

NIRF: regional realities for intervention*

G. Srinivas and S. Salil

The initial attempts of ranking higher education institutions were indirectly done by J. M. Cattell, who compiled a list of eminent scientists in the 19th century^{1,2}. Efforts to rank institutions has become pervasive across the globe in the last two decades. In 2016, the Government of India introduced the concept of National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) through the Ministry of Human Resource Development. There are many criticisms on the method and criteria adopted^{3,4}. Though the efforts to evaluate institutions may be imperfect, they are here to stay and need to be understood⁵. This note explores some of the disparities revealed by the NIRF 2020 ranking and argues for the need of region-specific and cluster-specific empowerment schemes in higher education, particularly among colleges.

Deemed-to-be universities and Central universities have proportionately higher presence in the top 100 universities in NIRF 2020. Table 1 shows the type of university and its presence in the NIRF university list. Only 10% of state universities are found in the top of the list; out of 412 state universities in the country. Private universities have a negligible presence in the list.

One probable reason for the poor representation of private universities in the list may be that most of them are of recent origin. However, there can be other underlying regulatory reasons like regulations of deemed-to-be universities are more rigorous than those of private universities.

State-wise analysis of universities shows a geographical skew (Figure 1). Most of the universities featured in NIRF 2020 are from Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka. These three states together comprise 42% of the total number of universities. This is followed by Delhi, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. More strikingly, the representation from Gujarat and Rajasthan is negligible in the top 100, even though there are 74 and 85 universities respectively. States like Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura

do not have even a single university in the top 100, though those states collectively have 146 universities.

An analysis of the state-wise distribution of colleges under general education

also shows a clear geographical skew (Table 2). Majority of the colleges in the NIRF list are from Tamil Nadu (32/100) and except one, all are autonomous. Delhi comes next with 29 of its colleges

Table 1. Types of universities in the NIRF university list

Type of university	Total no.	No. of universities in the top-100 (NIRF)
Central Universities	53	12 (27%)
Deemed Universities	124	42 (34%)
State Universities	412	42 (10%)
Private Universities	356	04 (1%)
Total	945	100

Source: Ref. 6 (as on 1 June 2020).

