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Deconstructing the Anomaly of India's Higher Education Ranking Framework: A Case of Misdirected Selection of Evaluation Parameters

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Introduction

University rankings have in the past one decade attained cult status. Universities not only proactively participate in the ranking process but also put in efforts to improve their ranks every subsequent year. A variety of university rankings exist globally, right from the top three universally accepted rankings to nation specific ranking competitions to rankings awarded by a variety of business magazines and media houses.

The first known university rankings appeared in the 1870s to weed out information asymmetries that existed between various stakeholders of the education system. However, with the introduction of US News Education Rankings (USNWR) in the early 1980s, ranking as a marker to indicate academic quality gained mass prominence. Many such ranking frameworks curated by commercial publishers came into existence in the past four decades but the world higher education system is gradually converging towards recognizing the three most publicized ones – Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds University Rankings (QS).

This article discusses the inevitability of rankings and how deeply it has entrenched itself even in India where higher education is predominantly driven by government directed socio-economic policies. The Indian higher education ecosystem is vast and despite the recent emergence of the private universities, the government's policies do not offer a conducive environment for their growth and competitiveness. Private universities are coerced to operate as not-for-profit universities and therefore are not incentivized to invest in research and publications, internationalization and other parameters that are considered important to score better ranks. They operate with a simple 'admission-certification-placement' mandate and play the role of supplying certified graduates to the industry. The better their ability to place students, the more attractive they become in the student recruitment market. 'Industry placements' is the only significant marker that helps private universities sustain and operate. On the other hand, public universities in India are driven by quota system and student recruitment happens via a mass common entrance test. Since education in the public universities is practically free, the demand far outstrips supply leaving no incentive for the universities to compete with each other. Ranking or no ranking, public universities continue to attract students as the markers of university attractiveness are not ranks but availability of seats.

The article attempts at deconstructing India's higher education ranking framework -- popularly known as National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) -- and how the parameters selected for evaluating institutional performance are unsuitable to the Indian context. The article through a detailed commentary on each metric employed in NIRF methodology sheds light on how the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) that is tasked with governing the education system in India has to a large extent blindly mimicked Western ranking parameters that do not fit into the Indian higher education ecosystem and to some extent introduced metrics that have more to do with mundane operational efficiency than with the core principles of a ranking exercise.

Literature on Ranking

Why this obsession for ranking? Why do universities pursue the tag of being world class? What does world class mean? Among many factors that define what world class means, Salmi (2013) suggests that world class universities are those that are at the top of the ranking tables that are achieved by their ability to attract and recruit high quality students and faculty, produce quality research, become the most sought-after institutions by employers to hire quality talent and most importantly have a vision that is far beyond their contemporary contexts.

Rankings signal global competitiveness, increased marketization, better brand recognition and therefore create better employment opportunities for students and offer bragging rights to alumni. Good ranks are the single most important signals for international student recruitment. Lower rank projects not just the university's but the country's inability to create knowledge and accumulate human capital (Foray et al., 2009). Rankings signal a snob effect and socially advantaged students are drawn to the prestige of ranks. Ranking agencies believe that their job is to offer a complete and accurate picture of universities to students.

Ranking frameworks allude to a dynamic system at play among universities. By themselves, their improvement might not make a difference for universities but when compared with others their fortunes could change (Cramer and Page, 2007). Therefore, rankings anticipate a certain level of synchronicity in the higher education ecosystem.

Universities that put in conscious efforts to improve their ranks generally do well. A study of four Australian universities for a 15-year period by Dowsett (2020) suggests that universities that have put in concerted efforts to shape the strategic direction of their operations have not only improved their market

position but also significantly improved their ranks. These efforts were primarily fuelled by higher research and development spends. US universities consistently top the ranking tables due to their governance and funding structure (Li et al., 2010). US universities are well funded and therefore their research output is competitive.

