

## Self-reflection is the key to improvement for Indian universities

Focus on rankings risks neglecting the genuine quality improvements that could propel Indian institutions into the global league, says Amarnath Bose

November 30, 2017

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When it comes to the quality of Indian higher education, the tail is wagging the dog. Institutional rankings have captured the imagination of institutions, policymakers and the public alike. They are seen as a badge of academic excellence and institutions – particularly those offering management education – are in a mad rush to improve their placings at any cost. This is not doing us any good.

Despite all their efforts, Indian institutions remain conspicuous by their absence from the top 200 of *Times Higher Education's* latest World University Rankings (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2018/world-ranking>), while only 30 Indian institutes made the top 1,000. The Indian Institute of Science (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/indian-institute-science>), in Bangalore, was highest placed, somewhere between 251st and 300th.

The reason for this is pretty obvious: global standards are beyond the aspiration of most Indian institutions. The better among them attract the best students because there is little domestic competition from global education brands, so there is no economic compulsion for them to change. Meanwhile, those placed lower in domestic rankings, such as the government-run National Institutional Ranking Framework (<https://www.nirfindia.org/Home>), cannot afford to change for fear of losing the market segment that they have. The conundrum is that, while demand for higher education soars in India, the focus on filling seats means that quality continues to be well below par.

Nevertheless, the *appearance* of quality is very important in India's intensely competitive domestic market. Hence, institutions have no option but to turn to ranking agencies to provide an external validation of their worth, even though the common ranking methodologies have several shortcomings. Some place too much weight on graduate salaries. Others give too much weight to a rather nebulous concept of "university brand" that arguably has little to do with academic quality.



Moreover, smaller and newer institutions could justifiably argue that older and wealthier institutions have a clear fair advantage in rankings because of their more capable set of resources. With a more capable set of resources, these universities can

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What, then, should institutions without these advantages do? The answer may not sound convincing and is definitely not a quick fix. It lies in the assurance of quality: a rather esoteric concept in Indian higher education. Institutions need to define their internal quality assurance mechanism and then monitor progress on identified academic and related parameters. As was famously said by management guru Peter Drucker, what cannot be measured cannot be improved. And the most meaningful benchmarks for a higher education institution must be provided by the institution itself, in line with its vision and mission.

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As soon as we turn the comparison inwards, problems associated with varying input of student quality diminish, and the pragmatics of filling seats can be handled more rationally and with less pressure. Setting realistic and meaningful internal benchmarks would give institutions the freedom to control student quality, even if it resulted in seats going vacant. This would set off a virtuous cycle of better teaching standards and improved student outcomes. It makes little sense to compare one institution with another because the strengths and weaknesses of each are unique. The important questions for an institution, from the perspective of improvement, should be only how it is doing year-on-year. The focus should be on questions such as whether its students' entry grades and its graduates' salaries are rising.

Institutions also need to figure out whether their teaching effectiveness is improving and whether assessments authentically reflect student learning from the courses taught. With critical institutional performance indicators measured and compared over time, appropriate corrective action can be taken when these metrics fall short of expectations.

While this internal quality-based approach might not grab headlines, it will slowly but surely improve quality. And, in time, the institution's ranking will edge upwards as a consequence. If this approach is pursued consistently over many years, it might even allow India to crack the global league of higher education.

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