



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2017; 3(6): 428-432
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 04-04-2017
Accepted: 05-05-2017

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National institutional ranking system: To regain the lost glory of Indian higher education

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Abstract

The soil of great education centers like Nalanda, Taxashila and Vikramshila faced immense embarrassment when none of its university could stand among the top 200 universities in the world. Not a single Indian University out of 47 central universities, 359 State Universities, 123 Deemed to be Universities and 260 Private Universities, above 37000 colleges and above 11000 stand- alone institutions could be counted among the top world class universities. This huge failure of the Indian Universities jolted the entire country and posed an urgent need to take some effective measures. Quantity, quality, equity and all the other dimensions of the Indian Education System came under vigilance. Out of the various measures taken up to rejuvenate the fading glory of Indian Higher Education one was, introducing the National Institutional Ranking System. Some rankings evaluate institutions within a single country, while others assess institutions worldwide. This National Institutional Ranking System was introduced to rank higher educational institutions in the country in order to help the institutions in evaluating themselves before presenting themselves to the global platform and thus preparing them for the big ranking competition. But there aroused much debate about rankings usefulness and accuracy. So this paper attempts to discuss the need and coming up of National Institutional Ranking System, the shortcomings it faced, the learning it gained and finally to put forth certain recommendations to be acted upon, endeavoring to move from failure to success.

Keywords: University Rankings, National Institutional Ranking System, Honest and Hard work, Reliable Data, Professional Ethics

1. Introduction

“If we want things to stay as they are, things have to change”. This memorable line from Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel, *Gattopardo* (The Leopard) sums up the highly successful strategy of ETH Zurich- Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich. In order to attain a position and further maintain the position in the World University Rankings, universities in India cannot blindly do the same things which they are just doing since years and years and then expect a miracle of getting ranking among the top world universities. Talking of the international scenario, innovations and changes are taking place in a routine basis. The universities like Oxford, Cambridge, Caltech, Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Stanford are the top rank holders who are there in the race but they don’t have to struggle much for their status. It is the high quality of their work and performance that give them that place of high reputation and prestige.

In recent years, it has become quite impossible to ignore university rankings of various kinds, which include those that are global, regional and subject-wide in scope, especially by Times higher education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

The top 5 Global University Ranking Surveys can be named as:

1. Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU): Shanghai Ranking
2. The World University Ranking: Times Higher Education
3. National Taiwan University Ranking: Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities
4. Quacquarelli- Symonds Rankings
5. Webometrics Ranking of World Universities

These Global University Ranking Surveys and many more like them inspite of having some commercial motive provide a platform to all the universities to fight in a healthy way and capture the top most position in the entire world of education.

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It is a fight of excellence for excellence and can be achieved only through excellence. The variety of academic rankings provide a comprehensive overview and insightful overlook of different academic institutions on composite capabilities in academia. But to fight in this big global academic arena is not as simple as it may look like. It is a tough battle among the champions of higher education and also of those who prepare themselves from years to years to get that position. To attain the top most positions in the global university rankings may be the dream of all higher education institutions but it is achieved only by the best. So it is important for the institutions to keep themselves on toes and keep on increasing their capability, capacity, dedication, work and performance. Thus, it is prudent and essential for Indian institutions to keep abreast with the global growth of other institutions and take steps accordingly.

2. Position of Indian Institutes in the World University Rankings

World University Rankings 2012-13

In the list of top 200 universities in the world for the year 2012-13, announced by The Times Higher Education World University Rankings the United States of America topped the list, having seven of the top ten slots and 76 places in the top 200. The United Kingdom followed next with three universities in the top 10. While the three Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), i.e. IIT Kharagpur, IIT Bombay and IIT Roorkee got a place in the table of the world's top 400 universities. India could not get a place in the top 200 list of both the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education rankings for the year 2012.

World University Rankings 2013-14

In 2013-14 in Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) maintained the number one position, followed closely by Harvard University and the University of Cambridge at the second and third position. However the Indian Universities were again out of the race of top 200 world universities. Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IITB) attained 222nd position and Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD) secured 235th position.

It was very shocking and heartbreaking for all the Indians to see that none of the Indian Educational Institutions was figured among the top 200 universities in the World University Rankings. This distressing condition needed urgent consideration and action. This was the time when on October 9, 2014 National Ranking Framework was launched and the difference appeared in the position of the Indian institutes in the global platform of ranking from 2015 onwards.