There is another strand of literature that has a not-so-favourable view of rankings. Studies have stated that the contribution of league tables is overstated in the higher education ecosystem. Prospective students are not influenced by the year-on-year changes in ranks. They do not consider rank as an important marker for their choice of university. Instead, they were concerned about the competition that they had to face to find a study place in a university of their choice (Eccles, 2002).

Over the past decade, ranking has skewed the faculty hiring process in favour of academicians that can publish in top rated peer reviewed journals (Clauzet et al., 2015). Obsession with ranking has led to faculty burnout as they are under tremendous pressure to produce research papers fuelling academic anxiety (Grollman, 2014). Also, this has been the cause of increased competition and consequently animosity among faculty members. However, the linkage between quality and quantity of research undertaken by faculty and the quality of teaching and learning is not evident (Dill and Soo, 2005; Marginson and van der Wende, 2007). Rankings often fail to offer a comprehensive view of the university's competence in teaching and education. Instead, they reflect the university's research performance more accurately (Myklebust, 2014 and Rauhvargers, 2011).

Ranking has led to the commodification of higher education. Boyadjieva (2016) cites nine endemic weaknesses of rankings:

“(a) the vicious circle of increasing distortion; (b) endemic weaknesses of data and indicators; (c) the lack of agreement on quality; (d) ‘imperialism’ through rankings; (e) the systemic biases of rankings; (f) preoccupation with aggregates; (g) praise and push towards concentration of resources and quality; (h) reinforcement or push towards steeply stratified systems; and (i) rankings undermine meritocracy.”

Subjective perceptions that colour the performance of the university at a local level are ignored in the ranking process. Not all universities have similar mandate. For example, in the Indian context, majority public and private universities primarily operate as teaching universities. Research and internationalization are not on the agenda of teaching universities. Moreover, private universities are self-funded and have little to no motivation to engage in research because of funding

gaps. Universities have their own special missions that do not reflect in the rank-based data (Cramer and Page, 2007). The biggest challenge of the ranking system is that all universities are encouraged to mimic the best and are seldom encouraged to be original.

Indian Higher Education System and NIRF

Indian higher education ecosystem is very vast and complex. It has over 56,472 HEIs of which 1046 are universities and institutions of national importance (INIs) and the rest are colleges of various denominations (see Table 1).

Central universities and State universities are financed by the federal or the regional government based on their incorporation status. Private universities and deemed universities are self-funded and receive no grants from either the federal government or the regional government. These universities are predominantly funded by trusts or societies that are set up by promoters that have business interests in higher education. While private and deemed universities are by law supposed to operate as not-for-profit universities yet they would cease to exist if they do so. Promoters therefore find ingenious ways of tunnelling profits. Many functions of the university management are outsourced to private parties and revenues tunnelled out as fees or pay-outs to such service providers. So, while the rule of law is followed, the spirit of law is ignored.

In most states, private universities are to comply with the socio-economic charter of the regional governments. Seat quotas and fee structure as mandated and approved by the regional governments are to be fulfilled. Likewise, these universities are compelled to offer partial or full fee waivers to certain categories of students. Moreover, they are not authorized to generate any additional income by affiliating colleges, an activity that has been exclusively set aside for public universities.

Table 1: Types of HEIs in India

| Type of Institution | Number | Definition |
|--|---------------|--|
| Central University | 54 | Established by an Act of Parliament (Federal Government) |
| State University | 412 | Established by an Act of the State Legislative Assembly (State Government) |
| Deemed University | 124 | Established as an autonomous university via an administrative order under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 |
| Private University | 356 | Established under the aegis of State Private Universities Act of the State in which it is registered. These universities are however regulated by UGC through UGC (Establishment of and maintenance of Standards in Private Universities) Regulations, 2003. |
| Institution of National Importance (INI) | 95 | Premier public institutions that are set up by an Act of Parliament (Federal Government) and have a special status in the education ecosystem of the country. They receive special funding and are recognized as pivotal players in developing knowledge and human capital of the country. |
| Institution of Higher Learning | 06 | An assorted set of institutions that are either set up under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 or are recognized as 'deemed-to-be universities' by the Government of India and serve specific niche areas of education. |
| Colleges under Sec 2(f) & 12(B) | 12429 | Colleges that receive financial assistance from the Federal Government or any of its agencies under various funding schemes. These colleges can be affiliated to state universities. |

