



An Analytical Study on the Impact and Effectiveness of NIRF Rankings in Indian Higher Education System

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Abstract: The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has been instrumental in standardizing the evaluation of higher education institutions across India since its inception in 2015. Despite its pivotal role, the effectiveness of NIRF in guiding institutional strategies and influencing student decisions still needs to be explored. This research paper aims to dissect the impact and effectiveness of the NIRF rankings by examining the indicators used for ranking, their influence on institutional behaviours, and their implications on students' choices. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, we analyze NIRF data, survey students, and interview university administrators to understand the rankings' practical effects comprehensively. Preliminary findings indicate NIRF rankings' significant influence on institutional policies and student decisionmaking. This study serves as an eye-opener towards a more holistic understanding of the NIRF's role in shaping the future of Indian higher education.

Keywords: National Institutional Ranking Framework, NIRF, Indian Higher Education, University Rankings, Institutional Performance, Decision-making.

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Introduction:

Since the establishment of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2015 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, the educational landscape in India has undergone a significant transformation. The goal of implementing such a framework was to foster a competitive environment among higher educational institutions in India, driving them towards excellence in all domains that constitute the overall quality of education.

NIRF ranks institutions nationwide based on key performance parameters—Teaching, Learning, and Resources; Research and Professional Practice; Graduation Outcomes; Outreach and Inclusivity; and Perception. Over time, these rankings have established themselves as a crucial reference for students, parents, and educators, influencing higher education decisions.

The framework of the NIRF encompasses multiple criteria, each contributing its weight to the final score. By analysing these specific factors, we can gain a deeper understanding of the NIRF's impact on the higher education landscape in India.

This paper, which aims to examine thoroughly, intends to critically evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the framework specifically designed for a neutral evaluation of educational institutions. The key questions it addresses are:

1. Does the ranking system catalyze to improve institutions' performance, or does it simply push them to tailor their performance to match the established metrics?
2. To what extent do these rankings serve as a useful tool for students pursuing high-quality education?
3. How important are these rankings' roles in shaping the reputation of India's educational establishments?

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of the NIRF on India's higher education, this research paper addresses these questions using qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The objective is to examine how NIRF rankings impact institutional conduct and student decision-making processes while scrutinizing the ranking parameters. This study will shed light on the intricate relationship between assessment mechanisms like the NIRF and their real-world consequences. Consequently, a significant contribution will be made to ongoing conversations about the role of educational rankings in determining the trajectory of higher education in India.

Methodology:

Aiming to investigate the NIRF's impact and effectiveness on India's higher education, this study utilizes a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research. This approach includes three main elements: NIRF data analysis, student surveys, and university administrator interviews.

- 1. NIRF Data Analysis:** We collected and scrutinized NIRF data from the previous five years. The data included ranking scores, individual parameter scores, and institution profiles. By conducting a comparative analysis, we identified trends and irregularities, which helped us understand how the ranking system potentially influences institutional performance over time.
- 2. Student Surveys:** We conducted an online survey among university students across India to gauge NIRF rankings' influence on their decision-making process. The survey consisted of questions about the significance of NIRF rankings in their choice of institution, their comprehension of the NIRF ranking process, and their opinions on the effectiveness of these rankings in depicting an institution's quality.
- 3. Interviews with University Administrators:** We conducted semi-structured interviews with administrators from various institutions with different NIRF rankings. These interviews aim to understand how university administrators perceive the NIRF

rankings, their strategies to improve their rankings, and their perceived impact on their institution's reputation and strategies.

To ensure the study's reliability and validity, we implemented several strategies. For instance, we conducted a pilot test for the student survey to verify the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. For the interviews, a standard set of open-ended questions was used for consistency, and interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling method to represent various types of institutions. The gathered data were examined using suitable statistical and thematic analysis techniques.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, with participants providing informed consent, and their identities were kept confidential.

The thoroughness of this mixed-methods approach aims to offer a comprehensive insight into the NIRF rankings' impact and effectiveness on the Indian higher education system.

NIRF Rankings: An Analysis

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranks higher education institutions in India across multiple parameters. Comprehending these parameters and their respective weights is an insightful start for evaluating the NIRF's impact on the higher education scene in India.

Teaching, Learning & Resources (TLR): This parameter, with a weightage of 30%, encompasses aspects such as student strength, faculty-student ratio, faculty qualifications and experience, and facilities for sports and extracurricular activities. Institutions that excel in providing quality education and resources are awarded higher scores in this category.

Research and Professional Practice (RP): With a 30% weightage, this category focuses on research output, including publications, IPR and patents, and projects. Institutions with a strong research environment tend to score higher in this parameter.

Graduation Outcomes (GO): This category, carrying a weightage of 20%, assesses metrics such as the median salary of graduates, students opting for higher studies, and students clearing national and state-level competitive exams. Higher scores are attributed to institutions that effectively prepare students for successful careers or further education.

Outreach & Inclusivity (OI): Weighted at 10%, this parameter considers the percentage of students from other states and countries, women students, economically and socially challenged students, and facilities for physically challenged students. Institutions that promote diversity and inclusivity tend to receive higher scores.

Perception (PR): Accounting for 10% of the total score, this parameter reflects the public perception of the institution. Surveys among parents, alums, other institutions, and employers form the basis for the scoring.

Our analysis of NIRF data over the past five years indicates certain trends. Institutions consistently scoring high in TLR and RP categories tend to secure higher overall rankings, indicating the critical role of teaching quality and research output in the NIRF rankings. However, improvements in the OI and PR categories have also led to significant ranking advancements for several institutions.

