

SHIKSHA VICHAR

PERSPECTIVES • INSIGHTS • IMPACT

THE GREAT RANKING ILLUSION

Beyond the Ranking Numbers:
Rethinking & Designing Excellence

THE NEXT GENERATION ASSESSMENT ECOSYSTEM

Data, Technology and Trust
Driving a Smarter, Fairer
and Future-Ready System.



RANKING THAT EVOLVES

Better Metrics.
Deeper Insights.
Stronger Accountability.



INSIGHTS THAT MATTER

Understanding Performance.
Recognising Purpose.
Inspiring Progress.



IDEAS THAT SHAPE

New Perspectives.
Practical Solutions.
Real-World Change.



IMPACT THAT LASTS

Empowering Institutions.
Enabling Learners.
Strengthening the Ecosystem.



ASSESS TODAY



ASSURE TOMORROW



EMPOWER ALWAYS

DRISHTI-AI

FROM PIXELS TO PREDICTIONS

[A 24-HOUR HACKATHON]

DEXIT GLOBAL joined hands with **Dwarkadas J. Sanghvi College of Engineering (DJSCE)** to empower young innovators at DRISHTI-AI, a 24-hour Computer Vision hackathon that brought ideas to life and predictions to reality.



DEXIT GLOBAL was the proud industry partner, bridging academic innovation with enterprise-level, real-world impact.



PROBLEM STATEMENT DESIGN

Defined the technical scope and parameters for both tracks - Behaviour Monitoring and Motion Estimation - aligned with real industrial automation challenges.



SPONSORSHIP & PRIZE FUNDING

Backed the event financially with a prize pool for the top two winning teams of each track.



INDUSTRY MENTORSHIP & JUDGING

DEXIT tech leaders served on the grand finale jury, evaluating code efficiency, mathematical approach and deployment feasibility of computer vision models.



INCUBATION & SCALABILITY

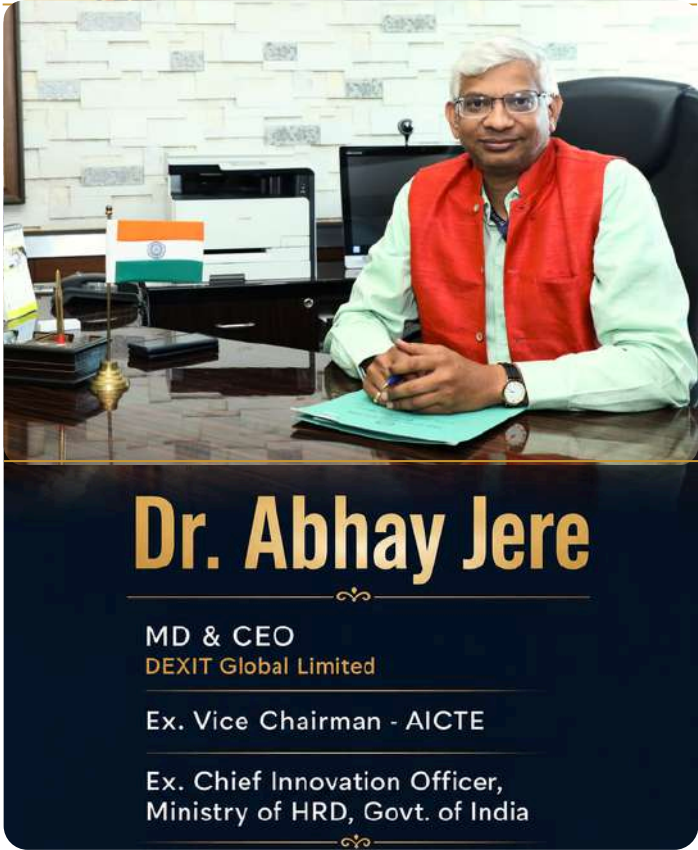
Providing a path for outstanding prototypes to be refined into enterprise-grade solutions through our ecosystem and initiatives.



Empowering the next generation of innovators to build solutions that drive automation, safety, and intelligence for a better tomorrow.

Together, we turn **ideas** into **impact**.

About This Issue



What Exactly Are We Ranking?

A ranking is, after all, just a number on a table. But somewhere along the way, we have started treating it almost like a verdict. This is something I found myself thinking about while writing my recent Economic Times article, “What to Rank, and File Away.” I looked at some interesting contradictions in global university rankings— institutions that do exceptionally well on research and citations but score much lower on reputation or employability, and vice versa.

These contradictions are worth pausing over. Because they leave us with a rather fundamental question: what exactly are rankings telling us about a university?

I am certainly not arguing that rankings do not matter. They certainly do, because students look at them, parents check them, and even institutions and policymakers pay attention to them. In a higher-education system as large and diverse as ours, rankings do serve a purpose. They give students, parents and institutions a way to make sense of a landscape that can otherwise be difficult to navigate. But a number can also give us a false sense of certainty.

This edition of Shiksha Vichar picks up that conversation—looking beyond the familiar caveats about rankings and asking a rather uncomfortable question: are we measuring what truly matters? Because perhaps the real goal should not be to build universities that rank better. It should rather be to build genuinely better universities, and let the rankings follow.

That, I believe, is a conversation worth having.

— Dr. Abhay Jere, Shiksha Vichar

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A Typical Ranking Day



Somewhere in India, a university communications team is refreshing a webpage that has not changed since the last refresh, forty seconds ago. Somewhere else, a vice-chancellor is sitting very still, phone face-up on the desk, pretending he's not eagerly waiting for a number. A WhatsApp group has already been created for the occasion. It has a name like "Ranking Day 2026" with 42 participants, most of whom will say nothing until there is something to celebrate. The press release exists in two versions: one in case the number goes up, and a shorter and vaguer one, in case it does not. The social media creatives are ready in both a blue palette and a green one. Nobody has said out loud which palette corresponds to which outcome, but everybody knows.

The number arrives. It has moved. Not by much (4-6 places), the kind of movement that would not survive a single rigorous significance test, but it has moved in the right direction, which is enough. Within the hour: "Proud moment for our institution." Within two hours: a graphic with a trophy emoji. Within a day: a full-page advertisement in a newspaper that costs more than the cause it is celebrating. Here is the question nobody in that WhatsApp group is asking, because asking it would spoil the day: did anything actually happen?

Did teaching get better between last year and this one? Did the students in the back row of a three-hundred-seat lecture hall suddenly start understanding thermodynamics? Did the research produced this year change more minds, cure more diseases, fix more bridges than the research produced last year? Or did the institution simply move — a little, carefully, deliberately — inside a methodology that someone else had already fixed in place?