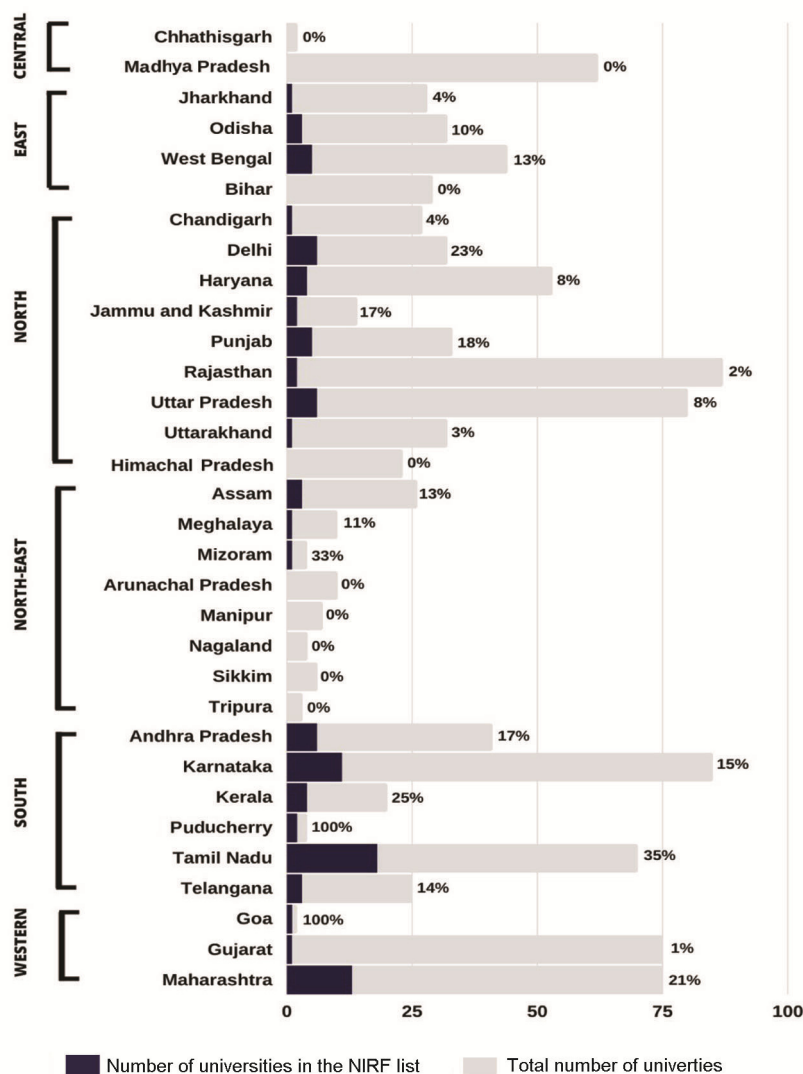


Figure 1. State-wise distribution of the top 100 Universities in the NIRF list. Sources: Refs 6–8.

*Views are personal.

finding a place in the top 100. In case of engineering institutions in the NIRF list, the maximum number is again from Tamil Nadu followed by Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa and Delhi. However, unlike in colleges of general education, there are representations from most states in the engineering list.

The representation, or lack of it, in the top 100 of the NIRF list from a particular state is a result of several factors like academic quality, data management efforts from the institution, inclination to participate, data validation methods adopted by the accrediting or ranking agency and regional competition among institutions.

The geographical spread of the top 100 colleges is surprisingly uneven. Three states (Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Kerala) together comprise 81 colleges in the list of 100 which clearly indicates the magnitude of the skew. Except for seven colleges from West Bengal, there is no significant representation from the east or North Eastern states in the college list. In the case of states from the west, only three colleges from Maharashtra and two from Gujarat find a place. Excluding the national capital Delhi (29 colleges), only one college from Chandigarh and one from Haryana find a place. Other states of the northern region do not have any significant presence in the top 100 of the list. Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Haryana and Karnataka have only one college each in the top 100, which needs further attention considering the greater number of colleges in these states.

The regional disparity is reflected in other dimensions as well. For example, though Maharashtra and Karnataka have a high density of accredited colleges, it is not reflected in the top 100 colleges of the NIRF list. Both the states have many national institutions to their credit, but colleges where enrolment figures are high need urgent and simultaneous intervention for quality upgradation. All these point towards the requirement of region-specific empowerment efforts through multiple schemes to effectively augment the national approaches.

The southern States have more participation compared to other regions in the country. Goa has the highest participation rate as 24 out of 57 colleges participated in NIRF. Assam and West Bengal are the only two states from the North East and eastern region respectively, where participation of colleges in the

Table 2. State-wise distribution of colleges

State/Union Territory (UT)	No. of colleges	College density	No. of colleges applied for NIRF	No. of colleges in the NIRF list	Other institutions from NIRF discipline-wise list*
Andhra Pradesh	2,678	49	259	1	20
Arunachal Pradesh	37	23	3	0	2
Assam	544	15	64	0	7
Bihar	840	7	5	0	2
Chandigarh	25	13	10	1	8
Chhattisgarh	760	24	8	0	4
Delhi	180	8	45	29	29
Goa	57	31	24	0	3
Gujarat	2,232	31	55	2	17
Haryana	1,038	33	26	1	15
Himachal Pradesh	336	47	4	0	6
Jammu and Kashmir	293	23	15	0	1
Jharkhand	313	8	11	0	10
Karnataka	3,670	53	105	1	51
Kerala	1,348	45	116	20	12
Madhya Pradesh	2,191	24	8	0	11
Maharashtra	4,340	33	397	3	57
Manipur	92	28	25	0	2
Meghalaya	63	19	5	0	2
Odisha	1,062	23	3	0	16
Puducherry	76	46	12	2	4
Punjab	1,063	34	16	0	22
Rajasthan	3,156	35	9	0	11
Tamil Nadu	2,466	35	272	32	66
Telangana	1,988	50	20	1	20
Tripura	52	12	13	0	1
Uttar Pradesh	7,078	28	20	0	34
Uttarakhand	438	37	2	0	9
West Bengal	1,371	13	99	7	18
Other States/UTs	144	28	0	0	–
Total	39,931				

Sources: Refs 6–8.