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| Autonomous Colleges | 747 | Colleges that have existed for at least 10 years and have demonstrated academic accomplishments, have adequate college infrastructure and that have financial strength as well as quality of institutional management are granted autonomous status subject to the fulfilment of certain accreditation conditions. |
| Colleges with Potential for Excellence | 314 | <p>Similar to Autonomous Colleges but with less stringent accreditation conditions. These colleges are to be either Government colleges or Constituent colleges.</p> <p>Constituent colleges are colleges that are part of the State Universities. For e.g., College of Engineering in State University 'ABC' is considered to be a constituent college. Similarly, other colleges that are part of the University like College of Business or College of Science or College of Arts are all considered to be constituent colleges.</p> |
| Affiliated and Constituent Colleges | 41935* | Colleges affiliated to State Universities. |

Source: University Grants Commission, India (<https://www.ugc.ac.in>)

*As per 2018-19 Annual Report of University Grants Commission, India. Latest figures unavailable.

Indian universities have been participating in the global ranking competitions for about a decade and a half now. Observing their dismal performance in the global league tables, in 2015, MHRD decided to launch its own ranking framework for universities operating within the country to foster competitive spirit and to generally improve the quality of education. The MHRD believes that domestic ranking league will spur the quality movement in Indian education and consequently Indian universities will likely perform better in the global ranking leagues. The logic behind domestic ranking of public universities that recruit students through a mass common entrance test and that are tightly tied to the nation's reservation policy simply seems to belie the very purpose for which ranking system was created in the first place.

The Indian ranking framework – NIRF -- was designed and the methodology focused on five important pivots of education – teaching, learning and resources; research and professional practices; graduation outcomes; outreach and inclusivity; and perception. Most of these pivots were inspired by the Times Higher Education Ranking framework.

The biggest drawback of NIRF is that (a) it assumes a level playing field between the types of universities operating in India; (b) it incorrectly ascribes autonomy to all the universities – both public and private; (c) it incorrectly believes that the charter of universities is to advance knowledge and not pursue government directed socio-economic justice; and (d) it fails to correct for a variety of differences that characterize the Indian higher education system, viz., no two universities in the country have similar mandates. Some universities exist in geographical locations -- that have no access to resources be it faculty, finance, infrastructure or industry and in some cases even students -- primarily because of political compulsions. Such universities too are put in the ranking pool and evaluated alongside universities that are located in metros with access to the finest resources, without correcting for their differences.

NIRF Ranking – A Meaningless Exercise

Owing to a wide variance in the universities in the Indian higher education ecosystem in terms of their operations charter, their geographical location, funding and resource availability, quality of students admitted, quality of infrastructure available and so on and so forth, ranking the universities becomes a dubious and meaningless exercise. Moreover, when the ranking framework that subjects itself to self-declared submissions without validation checks, the credibility of the ranking process becomes questionable.

Ranking agencies should not bestow ranks to universities on the basis of self-declarations (Salmi, 2011). NIRF though seems to belie this theory. Submissions made by universities are neither audited nor validated. The

agency does a clerical job of ranking the institutions based on self-declarations.

Data production and data collection in NIRF are often uncontrolled and are rarely validated for their correctness. Publicly verifiable information is unavailable in the NIRF data and therefore one has to accept whatever has been compiled and submitted by the participating university. The choice of proxies for evaluation is very nebulous. The basis on which each of the parameters is weighted is questionable as over 80% weight is given to items that have no relevance to the main stakeholder of the education system – the student. The choice of proxies as well as the lack of classification of universities – private, public, deemed, autonomous -- makes the NIRF methodology ambiguous.