If we are being honest, a university rarely transforms dramatically in twelve months. Its ranking, however, can.

And yet, dismissing rankings altogether would be just as wrong. A rank cannot tell the whole story, but neither can we pretend it tells us nothing. It gives us a benchmark, a point of comparison and, at times, a useful nudge to do better.

Rankings matter because the alternative to rankings does not mean there will be no judgment. It is a judgment made with limited information, by more biased means, through channels far less accountable than a published methodology anyone can pick apart. A parent in a small town, weighing an engineering college three states away, does not have the luxury of visiting the library, sitting in a class, or interviewing a dozen alumni. She has a number, a table, and a badge on a website, which is quite a lot to hang a decision on, and that is exactly why we should worry about how good the number is.



So this edition is not about dismissing rankings. It is about asking whether they deserve the weight we give them. If a number can influence a student's choice, shape a university's priorities, and even influence how excellence itself is perceived, then a question follows that we cannot afford to avoid: are we measuring what matters, or merely what is easiest to measure?

And if rankings are here to stay, the real question is no longer whether we should believe them. It is whether we can build a ranking system worthy of that belief.

That is the conversation this edition sets out to provoke — to question what rankings really measure, what they miss, and whether it is time to rethink the very parameters by which we measure, and call, excellence.

Why We Pretend We Don't Care

(while also checking the ranking results at 9:01 AM)

Ask any dean, in a seminar, whether rankings are a sound way to judge a university, and you will get a measured, faintly world-weary answer about the limits of quantification. Ask the same dean, at 9:01 on the morning the results are released, whether they have checked, and the honest answer — delivered slightly too fast — is yes. This is not hypocrisy so much as a structural fact about how modern institutions make decisions under uncertainty. Nobody involved in the ranking ecosystem — student, parent, employer, government, donor, journalist, or the university itself — has the time, expertise or access to personally evaluate the thing they are being asked to judge. A ranking is not really a claim about excellence. It is a solution to an information problem.



Consider what each stakeholder is actually missing:

A student choosing among a dozen institutions cannot sit in every classroom, cannot read every faculty member's last five papers, cannot talk to a representative sample of alumni about where their careers went and why. A ranking offers a shortcut through that fog — imperfect, but faster than the alternative, which is no information at all, or worse, information gathered entirely from a college's own marketing department.

An employer building a campus recruitment shortlist across two hundred institutions is not going to individually assess each one's curriculum. A ranking, or the reputational signal it encodes, becomes the filter that makes the recruitment cycle logistically possible. Even those who criticize rankings still find themselves using them. An academic may question whether citation counts truly reflect research quality, yet still cite their institution's ranking in a grant application. It is less about hypocrisy and more about the reality of the system: when one measure becomes the accepted yardstick, even its critics have little choice but to use it.

RANKINGS: A NECESSARY PROXY, NOT THE ULTIMATE TRUTH

-  > NECESSARY PROXY
-  > SYSTEM REALITY
-  > SHORTCUT,
NOT DESTINATION
-  > SMALL MOVES,
BIG NOISE
-  > CONTRADICTION
AT THE CORE

Rankings were created as a shortcut — a way to make sense of an enormous and complicated higher-education landscape. Somewhere along the way, we forgot the first part. We started treating the shortcut as the destination. A university moving from 142 to 137 suddenly becomes a story of progress, as if five places can capture a meaningful change in institutional quality. Sometimes it can, but many times, it is simply the result of a change in one parameter's weightage, or even one highly cited faculty member. That contradiction — using rankings as a necessary proxy while behaving as though they were the underlying truth — is the starting condition of this entire edition.

Everything that follows is an attempt to take that contradiction seriously. The aim is neither to dismiss rankings, nor to defend them, but to ask a harder question:

If rankings have such a powerful influence on how we perceive excellence, are we measuring the excellence as it truly exists — or simply the parts of it we are comfortable measuring?

By the Numbers

THE SCALE OF INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

~1,200 Universities & ~50,000 Colleges	make up the Indian higher-education system — one of the largest, most structurally diverse networks of institutions in the world. <i>(AISHE, Ministry of Education)</i>
~4.3 crore students	are enrolled across the system — meaning any ranking framework built for a few hundred research universities is, by construction, blind to the overwhelming majority of Indian higher education.
Gross Enrolment Ratio: ~28%	NEP 2020 sets a target of 50% by 2035 — implying tens of thousands of new institutions and campuses will be built, taught in, and eventually ranked, over the next decade.

What the Major Systems Actually Weigh



NIRF Parameter	Weightage	What It Captures
Teaching, Learning & Resources (TLR)	30%	Faculty quality, infrastructure, financial resources, faculty-student ratio
Research & Professional Practice (RP)	30%	Publications, patents, projects, professional practice, entrepreneurship
Graduation Outcomes (GO)	20%	Ph.D. scholars, placement rates, median salary, examination performance
Outreach & Inclusivity (OI)	10%	Gender diversity, economically/socially weaker section enrolment, accessibility
Perception (PR)	10%	Peer perception, media & public perception

QS World Rankings

QS Indicator	Weightage
Academic Reputation	30%
Citations per Faculty	20%
Employer Reputation	15%
Faculty-Student Ratio	10%
International Research Network	5%
International Faculty Ratio	5%
International Student Ratio	5%
Employment Outcomes	5%
Sustainability	5%

Academic Reputation (30%) and Employer Reputation (15%) together make up almost half the total score — reputation surveys, not hard outcome data, decide the largest share of a QS rank.

Times Higher Education

THE Parameter	Weightage
Research Quality	30%
Teaching	29.5%
Research Environment	29%
International Outlook	7.5%
Industry	4%

INDIA'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT



India now places more institutions in QS's global top ranks than at any point in the exercise's history — a genuine, multi-fold increase from where the count stood a decade ago. Yet even as headline placements rise, the share of India's 50,000 colleges that any global system can see at all remains a rounding error — global rankings were built to compare a few hundred research universities worldwide, not a system of this shape or size.

When the Metric Becomes the Mission

There is a piece of folk wisdom in economics and management theory, usually attributed to British economist Charles Goodhart, that every institutional data office should have framed on its wall: when a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure.



The logic is straightforward once you see it. A metric is chosen because, at the moment it is chosen, it correlates reasonably well with something we actually care about but cannot measure directly. Faculty-student ratio correlates, roughly, with the attention an individual student receives. Citation count correlates, roughly, with research influence. International-student proportion correlates, roughly, with a certain kind of global engagement.