World University Rankings 2015-16

In 2015, two Indian institutes for the first time made it to the top 200 list of the world's best universities. The Indian Institute of Science, Bangaluru, took the top spot among its Indian counterparts, bagging the 147th rank. The only other Indian institute to make it to the top 200 was Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, which ranked 179th.

A study was again conducted by Times Higher Education according to which not a single Indian university made it to the list of top 200 of the world university rankings 2015-2016. This year's ranking included 800 universities from 70 different countries, compared with the 400 universities from 41 countries in last year's table. This year's list of the best universities in the world featured 147 of the top universities

in the US with 63 American Universities making the top 200 of the list, including the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) as the world's number one university, followed by Stanford University in the third place, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in fifth and Harvard University in sixth. The UK was the second best represented country in the rankings, with 78 universities in the top 800, and 34 in the top 200. The UK's Oxford University was ranked second in the world, with Cambridge University in fourth. The Indian Institute of Science (IISC) and the Indian Institute of Technology – Bombay (IIT-B) were leading the list of the Indian Universities which were at the top position. The rankings revealed that IISC had position between 251 and 300 and IIT-B was ranked between 351 and 400 which showed that our educational institutions had slipped down from their earlier positions which had become a challenging issue for the Indian Higher Education System.

World University Rankings 2016-17

Viewing the position of Indian Educational Institutions in the World University Rankings, India topped the list in South Asia in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2016-17, making a new high for the country. Matter of joy as it is but is also reflecting the strides it needs to take in the globally competitive sector. The highly regarded Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, is India's top institution among the 31 in the list and featured in the 201-250 group in the overall list of 980 institutions. The University of Oxford topped the list for the first time. It has become the first UK University to top the Times Higher Education World University Rankings in the 12 year history of the table. It knocks the five time leader, the California Institute of Technology, into second place in the World University Rankings 2016-2017.

World University Rankings 2017-18

Discussing the present scenario of the Indian Educational Institutions in the World University Rankings, it is the first time in 14 years that India has three institutes in the top 200 list, with IIT Bombay being the entrant. The Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay has for the first time made it to the list of the world's top 200 universities, according to the QS World University Rankings 2018. The Indian Institute of Technology- Delhi has replaced Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore and QS World University Rankings 2018 upgraded the Delhi institute's rankings from 172nd position to 159, while IISC dropped from 152 to 190. IIT-Bombay raised 40 spots to enter the top 200 club. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology topped the list for the sixth consecutive year, followed by Stanford University and Harvard University, which have retained their positions for two years.

It is the first time in over a decade that three of the country's universities have made it to the top 200. This observed growth and progress of Indian institutes on the global platform can account a major credit to newly introduced National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF).

3. Introducing National Institutional Ranking System

The system of ranking the universities had started nearly 30 years ago in the US. Apparently, the current effort to install a National Ranking System in India is not for its trade potential but to use it as stimulant to improve the quality of our education comparable and compatible with the rest of the world through such national ranking efforts. MHRD's decision to launch its India-wide university rankings was, in

fact, partly in reaction to the poor performance of Indian Institutions- including the IITs and the Central Universities – in world university rankings prepared by THE and QS.

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has been launched to rank higher educational institutions in the Country based on objective, verifiable criteria. The ranking system is expected to promote excellence in education in a competitive environment. The process of framing National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) began on October 9, 2014 with constitution of a 16-member core committee under the chairmanship of Secretary (HE), Ministry of Human Resource Development. The terms of reference of the Committee were to suggest a reliable, transparent and authentic National Framework for performance measurement and ranking of institutions for higher education and to recommend institutional mechanisms, processes and timelines for implementation of the National Institutional Ranking Framework. The final framework identified nearly 22 parameters in five major heads; several of them are similar to those employed globally such as excellence in teaching, learning and research. However, there are a few which are India-centric, reflecting aspirations of the rising numbers of young people of a vast nation. Country-specific parameters relevant to the Indian situation include regional and international diversity, outreach, gender equity and inclusion of disadvantaged sections of society. The NIRF provides for ranking of institutions under five broad generic parameters, namely: i) Teaching, Learning and Resources; ii) Research, Consulting and Collaborative Performance; iii) Graduation Outcome; iv) Outreach and Inclusivity; and v) Perception.