Given the huge heterogeneity in the higher education space in India, comparing universities on like-to-like parameters is a foolish attempt to normalize education outcomes when they are not so in reality. Also, the attempt to club and evaluate all universities under an umbrella methodology explains the in-built bias of the framework in favour of the well-established, well-funded and resource rich universities. This is true even for departments within a single university. Better funded and well-resourced departments are likely to produce above average research output and are consequently encouraged further with better funds and resources while under-resourced and under-funded departments are likely to slip in their research output and are consequently punished for their underperformance (Johnes, 1989).

Reputed institutions like Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) – defined as INIs -- drag the education system into a halo effect and even if they underperform, stakeholders tend to ignore such shortcomings. Instead, they are eulogized for their past performance. So, ranking as a marker loses its contemporary value if past ranking and past reputation hold sway in stakeholder perception.

Public universities in India have the mandate of recruiting students on various parameters dictated by the social norms of the country. About 60% of seats available in public universities are filled under a quota system with reservations available for students from certain castes, communities, religions and gender. In addition, seats are also reserved for students from other states/regions, students with physical disabilities and students with a sports background. Suffice to say that classrooms are as heterogeneous as they can get in terms of student diversity, quality and competence. Most importantly, for many students that enter into regional public universities, the university could be their first brush with English medium education. Therefore, faculty members are tied with teaching and get little or no time to pursue research. Also, since faculty members of public universities have job protection they are

not incentivized enough to introduce and implement best practices in their universities.

Indian universities do not have an international character. So, it is amusing to see them competing in global ranking competitions that assign substantial weight to internationalization. The inability to break through the global top 100 universities is intuitive for two primary reasons –

(a) Public universities are mission driven and comply with the policy directives of the government. Interestingly, government directives are largely skewed towards socio-economic justice. Funding for research that is so important this year could become redundant in the ensuing year. Likewise, changing goalposts in terms of output expected from the public university system be it in the form of research publications or student outcomes or gross enrolment ratio are all directed at cutting into the autonomy of these institutions. Unless there is full autonomy and zero political interference in the administration of universities, it is practically impossible for them to break into the big ranking league tables;

(b) Private universities in India are incorporated as not-for-profit institutions and their revenues are largely dependent on a very simple matrix of programme cost versus quality of placements created by them. Students and parents look for their return on investment (ROI) from the programme. This puts tremendous pressure on the private universities to clock 100% placements year-on-year without fail and continue to improve on the placement quality metrics. By consistently delivering both on placement numbers and placement quality, these universities create both an identity for themselves as well as higher enrolment revenues. Financially it is imprudent for these universities to invest funds in research as their ROI from the research output is near zero.

India as a country is not an attractive destination either for international faculty or international students. So it makes no sense for private universities to signal the international markets of their attractiveness. It is in fact considered a drain on financial resources especially to promote a brand to an audience that is never going to buy your services.

I offer a metric-by-metric explanation of how the entire ranking exercise is futile and ill-designed without consideration for the ground realities on which Indian universities – both public and private – operate (see Tables 2-6).

Table 2: NIRF Parameter 1: Teaching, Learning and Resources (Weight: 30%)