*Other disciplines are engineering, management, pharmacy, medical, law, architecture and dental.

NIRF ranking effort was higher than the national average. Even if they have not made it to the top 100 of the list, Chandigarh, Manipur and Tripura have above-average participation rate, partly because of less number of colleges and low college density in these states.

Uttar Pradesh has 7078 colleges, the highest in the country. Yet, participation in NIRF is one of the lowest and no institution from this state features in the list of top 100 colleges. Though Uttar Pradesh is among the top six states in the NIRF universities list, the affiliated colleges show a contradictory picture that needs further attention. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Odisha also have a higher number of colleges, but with negligible participation rate in the ranking exercise with no college appear-

ing in the top 100 list. These five states have better participation from the professional institutions in disciplines like engineering, management, etc. with 11–34 institutions from these states featured in the NIRF discipline-wise lists. Evidently, higher education in these states is largely skewed towards professional courses and institutions that are active in the market space, while traditional affiliated colleges need focused empowerment.

Despite the low college density, Delhi has a higher participation and selection rate, with both general education list and discipline-wise list of NIRF. College density is the number of colleges per lakh eligible population (in the age-group 18–23 years). States with the highest college density in India are Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal

Pradesh, Puducherry and Kerala. States with the lowest college density are Bihar, Jharkhand and Delhi. Except for Delhi and West Bengal, other states from where more colleges appeared in the NIRF list also have higher college density. This indicates the regional competition driving ranking as a competitive marketing tool. Higher participation from the four southern states and Maharashtra, where there are more colleges, also indicates this regional competition.

The nature of the institution is also a factor that impacts ranking. Autonomous colleges have a clear presence in the NIRF list as most colleges from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and all colleges from Maharashtra in the list are autonomous colleges. Similarly, the share of private colleges is high as they have a market rationale to seek better ranking.

Assuming that NIRF is a reflection of the quality of institutions, the situation of colleges is a story of uneven development. More than a dozen states do not have even a single college in the NIRF list. This includes Assam, Goa, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Meghalaya, Tripura, Jammu & Kashmir and Manipur have a negligible presence in the NIRF lists of total 460 institutions, inclusive of all the

discipline-wise lists. The college density in these states is average or below less. Therefore, these six states require a targeted approach to increase the number of colleges, the participation of the existing colleges in the ranking and the overall quality in both traditional and professional disciplines. It is important to study further whether the participation is hindered by poor data management or lack of leadership at the institutional-level or a real quality trouble of colleges in these states. While policy focus on quality enhancement can be a common aim in the south, a new set of mentored empowerment schemes are required in the North East and western areas. This may serve as a pre-requisite to the ranking initiatives. Otherwise, many institutions will continue to get marginalized as the existing disparities will be intensified in future.

Ranking is a zero-sum game. Considering the complexity of Indian higher education, without addressing the inherent backwardness using cluster-based outcome oriented schemes, funding solely linked to accreditation or ranking will further weaken the educational chain. Linking of NIRF data to validated All Indian Survey on Higher Education and accreditation results can be used as a policy tool for intervention. It can be a baseline for regulatory action towards

differentiated mission-mode schemes to augment national policies.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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G. Srinivas (Deceased). S. Salil is with the University Grants Commission, South Eastern Regional Office, Fourth Floor, APSFC Building, Chirag Ali Lane, Abids, Hyderabad 500 001, India.
e-mail: findsalil@gmail.com