Thus, National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) emerged as a great idea to make the institutions assess themselves on the qualitative parameters used for ranking of institutions and thus help them move upward on the quality spectrum to improve their ranking in subsequent years. But each great and new idea takes time, endless efforts and nonstop modifications to be transformed into a success story.

4. Certain shortcoming of the India's Ranking System

India's first rankings of higher education institutions faced certain shortcomings and need improvement. The MHRD must be commended for releasing "India Rankings" (2016), the first ever effort by the government, to rank higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country. These rankings will become an annual feature and it is expected that both public and private institutions, and certainly students and parents will find them useful. But there is a need of reviewing the shortcomings and bring necessary improvements. Some of them are enlisted as follows:

1. Many institutions were not even considered for ranking. Institutions applicant for ranking in Engineering – category A whose total undergraduate student approved intake was less than 200. Institutions applicant for ranking in Engineering –Category B whose total undergraduate student approved intake was less than 350. Despite wide publicity, the response from the Architecture and general degree colleges fell short of being truly representative. Architecture Institutions, because of a very limited response from this category of institutions. General degree colleges – since very few of those that applied were above a basic threshold of

performance on many of the important parameters and Open universities.

2. There was no cross-verification of data before announcing the ranking of educational institutions by the MHRD. The data used for evaluation was submitted by the institutions themselves and the National Institutes Ranking Framework (NIRF) makes it clear, on its website itself that the responsibility for accuracy and authenticity of the data lies with the respective institutions. As R. Subramanyam, Secretary, MHRD, told The Hindu: "The National Bureau of Accreditation has checked for data inconsistencies but has not conducted verification."
3. In the absence of a reliable and comprehensive database that could supply all relevant data required for computing the scores for ranking, it became imperative that individual institutions desirous of participating in the ranking exercise be asked to provide most of the data. As such, institutions desirous of getting themselves ranked under the NIRF were invited to register themselves on the NIRF portal and submit data in the prescribed format. Thus, the participation of HEIs in the initiative is still voluntary and needs to improve further. The report itself acknowledges that there are question marks over the quality of data submitted by the participating institutions. Many institutions failed to put their best foot forward, when it came to supplying quality data. The point being emphasized here is 'quality'. Some of the institutions were definitely casual in supplying the data sought. Questions have also been raised about the methodology used to prepare the rankings.
4. The criticisms about the report reveal that there are inclusion of some not so good business schools among the top 50 institutions in the "management" category and the exclusion of others, which deserve to be there. It is also expressed that the rankings will mislead prospective students to those business schools whose record on placement and average salaries is unimpressive.
5. It is also a matter of concern and surprise that the IITs have chosen to participate in the rankings under the "engineering" category. Though they are recognized as engineering schools first, they compete under the category of "universities" in THE And QS world and regional university rankings. To the extent that they aspire to compete globally as universities, it is strange that they should compete as engineering institutions in "India Rankings".
6. One very important point to be kept in mind is that the race of status has become so important that instead of quality, research and innovations, rankings seem to have become the only concern of the universities. In order to get good ranking, institutions are seemed to be using unfair means of manipulations and are playing statistical games with the data which is just meaningless.
7. Though there were many shortcomings and pitfalls in the conduction of National Ranking System and many other factors would also have been responsible for the great achievement of Indian Institutes but the work of NIRF cannot be ignored in any way. The gradual progress of the Indian Institutes through 2015, 2016 and 2017 revealed that the intention made and the efforts

taken in the making and working of NIRF was quite genuine. But this achievement is not enough to be satisfied upon. India's universities still have a long way to go in climbing up the global pecking order. No Indian University, with the exception of an IIT or two ever features in any global ranking of the top 100 or top 200 global universities. This issue is still to be dealt very seriously and it needs the review of the work done and learning from them.