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| <p>1. Metric (Weight): Student Strength (6%)</p> <p>Definition: Defined as the number of students enrolled as against approved intake.</p> <p>Remarks: Public universities in India have a very low approved intake owing to limited resources. All seats are filled as education is practically free in them. Seats are filled based on admission competition and all seats get invariably filled for multiple reasons viz., to pursue education for which the student enrolls; to avail hostel and mess facilities; to avail the university's library and hostel facilities while preparing for civil services examinations to enter the Indian bureaucracy.</p> <p>Private universities are driven by market forces. There is no upper limit to the sanctioned intake. Universities can calibrate their sanctioned intake based on pure demand-supply economics. This metric therefore is highly inappropriate as gross enrolment targets are always met because there is excess demand for study places in public universities and demand is always met through calibration in private universities.</p> <p>2. Metric (Weight): Faculty-Student Ratio (9%)</p> <p>Definition: Emphasis is on permanent faculty full time faculty. PhD and Masters degrees holders will be considered.</p> <p>Remarks: The parameter suggests a 1:15 expected ratio failing which score would be considered 0. This is an irrelevant metric both for the public and private universities.</p> <p>Public universities that are managed by the Federal and State Governments are being run with faculty shortages to the tune of 35%. Public institutions cannot hire sanctioned faculty as they do not have adequate infrastructure – office, laboratories, in-campus housing – to host them. Some state governments have put a complete ban on faculty hiring for over a decade now due to financial crunch.</p> <p>Private universities circumvent the problem of faculty hiring by recruiting underqualified professionals. Since the metric by definition accepts Master's degree holders as faculty members, private universities prefer hiring less qualified professionals at lesser salaries than pay higher salaries to qualified PhD faculty. Moreover, in both the cases it is difficult to find qualified faculty willing to relocate to non-metro, non-town locations. Over 80% Indian universities are located in semi-urban and rural locations leaving the academic staff no option of a replacement employment in case</p> |
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of a job loss. Therefore, they are not incentivized enough to migrate to non-metro, non-town locations and jeopardize their career prospects.

Non-availability of qualified academic staff is a major gap in the Indian education system and yet the metric demands for a faculty-student ratio of 1:15 which barely 1% of the Indian HEIs can meet. The government is aware of this anomaly and so is the ranking agency. Yet they continue to deploy this metric with the full knowledge that the same 10 universities will always top score on this parameter therefore skewing the final rankings.

3. Metric (Weight): Faculty Quality (6%)

Definition: Percentage of Faculty with PhD or equivalent qualification with respect to actual faculty and faculty experience in number of years.

Remarks: This is yet another skewed metric with an ambiguous definition.

Universities that hire visiting professors with a PhD degree can clock better scores even when they do not have full time PhD faculty. As per NIRF's definition, if a visiting faculty teaches two subjects in year, i.e., one per semester, then such faculty would be considered as full-time faculty. So, it serves the university's purpose to lower its cost of faculty resources by hiring part time PhD faculty at lower rates. And yet under the Research parameter (discussed below), universities are expected to produce research output irrespective of the type of faculty they have hired.

4. Metric (Weight): Financial Resource and their Utilization (9%)

Definition: Average annual capital expenditure (CAPEX) and operational expenditure (OPEX) per student.

Remarks: This is a relevant metric for public universities but irrelevant metric for private universities. Public universities that depend on Government funding are obligated to share their average annual CAPEX and OPEX per student to highlight their efficiency in managing allocated resources as well as to demonstrate the net impact such spends have had on student outcomes. On the other hand, private universities are not dependent on the government or its agencies for their funding needs. They raise their own finances through promoters, trustees and individuals and manage their financial needs as per their institutional requirements. Their accountability is to their parent society through the Board of Trustees. Government has no role to play barring occasional oversight in the interests of paying students. Yet the ranking agency deploys this metric on both the public and private universities and treats them similarly to compute rankings.

Source: www.nirfindia.org

Table 3: NIRF Parameter 2- Research and Professional Practice (Weight: 30%)

1. Metric (Weight): Publications (21%)

Definition: Number of publications and quality of publications (ascertained via third party sources).

Remarks: Metric is ambiguous. No imputed time period prescribed to compute this. It doesn't say "total number of publications in A to B time period by the University's faculty while employed with the University".

Example 1: F is a faculty in University M. She publishes 10 papers during her tenure at M which the University claims for its ranking evaluation.