The correlation is real — that is why the metric was chosen in the first place — but it was never perfect, and it was never meant to bear the full weight of a definition. It is a proxy, not the thing itself. A useful signal, not a complete description. The distinction seems obvious, but it becomes remarkably easy to lose once the number starts carrying consequences for institutional reputation, funding, recruitment or leadership priorities.

The moment consequences attach to the metric, however, institutions stop optimizing for the underlying thing the metric was trying to approximate, and start optimizing for the metric itself. The faculty-student ratio becomes something to improve on paper; citations become something to accumulate; internationalisation becomes a head count to increase. What was once a means of observing progress can gradually become the objective around which decisions are organized.

The correlation, which was doing useful work while nobody was pushing on it, begins to break down precisely because someone is now pushing on it very hard. And that is the deeper problem: the more a measure is rewarded, the more incentive there is to improve the measure itself, even when doing so does not produce a proportionate improvement in the reality it was meant to represent. Look closely at the metrics behind most national and global rankings, and the same pattern keeps emerging.

Different metrics. Same pattern. A proxy for quality becomes the target itself.		
METRIC	MEANT TO MEASURE	WHAT GETS OPTIMISED
1 Faculty-Student Ratio 	 How much individual attention and mentorship a student is likely to receive.	• Increase headcount • Add visiting/adjunct faculty • Manage ratios on paper A better number does not automatically mean a better classroom.
2 Citations 	 Research influence—whether other researchers found the work worth building on.	• Publish in higher volume • Choose faster-citation topics • Build large co-authorship networks More citations don't always mean more impact.
3 International-Student & International-Faculty Ratios 	 A university's global intellectual exchange.	• Recruit international students • Expand through scholarships and specific markets • Focus on headcount, not deep internationalisation Global numbers don't always mean global depth.
4 Reputation Surveys 	 The informed judgment of peers.	• Increase visibility • Strengthen media & alumni presence • Enhance brand perception Visibility is not always the same as quality.
5 Placement Statistics 	 Whether an education translates into a livelihood.	• Redefine "placed" • Extend reporting windows • Count internships/stipends • Exclude late responders Numbers can improve without real careers improving.
6 Patents 	 Applied innovation and new ideas with potential value.	• Increase patent filings • Focus on quantity, not quality • File early, commercialise late (or never) A patent filed is not the same as innovation used.

None of these behaviours are, individually, scandalous. Most are legal, common, and defensible in isolation. Taken together, across an entire sector responding to the same incentive structure at the same time, they add up to something worth naming honestly: a university can become very good at producing what a ranking system can count, without that being the same thing as becoming very good at producing what students, employers, and society actually need.

What the Rank Does Not Tell You

Whether students enjoyed learning. Whether faculty had time to teach, or were sprinting between three institutions to make ends meet. Whether graduates stayed employed a year later, not just six months. Whether the research changed practice anywhere outside the paper it was published in. Whether a disadvantaged student, admitted on a stretch, actually succeeded — or simply survived.

The Ranking Dilemma

Compare four different ranking systems side by side — say, an Indian national framework, and three of the major global systems — and ask them to rank the same hundred universities. You will not get four versions of the same list. You will get four different lists, sometimes dramatically so, with institutions landing forty places apart depending on which system is doing the counting.



This is not usually a sign that someone is lying. It is a sign that four mirrors can each show a true reflection of the same person and still look nothing alike, because each mirror is angled differently, lit differently, and built to catch a different feature.



Research Intensity Lens

A system weighted heavily toward research output and international faculty will naturally favour large, well-resourced research universities.



Teaching & Social Impact Lens

A system weighted toward teaching quality, graduate outcomes, or regional accessibility will naturally favour a different, often less globally visible, set of institutions.



Neither mirror is technically lying. Both are showing something real, filtered through a specific set of choices about what counts.

This is not an argument for throwing the mirrors away. Different lenses, honestly labelled as lenses, are useful precisely because they show different things.

RANKINGS ARE LENSES, NOT VERDICTS



Each lens highlights certain strengths



Each lens leaves other dimensions out of focus



Together, they offer a more complete, but still partial, view

The danger appears when we stop treating the ranking as one lens among several and start treating it as the single verdict on an institution's worth — when the reflection becomes more important than the person looking into it, and an institution begins reorganising itself to look better in the reflection rather than to become a better version of the thing being reflected. That is when the measure quietly begins to shape the mission. Decisions about faculty, research, internationalisation, student recruitment and even institutional priorities can start being driven less by what creates lasting value and more by what produces a visible movement in the table. Over time, the risk is not simply that a university becomes better at ranking — it is that it becomes better at being ranked.



The honest response to four different rankings producing four different lists is not to pick the one that is most flattering and cite only that one, as many institutions quietly do. It is to read all four as partial views of a genuinely multidimensional thing, and to notice which dimensions each one is choosing not to show you.

A university is too complex to be reduced to a single hierarchy, and no ranking, however sophisticated, can capture every dimension of its quality, purpose and impact. The value lies in understanding what each framework sees clearly, where its blind spots begin, and how those different perspectives can be brought together before we make a judgement about the institution itself.

The Data Problem

Beneath every ranking number sits a much less glamorous layer: the data submission process. And it is here, more than in any grand debate about methodology, that a great deal of India's ranking story is actually decided — including, as this edition's opening note argued, the strange case of a research-strong institution that scores well on citations and still underwhelms on the softer, harder-to-document indicators a ranking also demands.



An argument made forcefully in recent public commentary on Indian rankings deserves to be taken seriously rather than filed away as a footnote:

A meaningful number of Indian institutions may be doing work that would justify a stronger ranking position, but lack the systems to consistently document, verify, and present that work in a form that ranking agencies can score.



An excellent placement outcome that lives only in a departmental Excel sheet, never reconciled against the registrar's records, does not exist as far as a ranking submission is concerned.



A genuinely influential piece of applied research, published in a regional journal outside the major citation databases, is functionally invisible to a citation-based metric — not because the research lacks value, but because the infrastructure to notice it does not exist.

This is worth separating into distinct layers, because they are frequently conflated and the conflation causes real damage.



DATA AVAILABILITY

Whether the number exists anywhere, in any form, that could in principle be reported.



DATA QUALITY

Whether that number, once it exists, is accurate, consistently defined, and comparable across departments and years.



DATA VERIFICATION

Whether anyone outside the reporting unit has checked the number before it is submitted.



DATA STORYTELLING

The skill of presenting accurate data compellingly — building the case, in a submission document, for why a number matters.



DATA GOVERNANCE

The institutional machinery that makes all four of the above happen reliably, year after year, independent of who is filling in the form that season.

