

# NIRF rankings: A catalyst for India's higher education transformation?



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**H**igher Education (HE) rankings transcend mere numerical values; they reflect the quality, competitiveness, and global stature of educational institutions. The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) was introduced in India in 2015 by the Ministry of Education to assess and rank higher education institutions based on various criteria. The NIRF has garnered substantial support in India's academic sphere due to its comprehensive approach and governmental endorsement. However, the question persists: Does NIRF serve as the transformative catalyst India requires to revolutionise higher education?

The NIRF was established to rectify a significant deficiency: the lack of a standardised, transparent, and contextually relevant rating system for educational institutions in India. Before its introduction, private organisations frequently carried out rankings in India, resulting in doubts about their authenticity and methodology. NIRF's systematic methodology seeks to provide legitimacy and consistency in rankings, considering the varied contexts of Indian institutions.

**NIRF evaluates institutions across five broad parameters:**

- 1. Teaching, Learning and Resources (TLR):** Measures the quality of teaching, infrastructure, and student-teacher ratio.
- 2. Research and Professional Practices (RP):** Assesses research and consultancy's volume, quality, and impact.
- 3. Graduation Outcomes**

**(GO):** Evaluate the success of students in securing employment, pursuing higher education, and receiving competitive scholarships.

**4. Outreach and Inclusivity (OI):** Considers representation from marginalised sections, including gender and socioeconomic diversity.

**5. Perception:** Gauges the institution's reputation among peers and stakeholders.

The comprehensive nature of these parameters positions NIRF as a distinctive framework capable of addressing India's unique educational challenges.

**NIRF's impact on Indian higher education**

**1. Driving healthy competition**  
NIRF has introduced an element of healthy competition among institutions, pushing them to improve their offerings. Universities and colleges are now focusing on enhancing research output, upgrading infrastructure, and fostering inclusivity. This competitive spirit is vital for raising the overall quality of education in the country.

**2. Promoting accountability and transparency**  
The ranking framework mandates institutions to submit detailed data, which is subject to verification. This has encouraged greater accountability and transparency in institutional practices. Stakeholders, including students, parents, and recruiters, now have access to reliable information to make informed decisions.

**3. Encouraging research and innovation**  
One of NIRF's most significant contributions is

its emphasis on research and professional practices. Allocating substantial weight to research metrics has nudged institutions to invest more in research infrastructure, foster industry collaborations, and focus on high-impact publications. This shift is crucial for India's global knowledge hub aspiration.

**4. Supporting policy formulation**  
NIRF rankings serve as a valuable tool for policymakers. Insights derived from these rankings help identify strengths and gaps in the higher education sector, enabling targeted interventions. For instance, government initiatives such as 'Institutions of Eminence' and 'National Education Policy 2020' align closely with the areas highlighted by NIRF.

**5. Empowering marginalised sections**  
The outreach and inclusivity parameter underscores the importance of diversity and representation. By rewarding institutions that support students from marginalised communities, NIRF promotes social equity within higher education.

**Critiques and challenges**  
Despite its achievements, NIRF is not without criticism. Addressing these challenges is imperative for its long-term efficacy.

**1. Overemphasis on research**  
While the focus on research is commendable, it may disadvantage institutions that excel in teaching and community engagement but lack robust research outputs. Such institutions risk being undervalued despite their significant contributions to local and regional development.

**2. Perception bias**

The perception parameter has drawn criticism for being subjective and disproportionately favouring older, well-established institutions. Such institutions often enjoy historical prestige and extensive alumni networks, influencing their perceived reputation among peers and stakeholders. This entrenched advantage can overshadow the achievements of newer or regional institutions, regardless of their actual performance in teaching, innovation, or inclusivity. As a result, perception bias may inadvertently stifle healthy competition, demotivate emerging institutions, and hinder a more equitable distribution of recognition across the education landscape.

The perception parameter has drawn criticism for being subjective and disproportionately favouring older, well-established institutions. This bias could potentially stifle the recognition of emerging institutions that excel in other areas.

**3. Data integrity and verification**  
Although NIRF emphasises transparency, instances of data misrepresentation have been reported. Strengthening data verification mechanisms is essential to uphold the framework's credibility.

**4. Exclusion of key parameters**  
Certain parameters, such as international collaborations, student satisfaction, and employability beyond the formal economy, remain underexplored. Including these aspects could provide a more comprehensive assessment of institutional performance.

**5. Disparities among disciplines**  
NIRF's methodology may not fully capture the

nuances of specialised disciplines such as arts, humanities, and vocational education. Tailored evaluation criteria for different disciplines could enhance its inclusivity and accuracy.

**Is NIRF a game-changer?**  
To determine whether NIRF is the game changer India needs, evaluating its contributions against the broader goals of higher education reform is essential. NIRF has undeniably catalysed positive changes, including improving quality standards, fostering innovation, and promoting inclusivity. However, its transformative potential hinges on its ability to address existing gaps and evolve in response to emerging challenges.

**For NIRF to truly revolutionise Indian higher education, the following steps are recommended:**

**Diversifying metrics:**  
Expanding the framework to include parameters like student satisfaction, graduate employability, and global engagement would provide a holistic view of institutional performance.

**Customising discipline and specific frameworks:**  
Tailored ranking methodologies for disciplines such as arts, sciences, engineering, and vocational education can ensure fair evaluation and recognition of diverse strengths.

**Strengthening data integrity:**  
Implementing robust verification mechanisms and penalising data misrepresentation would enhance credibility.

**Promoting inclusivity:**  
Encouraging participation from smaller and rural institutions by providing training and resources can bridge the urban-rural divide in rankings.

**Global benchmarking:**  
Aligning NIRF's methodology with international standards could help Indian institutions gain greater recognition in global rankings.

**Regular feedback mechanisms:**  
Engaging with stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry, to refine the framework would ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness.

NIRF signifies a substantial advancement in India's pursuit of educational excellence. It has established a robust platform for systemic enhancements by promoting competition, accountability, and innovation. The significance of its function in establishing benchmarks and directing institutions towards ongoing improvement is paramount. NIRF's focus on essential metrics, including research output, diversity, and graduation rates, has compelled universities to reassess and align their strategy with broader national and global objectives.

The framework's transformational potential depends on its capacity to evolve. It will be essential to mitigate its limitations—such as perceptual bias, data integrity, and incorporating varied metrics. The framework must evolve to encompass the complexities of India's varied higher education landscape while equipping institutions for global competition. The NIRF has the potential to catalyse significant reforms, although its effectiveness will hinge on its acceptance by institutions throughout the spectrum, particularly in rural and neglected areas.

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