

One NIRF listing for all types of institutions makes it less meaningful for students from semi-urban areas

August 20, 2022, was a proud day for 2,324 students of IIT Bombay who got their degrees during the globally renowned institute's 60th anniversary. This included 449 who received a doctorate degree, the highest number ever to be achieved by any Indian institution. The PhD students' strength has also increased in the last 10 years. From 1,895 PhD candidates in 2011-12, the number touched 3,534 in 2020-21, and the current count is about 3,727.



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Chocko Valliappa,
Vice-Chairman of
Sona Group of
Institutions, calls for
fairness in the
NIRF ranking
for engineering
institutions

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Even with such an illustrious record what took me aback was that IIT Bombay was ranked only third in the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) listing this July, despite crossing a major milestone for STEM (Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics) education in India. IIT Madras topped the list and IIT Delhi was number two among engineering institutions.

For the record, in 2021-22, IIT-Bombay received external funding of ₹329.08 crore for research and development, in addition to ₹862 crore in 2020-21 from the Government of India.

The Education Ministry's NIRF Rankings July 2022 lists the top higher educational institutions (HEI) across separate subjects, and overall, nationally.

What do these rankings really mean for students, parents and colleges? It helps students zero in on the top institutions out of the 40,000 odd colleges and 1,000 plus universities in India. As for the institutions, it helps in attracting faculty and researchers with higher qualifications and richer experience.

NIRF parameters

The NIRF applies five key parameters for evaluating each educational institution:

- Teaching, learning and resources, weighted at 30 per cent
- Research and professional practice, also 30 per cent
- Graduation outcome, worth 20 per cent
- Outreach and inclusivity, 10 per cent
- Perception, weighted at 10 per cent

Each of these five has more specific sub-criteria such as total publications, student-teacher ratio, and support for students who are economically and socially challenged that define these parameters and are similarly weighted. The NIRF lays more weight on easily quantifiable data.

The final NIRF rankings also factor in one qualitative parameter — perception that is based on the feedback of employers and academic peers. The perception scores of the top 200 NIRF engineering institutions, as expected, factor in the age of the institution, how widespread the institution's alumni, the institution's contribution to research, and how well-targeted it is in solving real technology problems.

The perception criteria gives IIT Madras, the topper among engineering colleges, a score of 98.5 and IIT Bombay at the third position gets a perception score of 88.70. The perception score dips to 14.94 for IIT Kurukshetra at the 50 th position; 9.25 for PES University at the 100 th position; 8.8 for Pondicherry Engineering College at the 150 th position and 6.07 for Vidya Jyothi Institute of Technology at the 200 th position.

The private institutions based in rural and semi-urban areas, which play a significant role in educating youth, are handicapped by not having large recruiters and industrial houses coming in for hiring. This naturally affects their perception ranking negatively.

Meanwhile, government-funded institutions such as the IITs, IISc, Institutions of Eminence as also universities and colleges funded by State Governments get an unfair advantage because of the large funding that is at their disposal.

Biased towards resource rich

In fact, the very first parameter – teaching, learning, and resources – gives an unfair advantage to government-funded institutions because right from the time of their founding, it can avail abundant resources such as land, buildings and equipment, and annual funding.

This leads to it's ability to invest a lot more in highly qualified and experienced faculty, library, new equipment and software for laboratories, engineering workshops, salaries, maintenance of infrastructure and consumables as well as send their faculty to attend and present at conferences and workshops. These institutions also get more consultancy projects that bring in more funds.

The allocations for Higher Education in the 2022-23 Union budget for UGC, IITs, NITs/NIEST, Central Universities and IoE was ₹28,580 crore. However, 23 IITs with 16,000 BTech seats get an allocation of ₹8,195 crore, or 29 per cent of the higher education budget. This looks excessive. There is an urgent need to fix this anomaly by allowing these institutions to find methods to become self-sustaining.

As a test case when we take a sum total of the above expenses submitted to NIRF 2022 (FY 2020-21) by participating institutions and compare it with IIT Bombay we find that cost per student per year for IIT Bombay to be ₹34.4 lakh compared to ₹11.6 lakh, ₹6.4 lakh, ₹7.3 lakh and ₹3.3 lakh for the institutions ranked at 50th, 100th, 150th and 200th positions respectively.

The outreach and inclusivity metric is determined by the number of students from within the state, outside the state and overseas students. However, Ministry of Education's various schemes for foreign students do not recommend seeking admission to institutions with NIRF rank beyond 100. Therefore, institutions with ranks beyond 100 will always be at a disadvantage for future NIRF rankings.

Apples to oranges

Is there a case for separating the NIRF list into three separate categories? First, that ranks government-funded institutions and second, that lists universities, and third privately funded colleges.

Private colleges operate under well-defined regulations of UGC, AICTE and their parent universities. The papers published by faculty of autonomous and affiliated colleges of the university adds to the performance, ranking and perception of the university. Therefore, ranking of a university and an autonomous or an affiliated college cannot be part of one single list.

Removing some of these anomalies will add a higher degree of openness and fairness to this commendable effort by the Ministry of Education.

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