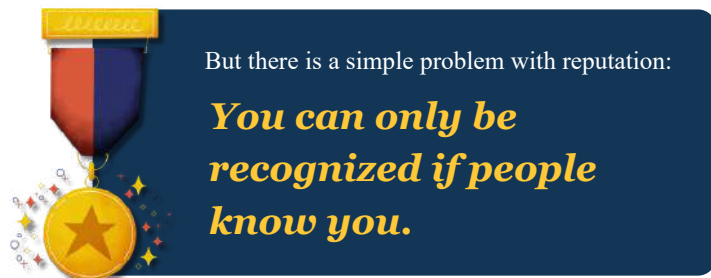
With roughly 50,000 colleges and 1,200 universities in the system, that governance layer is not a niche administrative concern. It is close to the central bottleneck of Indian ranking performance at scale. Indian higher education has, historically, been uneven across all five layers, and unevenly so even within the same institution.

Consider a strong research output undermined by a chaotic alumni-tracking system, or a genuinely engaged local-community program with no consistent record of the students and families it reached. Building institutional data capability, not as a ranking-season scramble but as a standing capability, is one of the more useful things an Indian university can do, and one of the least discussed compared to the more visible conversations about faculty hiring or research funding.

Well, better storytelling is not the same thing as better performance. An institution that builds a first-rate institutional research office can expect its true, existing achievements to become visible for the first time in a ranking submission. That same institution has not thereby become a better place to teach or learn. Data infrastructure closes a measurement gap; however, it does not, on its own, close a quality gap. Confusing the two is one of the quieter but more consequential errors an ambitious institution can make — spending on documentation what should have been spent on substance and mistaking the resulting rank improvement for genuine progress.

The Reputation Advantage

Reputation is one of the most powerful factors in university rankings. Academic leaders and employers are asked which institutions they see as the strongest. On the face of it, this makes sense. After all, numbers cannot tell us everything about the quality of a university.



Therefore, a university that has been around for decades, has well-known professors, publishes widely, and already has a strong global network is naturally more likely to be named in these surveys. Not necessarily because it is doing better work today, but because people already know its name. This is where rankings can create a cycle of their own.

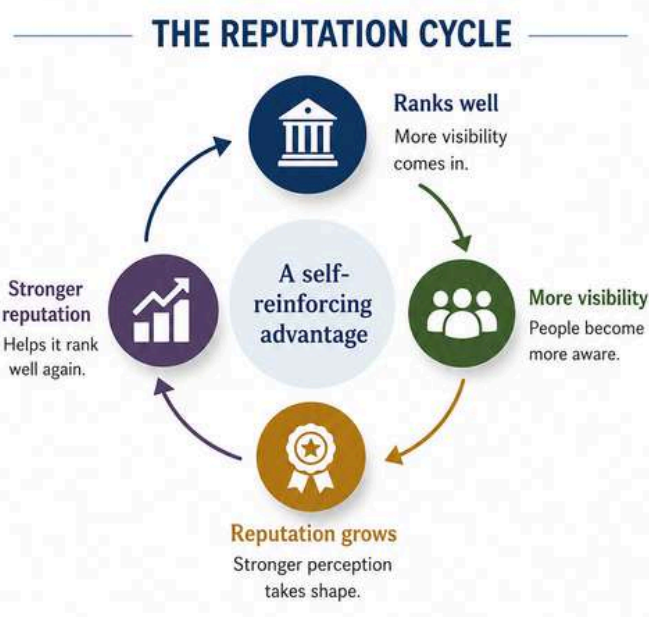


For an institution that is already well known, this is a powerful advantage. For a newer or less visible university, it can be a very different story. It could be doing some genuinely interesting work, solving problems that matter locally, producing strong graduates or building research that could shape its field — but if that work has not yet reached the people answering the survey, it is unlikely to influence the university's reputation score. This is where we think universities need to look beyond the ranking itself.

That is really where **Thought Leadership** matters. Universities need to put their ideas into the wider conversation — not simply publish research, but explain why it matters, contribute to debates, share expertise and make their work visible beyond their own campus.

Because there is an uncomfortable reality about reputation: it tends to follow visibility.

And rankings can sometimes reinforce that visibility rather than independently measure it.



This does not mean reputation should be removed from rankings. It surely holds value. But we should be careful about assuming that the university everyone knows is automatically the university doing the most important work today. Sometimes, the institution doing the most interesting work is simply the one fewer people have heard about yet.

Being good is no longer enough. Your work has to be seen, understood and talked about.

The Citation Impact

Citations do matter in university rankings. In fact, they are one of the main ways rankings try to measure whether a university's research is being noticed and used by other researchers. The logic is fairly simple: if people are building on your research, it must be making a contribution. And that is a reasonable place to start.

But the trouble begins when a measure of research visibility starts becoming a measure of research impact — and then a measure of university quality.



A university can have a high citation count because it works in fields where papers are cited frequently and quickly. Another university may produce excellent research in areas where citations come slowly, or where much of the work is published in local journals or Indian languages. In a ranking table, however, both can end up being reduced to a number that looks directly comparable.

THAT IS WHERE THINGS GET TRICKY FOR INDIA

A lot of research that is useful within India may never make it into the international databases that rankings rely on. A study

published in Marathi that changes farming practices in Maharashtra, for example, may be far more useful to the people it was written for than a highly cited paper that is read by researchers around the world. But the ranking is much more likely to see the second one.



EXAMPLE



Local Impact

A Marathi study improves farming in Maharashtra



Ranking Visibility

A highly cited global paper gets more weight



There is also the **question of time**. Some research gets noticed immediately. Some takes five or ten years before people realise how important it was. A ranking that looks at citation numbers at a particular point in time can easily favour research that gets attention quickly, rather than research that eventually proves to be truly valuable.

AND THEN COMES THE BIGGER QUESTION: WHAT ABOUT RESEARCH THAT CHANGES SOMETHING OUTSIDE ACADEMIA?

A new farming method
adopted by hundreds of farmers.

A public-health intervention
that reduces disease in a community.

A teacher-training programme
that improves learning in
government schools.

These may have very little to do with citation counts. Yet surely we could call them impactful research. So, when rankings use citations to tell us which universities are producing “high-impact” research, we need to ask a basic question:

Are we measuring impact, or simply measuring what the academic world happens to cite?

Citations can tell us whether research is being noticed by other researchers. That is valuable. But it is only one part of the story. And when that one measure starts influencing how universities are ranked, judged and compared, the difference becomes much more important.

Global Standards, Indian Context

The conversation around “Western bias” in global rankings can sometimes become too simple: rankings favour Western universities, so they do not work for India.