5. Learning from the experience of 2016 Rankings

The shortcomings of National Institutional Rankings (2016) have been worked upon and given a new starting in 2017. In 2017, all candidate institutions, independent of their discipline or nature (comprehensive or otherwise) are given a common overall rank, if they satisfy one of the mentioned criteria. The parameters have been chosen in such a manner that these are equally relevant for various kinds of educational institutions. Data format is designed to ensure that the diversity of disciplines and their separate character are accounted for. Institution NIRF has been empowered to take up physical checks on the institution records and audited accounts where needed, to ensure that the principles of ethical behavior are being adhered to. In case an institution is approached for carrying out any physical check, they are expected to co-operate. Non-cooperation may lead to debarring the institution from participation in the ranking exercise. Institutions will also be given a discipline specific rank as relevant. As in the previous year, the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) continues to be the Ranking Agency on behalf of NIRF for 2017. NIRF, by itself or with the help of other suitably identified partner agencies undertook authentication of data, wherever felt necessary, and where feasible. NIRF was to extract the relevant information from this data and through software, compute the various metrics and rank institutions based on this data. This process was expected to be completed in about 3 months, and rankings published on the first Monday of April 2017.

All efforts are made to display the raw data on the NIRF website after due processing by NIRF for cross-checking by the institution. Rankings are to be finally computed on the basis of this data and it will be the Institution's responsibility to ensure that the data published by NIRF accurately reflects the submissions by it. The institutions are also invited to check out the data supplied by or taken from third sources. If the Institution does not give any comments or feedback within a specified period on the displayed data, it will be assumed that this data is accurate. No petitions for corrections will be accepted after the declared deadline, or after the rankings have been announced. If it is found that an institution has deliberately manipulated the submitted data, causing erroneous rankings, NIRF will remove the institution from the ranking list and future rankings and publish a suitable note to this effect. Thus, much of the work is being done to eliminate the shortcomings of the national ranking system.

But mere elimination of the faults and flaws will not suffice the main objective of the ranking system unless and until conducted rightfully at the individual level as well as at all the levels of the system. There are certain things which are worth only if, earned rightfully and therefore there are still some points to act upon.

6. Recommendations

Honest and Hard work

It is highly imperative for us, the Indians to understand that no manipulation, only honest hard work can pave the way to the top position. As it is said by Thomas A. Edison, "There is no substitute for hard work." It is completely useless if we manipulate the data and play games statistically because this will just be making fool of our selves. National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has been developed for us to know our exact position in the world wide scenario and help our institutions and universities to move ahead in the right direction with appropriate process. It does not, at all, aim to misguide the nation by bringing forth the wrong information regarding higher education institutions. Therefore, if Indian institutions of higher education seriously want to participate in this world class competition of top universities then ultimately it is only their work and performance that is going to benefit them. Reliable data For bringing reliability in the rankings educational institutions have to be more careful about the data. Reliability of an exercise, like this, depends entirely on the reliability of the data. This is clearly an area in which further work is needed. Institutions need to appreciate that supplying honest and reliable data is important for their own image of how they want to be seen by their pupils and the world at large. Besides this, India is a country which has the highest number of human resources in the world. By 2020, India will outpace China as the country with the largest tertiary age population. It has also emerged as a globally recognized power in Information & Communication Technology and its applications. But this power of human resources and ICT is meaningless if it is not properly used for our own collection of data and that too from all the different parts of our country without any hindrance.

Professional Ethics Lino Guzzella, president of the Swiss institution, which is placed in the top 10 (ninth) of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2015-2016, says- " We have core values we want to keep, but to able to keep them you have to adapt to the environment, face challenges and come up with new approaches to research and teaching." Guzzella summarizes these values as nurturing staff and students, encouraging autonomy through a "lean" management system and providing resources to enable researches to come up with "new risky ideas". Thus, there is need to develop such work culture in Indian institutes which hails values and ethics in the entire profession from top to bottom and leaves no place for manipulation and corruption to enter.

7. Conclusion

In spite of taking much care, many pitfalls and deficiencies have been recognized in this first great attempt, which call for collective effort of all the stakeholders so that this step of taking the Indian educational institutions ahead can help them to move firmly towards global rankings. Though many shortcomings and deficiencies have been listed in the work of NIRF but it can be corrected only if it is genuinely wished by all the people responsible to it. More planning with adequate methodology and more systematic process with careful implementation and above everything, true and honest work of the stakeholders can only crack this nut. It is also realized that a single ranking framework for such a complex scenario of institutions would be counterproductive and even meaningless. Emerged as a vital and dynamic step,

National Institutional Ranking system can bring great benefits to students, parents, teachers, the institutions and ultimately to the whole education system of the country. Such ranking system only if conducted and followed honestly and adequately can help leading the higher education institutions to the top most positions and arrest the brain drain of our country. Need is to think of having collective benefit with a broad and long term view rather than having individual benefits with short term outlooks.

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