Now F joins University N. She can carry forward her publication records to University N which can then claim them for its evaluation. Assuming that there are multiple F's moving in and out of universities, which is quite common in Indian higher education sector, universities have a free run claiming scores that originally does not belong to them.

Example 2: University M decides to hire 20 PhD graduates as faculty in a certain year. These PhD candidates would have published their research papers during their doctoral studies. Such publications would have already been claimed by their parent universities for ranking evaluation. However, University M can also claim these publications because the metric does not restrict it from adding them to its basket.

Example 3: Professor F joins University M from University N. While at University N, Professor F publishes a number of research papers in Grade A journals. However, by the time she could start clocking citations she is with University M. While Professor F is the owner of the citations who should book this metric – University N whose time and resources F used to publish the paper or University N that had nothing to do with F's publications before she joined it?

NIRF's definitions fall short of correcting for these anomalies.

Also, most importantly, Indian private universities are teaching universities. They have no incentive to engage in research as (a) they are largely regional in nature; (b) their attractiveness comes from their ability to get their students placed in industry. Public universities, barring the Institutions of Eminence, also have no incentive to publish research as faculty jobs are more or less secure and faculty members are not penalized for their inability to perform.

2. Metric (Weight): Patents (4.5%)

Definition: Number of patents granted and patents published over the previous three years.

Remarks: There is an overlap between patents granted and patents published over the three-year time frame. This metric runs the risk of double counting. This anomaly has not been accounted for in the framework.

Private universities as mentioned in the above comments have no incentive to engage in research and file patents. Their objectives and *raison d'être* are far away from the demands of this metric. Likewise, public universities that operate with 35% faculty shortage are already hard pressed to handle classroom teaching and curriculum. The scope to pursue research and file patents does not exist in the median public university.

While IP is a standard universal metric to evaluate institutional quality, it does not fit well with the Indian context. This metric though is applicable only for the 95 institutes of national importance (see Table 1) that have the financial wherewithal and facilities to pursue focused research.

3. Metric (Weight): Projects, Professional Practice and Executive Development Programs (4.5%)

Definition: Annual research funding earned, Consultancy income earned and annual earnings from full time executive development programs (EDPs) ---- all averaged to the previous three years.

Remarks: This metric like all the above ones is inappropriate.

Private universities are not patronized by industry executives for EDPs as the quality of training is abysmal. Also, private universities do not pursue EDP revenues. Their main focus is on paying students that join them with the aim of securing job placements. Also, private universities for reasons earlier above do not focus on raising research funds/grants or engage in consulting.

On the other hand, barring institutions of national importance (see Table 1) that are managed by the government, the entire population of central and state universities fail to generate consulting assignments and consequently revenues. Their EDPs are mere check box activities and are low priced making their income from professional practice highly inconsequential. The ranking agency has not considered the inability of either the private or the public universities to earn non-conventional revenues while introducing this metric in the ranking framework.

Source: www.nirfindia.org

**Table 4: NIRF Parameter 3- Graduation Outcomes
(Weight: 20%)**

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| <p>1. Metric (Weight): Metric for University Examinations (12%)</p> <p>Definition: % students passing their course within the stipulated time.</p> <p>Remarks: This metric is irrelevant for private universities. Almost every paying student that enrolls in private universities successfully completes her course. That is the default setting in private universities. Supply of higher education exceeds demand in India and students have choices. Any university detaining students quickly loses its market to competition and therefore cannot pursue detention policy to its own detriment.</p> <p>2. Metric (Weight): Metric for number of PhD students graduated (8%)</p> <p>Definition: Average number of PhD students graduated over the previous three years</p> <p>Remarks: Metric is irrelevant for private universities as majority PhD students are working professionals in ‘eminence hunting’ pursuits. They enrol for a PhD program not for the love of research or to improve their career prospects but to acquire the title of ‘Dr.’ which offers them social heft and entitlement. A quick reference of private university data with regard to type of PhD enrolment, available in NIRF records throws the following figures (list indicative, not exhaustive) –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rank 28, Vellore Institute of Technology, Full time -1247, Part time-1417 ▪ Rank 61, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Full time -174, Part time - 901 ▪ Rank 63, Amity University, Full time-836, Part time-2596 ▪ Rank 70, KL University, Full time-172, Part time – 919 ▪ Rank 99, Lovely Professional University, Full time- 339, Part time-1242. |
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Source: www.nirfindia.org