There is some merit to that concern, but we think the reality is a little more nuanced.

There is a lot that Indian universities can and should learn from global benchmarks. Research quality, academic integrity, peer review, graduate outcomes, good governance and international collaboration are important wherever the university is located. These are not Western ideas. They are simply part of what makes a strong institution.



At the same time, we should recognise that India’s higher education system has its own context.

Our universities are dealing with scale that is difficult to compare with many other systems. They are educating large numbers of students, including many first-generation learners, reaching students beyond the major cities and, in many cases, working across different languages and very different social and economic settings.



Some institutions are also doing work that has a very direct impact on their communities — through teaching, employability, research, innovation or partnerships with industry and government. Not all of this is easily captured by the measures used in **global rankings**.

That does not necessarily make those rankings wrong. It simply means they may not tell the whole story.



Perhaps the better question for Indian institutions is not whether we should accept or reject global rankings. It is:

What can we learn from them, and what do they miss?

Global rankings can give universities useful benchmarks and help them understand how they are seen internationally. But they should sit alongside other ways of looking at institutional quality, especially the contribution an institution makes to its students, its community, its economy and the wider society.

For India, the opportunity is to do both: meet global standards where they genuinely matter, while also making sure that the strengths of our own higher education system are not lost simply because they are harder to measure.

That, perhaps, is a more useful conversation than simply asking whether rankings are “Western” or “Indian.”

The University that Changes Lives

Consider a hypothetical situation, composited from patterns visible across many smaller Indian institutions rather than drawn from any single named university: a regional one in a district town, admitting a large proportion of first-generation learners, teaching substantially in the local language alongside English, with a placement office more focused on getting graduates into stable regional employment than into popular multinational offers.



Over a decade, this institution trains teachers who go on to staff government schools across the district. It incubates half a dozen small local businesses through a modest entrepreneurship cell. Its agriculture and allied-sciences faculty run extension programs that measurably improve crop yields for smallholder farmers within a fifty-kilometre radius. A majority of its graduates stay in the region, rather than migrating to a metropolitan hub — arguably strengthening, rather than depleting, the local economy.

THE IMPACT IT CREATES

EDUCATES TEACHERS

Teachers who go on to staff government schools across the district.

BUILDS ENTERPRISES

Incubates small businesses that create local jobs and opportunities.

IMPROVES LIVELIHOODS

Extension programs that improve crop yields for farmers in the region.

STRENGTHENS THE REGION

Graduates stay back, contributing to a stronger local economy.

Real impact. Real communities. Real change.

On every metric that dominates a conventional ranking table, this institution performs weakly. Its citation count is thin, because its faculty often publishes in regional venues rather than internationally indexed journals. Its international-student and international-faculty ratios are close to zero, because international mobility was never central to its mission. Its academic-reputation score is negligible, because reputation-survey respondents in Delhi, Bengaluru, or overseas have likely never heard of it.

ON CONVENTIONAL RANKING METRICS

LOW CITATION COUNT

Research is applied and region-focused, often published in non-indexed journals.

NEAR_ZERO INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE

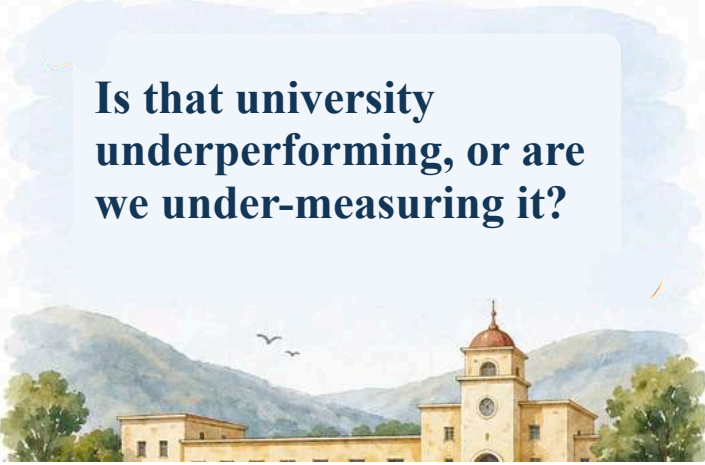
International students and faculty ratios are close to zero.

NEGLECTIBLE ACADEMIC REPUTATION SCORE

Largely unknown to survey respondents in India's metros or overseas.

NO GLOBAL VISIBILITY

Its mission is local impact, not global recognition.



Is that university underperforming, or are we under-measuring it?

This is not just a technical issue with rankings. Most ranking systems were designed around research-intensive universities. But India's higher-education landscape is far more diverse. A Tier-2 or Tier-3 university may be doing very well in teaching, student outcomes, industry engagement or serving its local community, yet struggle to move up the rankings because these strengths may not carry enough weightage in the ranking ecosystem. So the question is simple: are we measuring how good an institution is, or how well it fits the model of the ranking parameters?

The real test of a ranking system is clear: does an institution have to become better to rank better? If better data management, smarter reporting and better publicity can move the needle more than genuine institutional improvement, then the system needs to be questioned — however sophisticated it may look on paper.

The New Scorecard

After identifying the areas of opportunities in the current ranking systems, this edition owes its reader something more constructive than another list of complaints.

NIRF does several things right: it creates a common framework for comparing institutions, encourages colleges and universities to improve areas such as research and infrastructure, and makes some institutional data more visible to students and the public.

A framework like NIRF covers numerous parameters:

Categories	Parameters
Teaching, Learning & Resources (TLR)	Student strength
	Faculty-student ratio
	Faculty with experience
	Financial resources and their utilization
	Online education
	Multiple entry/exits, IKS, regional languages
Research and Professional Practice (RP)	Quality of publications
	IPR and patents
	Footprint of projects + professional practice
	Publications and citations in SDGs
Outreach and Inclusivity (OI)	Region diversity
	Women diversity
	Economically + socially challenged students
	Facilities for physically challenged students
Graduation Outcomes (GO)	University examinations
	Ph.D. graduated students
Perception (PR)	Perception ranking
	Academic peers and employers

However, NIRF also has limitations. Its rankings depend heavily on self-reported and submitted data, which can create inconsistencies in how institutions measure and present their performance. Some criteria, particularly perception and research-related metrics, can favour older, well-established institutions and may not fully capture teaching quality, student experience, or the diversity of institutions.

As a result, NIRF is useful as one indicator of institutional performance, but it should not be treated as the definitive measure of educational quality. Since there are a few factors being missed by our current ranking systems, we have devised a new scorecard which aims to answer the question: what should a next-generation scorecard for Indian higher education actually try to measure?



