

IISc poor performer in THE rankings; are other institutions gaming the system?

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In the last few years, global university rankings have transcended their original purpose of being simple performance indicators to emerge as the powerful drivers that influence various aspects of the functioning of the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), ranging from funding, approval of international partnerships, going up to enhancement of institutional autonomy. The stakes are so high that the HEIs, particularly in India, anxiously look forward to the release of university ranks like the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings (WUR), QS World University Rankings, ARWU (Shanghai Rankings), National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and so on as a seminal event.

Not just that. A few of the HEIs try to do whatever it takes to improve their rank, forgetting the very purpose of the ranking. Goodhart's Law on metrics, which says

that when a measure (like citation counts) becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure, seems to be coming out as a reality in higher education.

The latest THE WUR 2026 cycle has raised concerns about the credibility of its methodology. The Indian Institute of Science (IISc), which has consistently demonstrated exceptional research performance, received a low Research Quality score of 51.2 and was placed at 64th position out of 128 HEIs ranked from India. Indian institutions ranked higher than the IISc in research quality don't quite have the distinguished record of the latter, and there's little to suggest that more than 50 institutions have raced ahead of the IISc in a short period. Yet they gained significant ranking traction more than a world-class institution like the IISc, giving the impression that the ranking mechanism is structurally susceptible to volume-based gaming. IISc routinely tops NIRF rankings and is far ahead of those ranked higher THE WUR 2026 cycle.

In the 2025 QS table, IISc achieved the highest global score of 100 in Citations per Faculty, whereas in ARWU it was placed in the 101–150 global band, based on its research outputs. The Stanford top 2% scientists list for 2025 saw 117 researchers from IISc, the largest by any Indian institution. With a research score of 85.01 in NIRF 2025, it continues to be the leading research institution in India.

A closer analysis of the major global ranking systems reveals the differences in the research parameters considered and how they are evaluated. For the last five years, six IITs (Bombay, Delhi, Madras, Kanpur, Roorkee, Kharagpur) withheld participation in THE WRU, citing lack of transparency, inconsistent data handling, and methodological opacity. In response to the criticism, THE came up with its revised

“WUR 3.0” framework, used from 2024, including stepped-up integrity reviews and expanded validation.

THE’s revised “WUR 3.0” framework allocates 30% of its score to research quality, split across four bibliometric indicators, citation impact, research strength, research excellence, and research influence, measured using Scopus data. QS, by contrast, pairs citations per faculty with heavy reliance on reputation surveys, while ARWU prioritises high-impact publications, Nobel laureates, and highly cited researchers. India’s NIRE, uniquely, has begun to integrate penalties for retracted or unethical research. No global system, however, has yet fully embedded integrity-based scoring.

Concerns of this type are not unique to Indian HEIs. Investigations have shown false affiliations and citation stacking used to lift standings in global systems, prominently involving some Saudi universities, prompting Clarivate to exclude over 1,000 researchers from its 2023 Highly Cited Researchers list. Some journals have also lost impact factors for suspected citation manipulations

Despite their flaws, rankings are here to stay. They serve a crucial purpose by providing quantifiable parameters for institutions to benchmark performance against global peers.

For institutions, the focus must shift from merely chasing a rank to communicating specific, verifiable strengths. Moreover, they must address the systemic issue of perverse incentives, such as the mandatory research output targets for faculty not specialised in research, which drives low-quality publication and malpractice.

Without structural reforms, especially in data integrity, penalising misconduct, and transparency, the risk is that rankings may tilt further toward a “numbers game” rather than a meaningful assessment of scholarship. In order to retain relevance, ranking bodies must encourage “integrity indices” alongside prestige rankings, introduce clearer penalties for retracted or unethical research output, increase transparency on data validation and methodology changes, allow third-party auditing of self-reported institutional data and publish explanatory notes when rank volatility is caused by methodology adjustments rather than institutional decline.

The message to stakeholders, whether governments or prospective students, must be clear: rankings are a mere diagnostic tool, not a definitive final judgment. No single table can capture the complexity of an institution. A holistic assessment requires a composite view across rankings. Triangulation offers a more realistic assessment than treating any one table as definitive. Institutions, regulators, and media should use a multidimensional lens rather than headline ranks.

Rankings can help institutions benchmark and improve—but only when interpreted with perspective. IISc’s varying research positions across multiple global ranking systems reinforce the case for triangulation rather than rank-chasing. For policymakers and universities alike, the goal should be to build and demonstrate research excellence—not to manage rankings as scoreboards. The strategic imperative for the HEIs is clear: Integrity first, rankings later. Prioritise ethical, high-quality scholarly impact over superficial, manipulated volume.

(This article is written by Prof. O.R.S. Rao is the Chancellor of The ICFAI University, Sikkim.

The views expressed are personal.)

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