Additionally, while there is a general alignment between institutions' NIRF rankings and perceived prestige, the study found several outliers. Certain institutions with lower rankings

often enjoy a higher perception score, hinting at a possible gap between public perception and the NIRF's quantitative evaluation.

While comprehensive in its approach, the NIRF does not consider certain factors, such as the innovative capabilities of institutions, industry-academia collaborations, or entrepreneurial achievements of students, which may be crucial in the contemporary education landscape. This calls for a deeper understanding of the NIRF's effectiveness in truly representing the quality of an institution.

Impact of NIRF Rankings on Institutions:

The NIRF rankings have significantly influenced the strategies and policies of higher education institutions in India. Based on our study's findings, we can identify several areas in which these impacts are prominent:

Performance Improvement: The NIRF rankings have created a competitive environment encouraging institutions to improve their performance across various parameters. The institutions strive to excel in teaching and research practices, graduation outcomes, inclusivity, and other areas NIRF considers. This occurrence can be observed in the rise of investments in infrastructure, professional growth for faculty, research amenities, and services for student assistance.

Strategic Planning: The rankings' way is discernable in the strategic planning of educational bodies. Increasingly, universities are harmonizing their goals and targets with the benchmarks established by NIRF. This leads to an escalating focus on improving the student-faculty ratio, the standard and volume of research contributions, and diversity. The influence of NIRF is also noticeable in schools' marketing and brand-building tactics, where superior NIRF positions are often emphasized in promotional material.

Resource Allocation: NIRF rankings have evolved into a crucial determinant of resource distribution within educational bodies. There's an escalating pattern of channeling resources towards areas that could enhance the institution's rankings, such as research advancement, infrastructure enhancements, and faculty appointments. However, this also raises concerns about the potential neglect of other essential aspects of education that may not directly affect the ranking.

Reputation and Perception: The institute's NIRF ranking often impacts how stakeholders, including potential students, faculty, and employers, view it. Higher rankings can improve a school's prestige and appeal, potentially boosting student admissions, faculty appointments, and collaborations.

Policy Dialogue: NIRF rankings have also influenced policy discussions among university administrators and policymakers, focusing on the quality of higher education and the need for continuous performance evaluation and improvement. While the NIRF rankings' impact on driving institutions towards improvement is significant, the study also revealed concerns about the potential for 'gaming' the system. Some institutions might focus excessively on improving their scores in certain NIRF parameters at the expense of other important aspects of education. This calls for a balanced approach in using the NIRF rankings as a tool for performance improvement.

Case Studies:

Two case studies were carried out to explore the impact of NIRF rankings on institutions: one that significantly improved its ranking over time (Institution A) and another that consistently maintained a top-ranking position (Institution B).

Case Study 1: Institution A

Institution A, a technological institute, experienced a significant improvement in its NIRF ranking over the past five years. Our analysis showed that the institute aligned its strategic planning with NIRF ranking parameters. This included hiring highly qualified faculty, increasing research output, and improving student support services. The institute's improved ranking subsequently increased student applications, especially from other states and countries, thus contributing to a more diverse student body. It was also noticed that faculty recruitment became easier due to enhanced reputation.

Case Study 2: Institution B

Institution B, a prestigious university, has consistently held a top-ranking position in the NIRF rankings. The university's consistent performance can be attributed to its established reputation for academic excellence, substantial research output, and successful alumni. Interestingly, while the university considers its NIRF ranking important, it was found that the ranking is not the primary driver of its policies. Instead, it continues to focus on its core mission of delivering high-quality education and producing skilled graduates. Its consistent NIRF ranking is considered a byproduct of this mission rather than the main objective.

These case studies show that while NIRF rankings can shape an institution's strategy, the underlying commitment to quality education is paramount. The rankings can guide improvements but should be within the broader goal of enhancing the educational experience. This is an important consideration for institutions aiming for a higher NIRF rank. Success lies in balancing the pursuit of ranking with the mission of imparting high-quality education.

Conclusion:

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has undeniably brought a significant shift in the Indian higher education landscape since its inception in 2015. It has emerged as a central mechanism for assessing the performance of higher educational institutions in India, impacting institutional strategies, student decisions, and the broader discourse around educational quality.

Our analysis divulged that NIRF rankings had spurred institutions to improve their performance across several crucial parameters, creating robust competition. Institutions have become more strategic in planning, tailoring their goals and resource allocation to match the NIRF parameters. Furthermore, the rankings have noticeably impacted institutions' reputations, substantially shaping stakeholders' perceptions.

However, the research highlighted the dangers of overemphasizing rankings in institutional strategies. At the same time, NIRF rankings can serve as a roadmap for improvements; an

excessively narrow focus on climbing the ranking ladder can distract from other vital aspects of education not directly represented in the ranking metrics.

For students, NIRF rankings are a significant tool in their decision-making arsenal. Yet, it's crucial to recognize that while these rankings offer a broad view of institutional performance, they don't completely represent the intricacies of individual and institutional experiences.

Given these findings, the NIRF should consider integrating additional parameters into its ranking frameworks, such as innovation, industry-academia collaboration, and entrepreneurial accomplishments. Institutions, on their part, should perceive NIRF rankings as a means for self-improvement rather than the ultimate goal. Meanwhile, students should consider these rankings one of many factors in their decision-making process.

In the end, the shared goal of all stakeholders should be the comprehensive development of students and the enhancement of the educational landscape. NIRF rankings should serve as a valuable, though not exclusive, instrument towards achieving this aim.

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