INNOVATION FOR LOCAL CONTEXT

While existing systems may cover research output and patents, they do not explicitly cover innovation for local adoption and measurable community benefit. They must solve problems that matter to the institution's own society, not only to internationally fashionable agendas.



REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The institution's measurable footprint on its immediate region: local employment generated, local problems solved, graduates retained nearby.



DATA INTEGRITY

An explicit, scored dimension rewarding institutions that can verify their own numbers, rather than treating data quality as an invisible precondition nobody checks.



STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Gathered directly from current students and recent graduates, not inferred from proxies that are several steps removed from the classroom.



LANGUAGE ACCESS

The extent to which quality instruction is genuinely available beyond English medium, treated as a strength to be measured rather than a limitation to be apologized for.



PUBLIC VALUE

The total measurable benefit an institution generates for society beyond the private benefit captured by its own graduates and its own balance sheet.



INSTITUTIONAL TRAJECTORY

Arguably the single most important addition an Indian scorecard could make.

Why Trajectory Matters

Trajectory deserves to be a part of how we judge universities, as most rankings give us a snapshot. They tell us where an institution stands today, but not where it started, how far it has come, or how quickly it is moving. And that distinction matters more than we sometimes acknowledge.

Consider two universities. One has been among the top institutions for decades, with the benefit of an established reputation, strong networks and resources built over many years. The other may have started with far less, but has spent the last five years steadily investing in faculty, infrastructure, research, governance and student outcomes — and has made significant progress as a result.

A ranking table may simply show where both stand today. But the story behind those two positions is completely different. This is one of the limitations of a static ranking. It can reward where an institution happens to be at a particular point in time, without recognising the effort, investment and change that got it there.



This matters particularly for institutions that are still building their reputation. A younger university or a university from a less established academic ecosystem may need years of sustained effort before that progress becomes visible in conventional ranking measures.

If rankings only reward the final position, they risk overlooking the journey and what it took to get there. And that is where trajectory can add something important. It does not mean rewarding an institution simply because it has improved. It means recognising sustained, meaningful progress — the kind that comes from better people, better systems, stronger academic work and a genuine commitment to improving outcomes.



Perhaps the more meaningful question for a ranking is not only “Who is at the top today?” but also “Who is moving forward, and how?” That is a question worth putting on the table.

Use rankings as a way to understand where you currently stand and where you can improve — not as the goal itself. The basic logic is to use rankings diagnostically, not devotionally. In practice, that distinction suggests a fairly concrete set of institutional priorities.

Check out the suggestions below:



Build genuine institutional data architecture

Not a seasonal scramble ahead of a submission deadline, but a standing capability that tracks accurate, verified numbers year-round, because those numbers are useful for internal decision-making whether or not a ranking agency ever asks for them.



Audit ranking submissions internally

Before they go out, with someone whose job is specifically to check the numbers against underlying institutional records, rather than trusting whatever a department self-reports.



Separate ranking strategy from institutional strategy

As distinct functions, even if the same office ultimately manages both — so that decisions about what the institution actually needs are not quietly made by asking what a methodology document rewards.





Invest deliberately in faculty quality

Hiring, mentorship, teaching development, research support — the substance that, done well, tends to move most ranking metrics as a byproduct rather than as the primary target.



Measure student experience directly and regularly

Through instruments the institution controls, rather than relying entirely on proxies external ranking systems happen to capture.



Track regional and social impact explicitly, and publish it

Even where no external ranking system currently asks for it.



Publish an institutional scorecard of its own

A public statement of what the institution believes it is trying to achieve, measured on its own terms, alongside whatever external rankings it also chooses to report.

But rankings tell us where an institution stands relative to others; they do not necessarily tell us how strong the institution itself is. Consider two universities ranked #25 and #45. The ranking establishes that one is ahead of the other. But what if both demonstrate strong academic systems, research capabilities, student outcomes and governance? Could both be high-quality institutions? Certainly. This is where the banking analogy becomes relevant.

A company may not be the largest in its industry, but it can still have a strong credit rating. Similarly, a university may not occupy the highest rank but may demonstrate exceptional strength in teaching, employability, research, internationalisation or student experience. Perhaps higher education needs to move beyond asking only, “What is your rank?” and start asking, “What is your institutional quality profile?”

The 360° University Quality Profile

When any bank decides whether to lend ₹1,000 crore to a company, it does not simply ask, “Where does this company rank in its industry?” It wants to know something more fundamental: **How strong is the institution, what are its risks, and how sustainable is its future?**

That is where financial ratings become important. A credit rating such as AAA or AA does not tell us whether a company is the largest or most profitable in its sector. It provides an assessment of its financial strength and risk against defined parameters. Several companies can have the same rating, even though their rankings may be very different.

The same distinction deserves greater attention in higher education. Today, universities are often reduced to a single number: their rank. NIRF and global rankings provide valuable benchmarks, allowing institutions to compare themselves with peers. Accreditation systems such as NAAC add another important dimension by assessing institutional quality against defined standards.



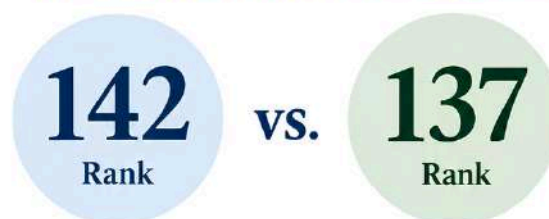
The Illusion of Numbers

Rankings should acknowledge uncertainty instead of presenting every one-place movement as a meaningful achievement. In fact, this may be one of the simplest and most useful changes the rankings industry could make.



A rank band is often more honest than a precise rank. If a university moves from 142 to 137, has it really become five places better? In most ranking systems, probably not. The difference in scores at this point of the table may be so small that it can easily be explained by minor changes in data, methodology or weightages from one year to the next. This is why NIRF's use of rank bands beyond the top 100 is welcome and worth extending.

THE PROBLEM WITH FALSE PRECISION



A 5-place difference that may not reflect any real difference in quality or performance.