**Table 5: NIRF Parameter 3 - Outreach and Inclusivity
(Weight: 10%)**

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| <p>1. Metric (Weight): International Diversity (Students) (2.5%)</p> <p>Definition: Percentage students from other countries</p> <p>Remarks: India as a country is not an attractive destination for international students. Barring a few public universities that have been historically servicing students from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan and some African countries like Somalia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda the country's international character doesn't exist.</p> <p>As per MHRD's own report the total number of foreign students in the entire country is at 47,427 which is 0.1% of India's enrolment numbers in higher education. So, assigning a 2.5% weight to a metric that has no practical currency in Indian HEI ecosystem is amusing.</p> |
| <p>2. Metric (Weight): Regional Diversity (Students) (0.5%)</p> <p>Definition: Percentage students from other states</p> <p>Remarks: Regional diversity was promoted in the early 1980s and 90s to encourage public universities to build the character of national integration and to improve student mobility. Policy driven reservation quota for non-home state students was implemented in the process.</p> <p>This measure is anachronistic in the current times as student mobility is high and private universities are increasingly seeing non-home state students in their campuses. Interestingly, now state governments have implemented a reverse quota policy where private universities are to compulsorily earmark 25% seats for students from the host state/region.</p> |
| <p>3. Metric (Weight): Gender Diversity (Female Students and Faculty) (3%)</p> <p>Definition: Percentage women students (Expected: 50% of total student strength) and percentage of women faculty (Expected: 20% of total faculty strength)</p> <p>Remarks: This is a misplaced metric and has more to do with government's policies than the university's student recruitment regulations. Private universities do not recruit students on the basis of gender. Paying students, irrespective of their gender, are offered a study place provided they meet the basic enrolment criteria. Public universities on the other hand are mandated to reserve seats for female students under women's quota. 20% seats are reserved for female students and 33% jobs for female faculty members in certain states. Evaluating public universities on a metric that has</p> |

to be compulsorily followed due to government's policy is akin to double counting one's wins and belies logic.

4. Metric (Weight): Support to Economically and Socially Challenged Students (2%)

Definition: % students offered full tuition fee reimbursement

Remarks: As in the previous metric, this too is a policy driven measure. For e.g., state governments through their Private Universities Act have mandated private universities to offer full tuition fee exemption to 1.25% of the total student strength (especially students that hail from the same state in which the university is located). Also in some states, tuition fee for the economically and socially challenged students at the undergraduate and post graduate level are fully reimbursed by the state governments. For example, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu among others.

Tuition fee reimbursement scheme is driven by policy and has to be mandatorily complied with. Therefore, assigning a weight to it in the ranking framework is an anomaly.

5. Metric (Weight): Support for physically challenged students (2%)

Definition: Infrastructure/Facilities provided for specially-abled students (Basis: Verifiable responses to questions)

Remarks: As per guidelines of the regulatory agencies like University Grants Commission (UGC) or All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), facilities are to be compulsorily provided to the physically challenged students and staff for access to the campus keeping in consideration their mobility needs. For this purpose, public universities are offered a grant of one million Indian rupees (approximately 13,500 USD dollars) per university to construct ramps, rails and special toilets. In addition, the UGC also grants 800,000 Indian Rupees (approximately 11,000 US dollars) to make available assistive technology devices like computers, screen reading software, low vision aids, scanners and mobility devices among other technology solutions.

