmarking data is what allows individual institutions to construct realistic, evidence-based five-year plans rather than relying on aggregate national trends that obscure category- and region-specific realities.



Fig6: Charting the Ascent to NIRF Excellence 2030: A Strategic Roadmap

This conceptual infographic illustrates the journey toward sustainable institutional quality beyond mere rankings. Starting from the base with diagnostic tools and unified governance, the path ascends through five strategic stages: baseline assessment, governance integration, impact evaluation, priority weighting for diverse institutions, and system-level benchmarking. The arduous climb through stormy compliance leads to a sunlit summit, where a glowing university campus symbolizes that true quality is self-evident, independent of the ranking itself.

X. CONCLUSION

NIRF has matured into a genuinely influential instrument for shaping institutional behaviour in Indian higher education, but the evidence reviewed in this paper shows that its benefits remain concentrated among a relatively narrow set of institutions and regions. Closing that gap by 2030 will require treating ranking improvement not as an annual reporting exercise but as the visible output of a longer, phased programme of institutional transformation. The three-phase roadmap developed here—diagnostic baselining in the first year, capacity building in the research and teaching core over the following two years, and outcome consolidation and global benchmarking in the final two years—is designed around the actual maturation timelines of NIRF's underlying indicators rather than around the calendar of the ranking exercise itself.

The central argument of this paper is that sustainable rank improvement is a by-product of genuine institutional quality, not a substitute for it. Institutions that align their NIRF strategy with their NAAC quality assurance cycle, that invest in research capacity ahead of the indicators that reward it, and that resist the temptation toward short-term metric optimisation are best positioned to achieve durable movement on the India Rankings table by 2030 and, more importantly, to build institutions whose quality would be evident with or without the ranking exercise that measures it.

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