WHY SMALL MOVEMENTS HAPPEN



Minor changes in data



Methodology updates



Weightage shifts



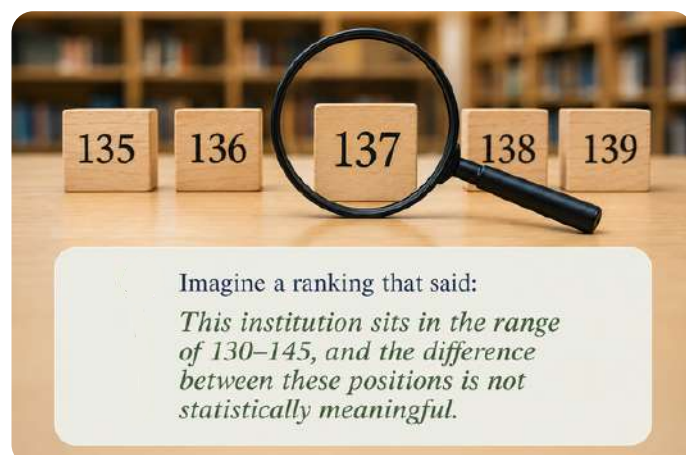
Year-to-year variations

A MORE HONEST APPROACH: RANK BANDS



Institutions within this band are essentially in the same range. Differences are not statistically meaningful.

Yet we continue to treat such movements as if they carry real significance. Institutions celebrate them, headlines amplify them, and suddenly a five-place jump becomes evidence of progress. It isn't exactly a lie. But it does create an illusion of certainty. The uncomfortable truth is that rankings often give us a level of precision that the underlying data simply cannot support. A university ranked 137th is not necessarily meaningfully different from one ranked 142nd. We just like the certainty of a number more than the honesty of saying, "these institutions are broadly in the same range." Perhaps it is time to change that.



Imagine a ranking that said:
This institution sits in the range of 130–145, and the difference between these positions is not statistically meaningful.

Assessing the Ranking Methodologies

Something nobody in this industry would like to be asked: if universities are constantly being judged, who is judging the judges?



We have grown extremely comfortable demanding that universities disclose their data, verify their claims, justify their methodology, and submit to public scrutiny every single year. Perhaps it is time the ranking systems themselves disclosed a little more about their own construction.

What We Demand From Universities	What We Should Demand From Ranking Systems
Transparent data	Transparent (total, not partial) methodology
Verified claims	Verified inputs
Consistent performance	Consistent, well-explained methodology across years
Evidence of student outcomes	Evidence of student usefulness
Institutional accountability	Ranking-agency accountability
Diversity and inclusion	Fair representation across institutional types in dataset
Long-term performance	Trajectory measurement, not just a snapshot
Evidence of real impact	Evidence that the ranking itself creates value, not just anxiety

Imagine turning the scorecards around. What if ranking organisations were judged by the same standards they use to judge universities?



Could an outsider understand exactly how the final score was arrived at?

Are changes in methodology clearly explained, or does a university sometimes find itself comparing this year's number with last year's number without quite comparing the same thing?

Does the system see the full diversity of higher education — including teaching-led, regional and non-English-medium institutions — or does it naturally favour universities that already fit its idea of what a "good" university looks like?

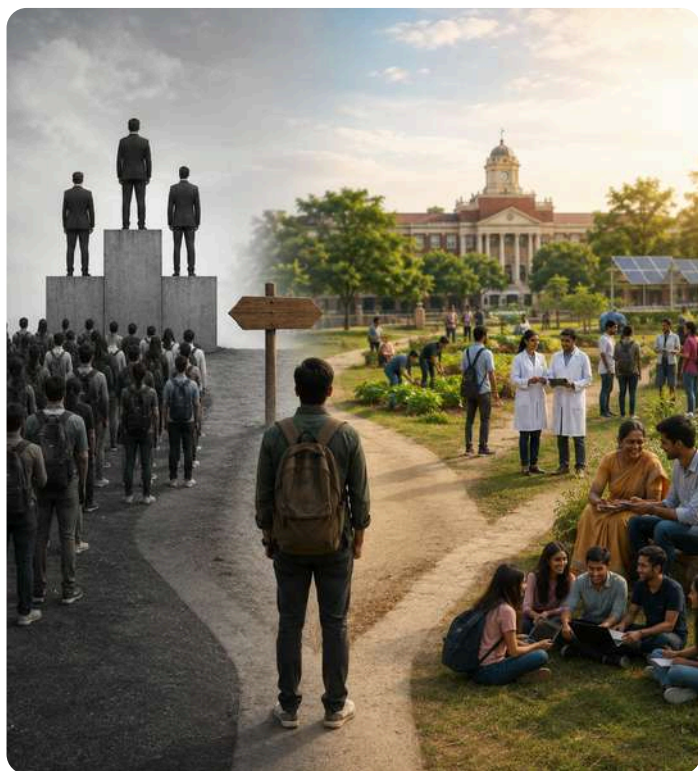
And perhaps the simplest test: Can a student and their parents understand why a university moved up or down, without having to read a methodology document longer than most dissertations?

None of this is an accusation against any ranking organisation. It is simply the same principle rankings have long applied to universities: scrutiny is healthy, transparency matters, and every system that judges others should be willing to examine itself.

The Ask

The honest trajectory this edition wants to argue for is a simple but important shift: from ranking institutions to understanding institutional value.

For years, we have become comfortable asking one question: Who is at the top of the list? Perhaps it is time we asked a better one: Who is creating meaningful value, for whom, in what ways, and how confidently can we say so? That is a much harder question, yet a crucial one. Institutions serve different communities, pursue different missions, work within very different circumstances and create value in ways that cannot always be reduced to a single number.



They need to speak directly to the student who is actually looking at the table and trying to make a life-changing decision. They need to recognise that excellence can look very different across institutions, rather than forcing every university into the same narrow definition of success. And perhaps most importantly, rankings need to be honest about the limits of what they can tell us—and equally honest about what aspects they simply cannot capture.

That means relying more heavily on verified data rather than taking institutional claims at face value. It means acknowledging uncertainty instead of presenting every number as absolute fact.

It also means looking beyond what is easiest to count and asking whether what we are counting actually tells us something impactful and significant about the value an institution creates.

What must Rankings do Better?



Acknowledge uncertainty, not absolute precision



Look beyond what is easiest to count



Ask if what we measure truly reflects impact

Because what is measurable is not always what matters. A university may produce fewer papers but transform the lives of students who would otherwise never have had access to higher education.

Another may have a modest research footprint but make an extraordinary contribution to its region, its professions or the communities around it.

Another may be pushing the boundaries of research in ways whose real impact will only become visible a decade from now.

If a ranking cannot see these differences, perhaps the problem is not with the institutions at all. Perhaps we simply need to question the lens through which we have chosen to judge them and consider the **illusions of ranking** as the ultimate status.

The next generation of rankings should therefore not simply become more sophisticated at producing a list. They should become better at helping us understand what that list actually translates to.

