

Measuring excellence: on NIRF rankings

The “who’s who” of universities and research institutions published by the Human Resource Development Ministry, as the National Institutional Ranking Framework, 2018, should be viewed mainly as a proposition that data make it possible to assign objective credentials to some aspects of education. Its assessment of some of the top institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the IITs and the IIMs is unsurprising, given their record of research, peer-reviewed publications and outcomes for graduates. Even among the 3,954 institutions that participated, there is a clear skew towards southern, southeastern and western India. Participation levels are inadequate: there were 40,026 colleges and 11,669 standalone institutions according to the HRD Ministry’s All India Survey on Higher Education for 2016-17. To the faculty and students in many colleges, what matters is the vision of the administrative leaders and a commitment to excellence. The governing bodies should make available adequate financial and academic resources to colleges, particularly the younger ones, to help them improve performance. These are measured by the NIRF in terms of the percentage of faculty with doctoral degrees, papers published in credentialed journals, inclusivity and diversity of students, and median salaries for the graduates.

Ranking educational and research institutes has practical uses, such as helping students make study choices, sponsors to identify research projects, and other universities to form partnerships. Yet, for the process to evolve and be relevant, it should be able to enrol all recognised educational institutions, not just the public ones. In the absence of such participation, older institutions with historical advantages could enjoy a higher ranking, obscuring newer entrants who may have stronger claims to excellence. Also, the ranking approach worldwide is critiqued for failing to capture the crucial metric of learning outcomes, relying instead on proxy data on faculty strength and qualifications. In the case of the NIRF, which is now in its third year, the final responsibility for accuracy of data lies with the participating institution, except for aspects like research publications that are independently verifiable. What is positive about the system is its emphasis on achieving measurable goals and bringing in transparency. The 2018 exercise added the disciplines of law, medicine and architecture and it hopes to cast the net wider in the future. Beyond competitive ranking, however, the higher order goal is to foster learning and scholarship. This can be achieved solely by encouraging faculty to exercise complete academic freedom, without the pressure of perception management. The NIRF ranks will measure the measurable, but there will be some dimensions it may not be able to fully capture.

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