Assessing the National Institutional Ranking Framework

What is the issue?

- The National Institutional Ranking Framework's (NIRF) rankings have become the big game in higher education.
- In this context, here is an assessment if the rankings are really working to fulfil the purpose or not.

What is the NIRF?

- The NIRF was approved by the MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) and launched in 2015.
- The framework outlines a methodology to rank institutions across the country.
- The ranking framework evaluates institutions on five parameters:
    1. Teaching, Learning & Resources
    2. Research & Professional Practice (RP)
    3. Graduation Outcomes
    4. Outreach & Inclusivity (OI)
    5. Perception (PR)
- The number of participating higher educational institutions (HEI) has risen sharply.
- It has increased from 233 universities and 803 colleges in 2017 to 294 and 1659, respectively, in 2020.
- [There are about 1,000 universities and 40,000 colleges in India.]

What is a noteworthy trend?

- As seen globally, there is a predominance of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) in the top ranks.
- In the 'Overall' category, the score ranges from 42 to 85.
- But there are only 13 institutions with a score above 60.
- Moreover, IITs and the IISc make eight of these thirteen.
- In the 'University' category, the scores of top 100 range from 40 to 84.
- But an overwhelming 65 universities have a score below 50.
- Regional inequality, too, is glaring, and 42 of the top 100 universities are from 3 states: Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka.
- Similarly, 81 colleges in the top 100 are from Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Kerala.

- Worryingly, directing resources to the top rankers would only widen the gulf.

How rational and fair are the rankings?

- Rankings attempt to introduce competition between institutions operating in quasi-market environments.
- It is laudable that the government is generating a credible benchmark through the NIRF.
- It is also noteworthy that it is mostly based on objective indicators.
- The PR parameter, which is widely criticised in rankings literature as 'reputation', is given only a small weight of 10%.
- However, there are unintended consequences of measurement.
- The view that anything that can be measured and rewarded will be gamed cannot be denied totally.
- 'Teaching to the test' is one way in which institutions are distorted, attempting to achieve something in letter, ignoring the spirit.

How does the teaching parameter work on ground?

- There are differences between types of institutions in terms of their functions and objectives too.
- But the parameters and the assigned weights can distort the perception of agents.
- For example, the core function of colleges is to produce graduates with a strong base in their subjects.
- Hence, the NIRF assigns a higher weight for teaching in colleges.
- Still, colleges persuade teachers, who are inclined to teaching, to increasingly do research and publish for which they are ill-equipped.
- A 16-hour teaching load and the task of conducting all the programmes to score on various ranking parameters fall on teachers.
- Over and above this lies the maintenance of an MIS (Management information system).
- Faced by these constraints, teachers resort to low-quality research, and the mushrooming of predatory journals in India is the living proof for this.
- In this process, colleges end up compromising on something that is difficult to measure - teaching.
- According to education researchers, one major factor that helps students graduate is 'student engagement'.
- An important aspect of this engagement is the quality of contact with faculty.
- In fact, it is this aspect that enriches the career of a teacher too.
- This is severely affected in colleges due to the above said burden on teachers.
- Students will definitely benefit by studying in institutions where teachers are

happy and their job satisfaction level is high.

What are the changes needed?

- It is certainly encouraging to see HEIs in India responding to the rankings framework.
- Given this response, the policymakers should innovate and modify the metrics suitably.
- Primarily, the metrics should include feedback from teachers.
- Secondly, the rankings on the basis of different parameters should be published.
- Although some data is available on the website, official publication of such rankings will help students make more informed decisions.
- Another issue is that the use of PhD as a measure of quality of faculty is fraught with serious drawbacks, for the quality of PhD varies a lot.
- A better indicator, at least for non-university categories, would be UGC-CSIR-NET.
- The NIRF should also increase the number of ranked institutions gradually as institutions are improving their scores.
- Notably, the score of 100th ranked college is 50 in 2020 compared to 35 in 2017.

What is the way forward?

- Essentially, it is important not to get carried away by rankings.
- It should be ensured that rankings inform decisions and never drive decisions.
- The real need is heterogeneous institutions with varied missions, programmes and approaches.

Source: Financial Express

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