Providing infrastructure facilities for the physically challenged students and staff is a mandatory provision that universities have to comply with. Assigning a weight to score a mundane operational task that can be assessed through a regular departmental fact-checking report is yet another anomaly in the ranking methodology.

Source: www.nirfindia.org

**Table 6: NIRF Parameter 5- Employers and Academic Peers
(Weight: 100 Marks)**

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| <p>1. Metric (Weight): Perception/Reputation (10%)</p> <p>Definition: Survey conducted over a large category of Employers, Professionals and Academics</p> <p>Remarks: There is no evidence of either any agency or the institution/university conducting a perception survey. Results shown under this metric are dubious and lack credentials. A university situated in a rural location can never expect to be on top of the perception barometer as for a large part of the year it is invisible and operates in the shadow zone. Universities that are located in metros and in the vicinity of industry clusters are more visible and get better traction. So, despite a rural university's best efforts it will never be able to score decently on this parameter.</p> <p>The ranking agency does not 'weight correct' for this anomaly.</p> |
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Source: www.nirfindia.org

Discussion

NIRF methodology is an ill-designed ranking framework. Indian higher education ecosystem is vast and diverse. Various types of HEIs co-exist in the country (refer Table 1). The charter for each of these types is different and so is funding, infrastructure and resource availability, admission process, administrative compulsions as well as their general attractiveness to the student community. Pooling all types of HEIs under one umbrella ranking methodology is doing injustice to those HEIs that do not share the same mandate as that of INIs. Through my commentary on metrics adopted in the framework (refer Tables 2-6) I have tried to establish the non-existing linkages between parameters adopted and the actual focus of the HEIs being evaluated.

A large part of the framework has been designed keeping the INIs in mind. These 95 institutions are a class apart and operate with a much larger mandate that includes research, publications, IP generation, reputation farming, ensuring faculty and student quality, engaging in consultancy services and professional practice. While they too are subject to the government's policies, the level of autonomy they enjoy is fairly suitable to the asks made in the NIRF methodology.

Public universities – both central and state – operate subject to boundary management by the government. Government's directives on various

parameters like faculty hiring, faculty-student ratio, resource utilization, student admission policies, outreach and inclusivity, graduation outcomes, etc., are in contravention of its own ranking criteria. On the one hand, the government's ranking methodology advises a faculty-student ratio of 1:15 and yet on the other the government's own regulatory agency – AICTE - recommends a 1:20 faculty-student ratio to HEIs accredited by it.

Private universities in the country operate differently. There is no convergence between the mandate of public and private universities. Private universities are a complete class in themselves. They compete with each other on the 'admissions-student placements' spectrum which the public universities can conveniently ignore. Private universities have no incentive to sink money in activities that would not offer them an immediate ROI. Establishing a private university in India is a very costly proposition given the numerous conditions set by the government. Most private universities have a local character that is driven by the demographics of the region and therefore they do not meet the requirements of NIRF methodology, by design. Clubbing them with the other types of HEI to evaluate and rank them is like running on a fool's errand. With the ranking agency not evincing interest in auditing or cross verifying the submissions made by the HEIs, the possibility of tweaking and managing data is very likely high. This makes the ranking process all the more suspect.

If domestic signalling, especially for students, is the primary idea of NIRF it should rank HEIs based on their classification rather than pool them and rank them under an umbrella methodology. Institutions that are heavily funded and that have access to all required resources like the INIs should form one cohort. Similarly, state public universities should form another group as they essentially display similar characteristics or are subject to similar regulations. Central universities have a different charter and they should be ranked separately. Finally, private universities and deemed universities that pursue similar goals and have near similar mandates must be clubbed as one group and ranked accordingly. Only then can ranking make a significant impact in the Indian higher education ecosystem. Else, as it is commonly known and understood by all stakeholders, ranking will continue to be gamed by the INIs and a handful of smart private universities.

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