And perhaps that is the real evolution we should be aiming for: not a better answer to "Who is number one?" but a much more meaningful conversation about **who is creating value**, how they are creating it, who benefits from it—and whether we are **measuring any of it well enough.**



The Real Promise of Excellence



Rankings ultimately rest on a philosophical claim about what education is meant for. In the current global framework, education is primarily for producing research that augments human knowledge, graduates who succeed in the global economy, and institutions that attract international talent and capital. These are not trivial goals — they are important ones, and India is pursuing them with growing success, as this edition's data shows.

But India's civilisational tradition has always understood education as something richer: a means of forming complete human beings, serving community, preserving wisdom across generations, and enabling the flourishing of individuals, families, and societies. These goals are harder to measure — but NIRF's newer SDG category and NITI Aayog's internationalisation proposal show they are not impossible. They are exactly the goals the next generation of ranking frameworks is beginning to reach towards, and India is helping lead that reach.



As India charts its course towards Viksit Bharat 2047, the question is not where our universities stand on someone else's ranking table. It is whether we are willing to define what excellence should mean for a country of our scale, diversity and ambition.

We have spent years shaping ourselves, our priorities and, at times, even our ambitions around the pursuit of a better position on someone else's ranking table. Perhaps it is time to turn the question around: **Are rankings ready to serve the institutions they claim to measure?** Because the India of 2047 cannot be built by institutions chasing better numbers. It will be built by institutions creating better futures — for students who enter their gates, for communities beyond them, for the knowledge they generate, and for a country whose challenges demand far more than what any league table can capture.

So perhaps the ambition of our educational ecosystem needs to be bigger than simply building universities that rank well. It should be about building universities whose work matters, whose genuine impact can be felt, and whose contribution becomes impossible to ignore. Universities that do not simply seek to fit the “ranking world's” definition of excellence, but instead compel us to rethink what the epitome of standards of excellence in higher education can truly be.



And when that happens, higher ranking placements will no longer be just the destination for educational institutions. They will become what they should have been all along: a credible lens through which we will understand holistic institutional excellence—not just an illusion of it.

Because behind every number on a ranking table is a university that is far more complex than the mere ranking number that table suggests. There are students whose lives have been transformed, teachers who have gone far beyond the call of duty, researchers pursuing questions whose answers may take years to emerge, ideas that have travelled far beyond the campus, and countless acts of institutional courage and commitment that will never find a place in a spreadsheet. That is where the real story of a university lives.

Rankings matter. They should matter. But they matter most when they help us see that story more clearly—and not just an illusory position on a table. Perhaps the next generation of rankings needs to ask a more difficult, more honest question: not simply “How highly does this university rank?” but “What impact is this university generating, and are we measuring that impact well enough?” Let us aim to build a ranking system that recognises this and celebrates it.

Having seen closely how rankings influence institutions, their priorities and, increasingly, their ambitions, we believe the real opportunity now is to move beyond a ranking that simply tells universities where they stand and build one that helps the world understand what they are doing, the difference they are making, and why it matters to the education world.

Designing for Viksit Bharat

What would a ranking framework look like if it was designed not to mirror global conventions, but to celebrate the specific aspirations of India as a civilisation, a democracy, and a developing economy targeting the status of a developed nation by 2047?



Social Mobility Index

No existing global ranking framework measures a university's effectiveness at changing the life trajectory of its students. India can be the first to do so seriously. Social mobility — the ability to elevate students from disadvantaged backgrounds into productive, well-compensated careers — may be the most valuable thing a university can do for a developing society.



Proposal

A Social Mobility Index, measured as the ratio of graduate earnings to parental income, disaggregated by socio-economic category — could give India a uniquely powerful tool for identifying and celebrating institutions that are genuinely transforming lives. With India's GER at roughly 28% against a NEP 2020 target of 50% by 2035, the institutions doing the most mobility work today are disproportionately the ones no current ranking rewards. This would be an innovation in ranking methodology, and one that NIRF's Outreach & Inclusivity parameter already provides a partial data foundation for.

Language Access Index

India has 22 constitutionally recognised languages and hundreds of regional languages. A university that delivers quality higher education in regional languages is addressing one of India's most significant educational equity challenges. A Language Access Index would celebrate this contribution and incentivise others to follow.



Viksit Bharat Alignment Score

As India pursues the ambitious vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, universities have a specific role to play in building the human capital for that transformation. A Viksit Bharat Alignment Score — measuring the proportion of graduates entering priority sectors, research addressing ANRF's seven mission-mode national priority areas, and contribution to skilling India's workforce — would directly connect ranking excellence to national purpose.



Innovation for Viksit Bharat Index

India's most impactful innovations may not appear in international patent databases. Low-cost healthcare technologies, drought-resistant agricultural practices, vernacular-language digital tools — these are the innovations that transform Indian lives.

An Innovation for Viksit Bharat Index would make them count.



Nalanda did not become the world's greatest university by following someone else's definition of greatness. It became great by knowing what it was for — and India knows what it is for.

*Proposed Indian Excellence Framework:
The Bharat Rankings*

Proposed Parameter	Weight	Rationale
Academic Quality & Resources	20%	Standard teaching and learning quality indicators
Research & Innovation	20%	Including India-specific innovation, not just global citations
Social Mobility & Inclusivity	20%	First-generation learners, BPL access, rural outreach
Graduate Impact & Outcomes	15%	Employment outcomes, public service contribution, entrepreneurship
Internationalisation	10%	Inbound/outbound mobility, global partnerships — per NITI Aayog's 2025 recommendation
Viksit Bharat Alignment	10%	Contribution to national priority sectors and ANRF mission areas
Language Access & Cultural Contribution	5%	Multilingual education, cultural knowledge preservation

Such a framework would not replace NIRF or global rankings.

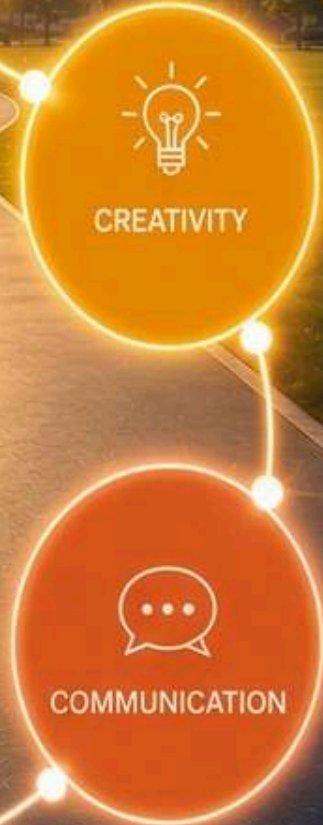
It would complement them by providing a distinctly Indian lens on institutional excellence that reflects India's aspirations, and in doing so, it would enrich the global conversation about what universities are for.

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