

NIRF Ranking: Making it robust, relevant and appropriate

Background

NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework) is the first un-biased ranking of higher education institutions in India, undertaken by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (**MHRD**). Based on an Expert Committee recommendation of 2015, three annual rankings were made (2016, 2017 & 2018); the ranking for 2019 is underway. The ranking is based of five core criteria, namely,

1. Teaching / Learning,
2. Research / professional practice,
3. Graduation outcome,
4. Outreach/ inclusivity, and,
5. Perception

Unlike many rankings undertaken mostly by media houses, NIRF is truly data-based and attempts to be as objective as possible. This is particularly of value, considering the fact that until a few years back, many Institute heads used to get a request from some of the media agencies for a fee running into several lakhs of Rupees with an attachment that shows the front page of the magazine issue with the specific Institute ranked as No 1! With very large number of Institutes in the country, ranking has become a difficult and often controversial exercise. NIRF too has its share of controversies, more due to inaccuracy of data than a flawed methodology.

As with any ranking framework, NIRF is continuously evolving and offers opportunities for improvement. This article focusses on possible areas of improvement to make NIRF robust, relevant and appropriate.

Move towards robustness in ranking

Three areas that can be taken up immediately are

1 Data collection improvement

A possible area that can be immediately addressed is a move towards automation of data gathering. Just as Google “crawls” data from Web-sites or Reserve Bank of India consolidates data kept by the individual banks in XML format (thanks to core banking), MHRD can “crawl” data with clearly identified meta-data and data structures for storing the data in an ongoing basis; in turn, there will not be a need to “collect” data from thousands of individual Institutions typically during September of every year.

The current portal also can be significantly improved in terms of “user interaction”, so that Institutes need not be burdened with dozens of hours of “data upload”.

Since much of the data originates from other wings of MHRD itself – for example, AICTE approved enrolment are already available with MHRD – there can be a dramatic reduction in data upload.

With the reduced load, Institutions can focus on “quality” of data, which in turn will lead to more reliable analysis.

For good Institutes, this leads to tedium of work due to duplicate work; for some of the “not so good” Institutes it is an area of unfair data fudging!

In today’s world that too in India, well-known for its IT expertise, one would expect this as the bare minimum.

2 *Improvement in data analysis*

With India emerging as “analytics” capital of the world, one would expect far deeper analysis of data than mere computation of weighted averages and a rank order. “Deep dive” analysis, location of interesting clusters, temporal analysis of data (with the fourth edition expected in 2019, at least the 2020 edition can analyse the 5-year trend) are all things that comes to one’s mind immediately.

With the expertise available in India, one could do a far detailed data analysis than what is currently done

3 Data visualization

Visualization of data through meaningful charts has evolved considerably. One only has to look at some the catchy reports from consultancy companies. Since Institutional ranking has policy implications at very different levels – MHRD / UGC and other regulatory bodies, University / College administrators, academic bodies like Senate and Heads of Departments – such visualization will dramatically improve the utility. Even end consumers like employers, prospective students and their parents will benefit from insightful visual reports than a mere number in the form of a rank!

Making NIRF rank more relevant

India is a vast country of 1.3 Billion population with thousands of Institutions of Higher Learning. The diversity of the country, in terms of geography, economic growth, languages, School systems (CBSE, State Boards, for example) and the rising aspirations of the middle class puts a variety of demands on the higher education system. Because of the success of CFTI’s (Centrally funded Technical Institutes) - IIT/IIM/ NIT/ IIIT/ IISc/ IISER – that enjoy access to large funds, autonomy, centralized admissions based on common entrance examinations etc., and the involvement of experts mostly from such Institutes in the ranking exercise – from the formulation of the ranking methodology to the actual processing of data – the ranking becomes less relevant for a very large number of Institutions, more so from the private sector. While expenditure, built-up space, fee, grants, student / faculty count, salary, placement etc., can be measured, the subtle act of creating and sustaining an academic culture of excellence,

peer-review based evolution of pedagogy, openness, scholarship that too across sciences, social sciences, humanities, specialized professions like architecture, medicine, accounting, law are things that are not easily measured; equally, they take years, if not decades to evolve.

With annual ranking, one is likely to skew the focus into short-term thinking, the way corporations are suffering from short-term thinking introduced by quarterly performance results that too on an inherently “emotional” stock markets! Issues like clustering institutions based on student size, scope of the departments, age of the Institutions must find a place.

Unlike Europe and Americas where Universities are inherently multi-disciplinary with Schools of Arts, Sciences, Humanities and often Law, Architecture, Medicine, most of the Indian Institutions are unitary in nature – Science, Engineering, Medicine, Law, for example. This provides a further skew in the ranking.

May be one should shy away from a simple number, however sophisticated, but provide a band – the way grading systems evolved from a number to a letter Grade and CGPA.

Of course, these are suggestions that hopefully will be considered by the policy makers

Making NIRF rank more appropriate

Perhaps an equally important area of improvement is the ultimate use of the ranking data. Indian Institute of Science will for a reasonably large number of years, if not decades, will be the No 1.

How can NIRF rank help a new and upcoming Institute, may be in private sector but with “public ethos” (valuing scholarship, merit-based admission of students, merit-based promotion of faculty, transparency in administration, “management” keeping an “arm’s length” from the day-to-day running of the Institution and its internal funds) in creating an equally promising Institute like IISc in the next 20 years?

How can an Institute in rural India that focusses on topics of local importance – technologies for agriculture, sustainability, special needs of local people by way of food, medicine, lifestyle - in an inter-disciplinary way with much smaller funds, but with much higher impact, get a higher ranking, in spite of the fact that its students may not get fancy salaries or 100% placement?

These are “food for thought”. NIRF is doing an admirable job of un-biased and data-based ranking. The ideas outlined above are only suggested to improve an already high-quality system to become even better, particularly considering the diversity of India and its education system

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