

National Institutional Ranking and Institutions of Eminence

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The National Institutional Ranking Framework of the Ministry of Human Resource Development shows that institutions funded by the Central Government occupy the pride of place in the higher education sector in India, followed by state universities and then by private universities. Autonomy, internal democracy, emphasis on merit in appointments and admissions, flexibility in administration, ability of faculty to attract research grants, etc. are pre-requisites for eminence. These attributes, which are worth fighting for, exist to different extents in centrally funded institutions. It is unfair to treat public and private institutions as two separate categories of equal importance for identifying Institutions of Eminence. Private universities need to be encouraged, but not at the expense of publically funded institutions which have done the nation proud and are acclaimed in India and abroad.

The national ranking of institutions of higher learning in India produced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development¹, attracted considerable attention in the context of the identification of five of them (and a private institution yet to be established) as Institutions of Eminence (IoE). In addition to its usefulness or otherwise for determining funding for a few institutions, the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) contains data which provide insights into the higher education sector in the country.

The 100 institutions listed in NIRF can be broadly divided into 3 categories: centrally funded institutions; institutions funded by states, which could be collectively referred to as state universities; and private institutions which may be called private universities. The 100 institutions are roughly equally divided among these 3 categories. However, 16 of the top 25 are centrally funded organizations. Happily, 6 state universities are among the top 25. The remaining 3 are private universities. Centrally funded institutions and state universities dominate the next 25 in the list as well. The 2 categories have equal share among the 25; private universities account for only 5 institutions. Nearly half in the bottom 50 are private universities; about a third of them are state universities; the remaining one sixth of the 50 are centrally funded institutions.

The above analysis makes it clear that centrally funded institutions occupy the pride of place in the higher education sector in India. In spite of severe constraints, the state universities continue to perform reasonably well. Private universities, though overall lower in quality compared to institutions in the other two

categories, have a significant presence at the high table of the higher education set up. In terms of the number of students enrolled, much of the higher education sector is serviced by state universities. Although they are still performing reasonably well, the general perception is that their comparative eminence has deteriorated over the years. The emergence of private universities as a significant component of the higher education sector is perhaps a comparatively recent phenomenon, although a few of them have served the sector for long periods. Like state universities, the quality of private universities varies widely. As indicated by NIRF, and also from personal experience, some of them are doing very well.

It is often said that there is no formula for success or leadership. The same is true about eminence. Yet, it might be instructive to examine our own undoubtedly eminent institutions. Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru is at the top of the MHRD rank list, closely followed by several Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and a few central universities. Any one of them could have been chosen for examination as an example. However, I am most familiar with IISc, an institution with which I have been associated for 55 years in different capacities. The ambience of an institution is an indefinable quantity. The only other institution in which I have worked is the University of Oxford. As far as ambience is concerned, but not in terms of accomplishments, I do not find any difference between the two institutions. Ambience is built and preserved over long periods of time. Many institutions in India have a tendency to start with a flourish and then

decay over the years. IISc is now more than 100 years old. It is remarkable that it still remains vibrant.

One prerequisite for eminence of an institution of higher education and research is autonomy. Autonomy is of course within the overall framework of Government rules and regulations, and should go along with accountability in relation to the stated or perceived goal and financial management. IISc has been fortunate to have been granted substantial autonomy in letter and spirit. The Governing Council of the Institute has members of parliament as its members. I, like many others, have held the view that the role of representatives of people in relation to academic institutions is to help in formulating overall policy directions and sensitizing the organization to national and societal needs. It is not desirable for them to indulge in micro management. The members of parliament who served on the Council of the Institute have by and large followed this overall approach. This has been largely true of the representatives of the Government as well. The relation between the Council and the Senate, the highest internal body of the Institute, has also been cordial. It is only very rarely that the Council declines to accept a recommendation of the Senate. Even on the rare occasions when it did, the communications to that effect were couched in very polite language.

Autonomy percolates through the entire organization. The departments enjoy substantial functional autonomy. Within each department, individual faculty members are to a great extent autonomous. In fact, a faculty member and his/her group constitute the basic autonomous

unit of the Institute. Unlike many other smaller institutions in the country, IISc is not Director-centric. The Director and other leaders are important, but the institution runs as a system. In fact, autonomy is most effective when it is accompanied by internal democracy. Decision making should be substantially a collective participatory process, without it degenerating into anarchy. In this respect also, the system has worked reasonably successfully. Participatory democracy, even within an overall framework, is sometimes inconvenient. However, in the long run, it is effective. As Satish Dhawan used to say 'we are perhaps a little ponderous, but ultimately get there'.

Appointments and admissions based on merit, made after due diligence, are important for maintaining the health of the institutions. At IISc, only the Director is appointed without the involvement of the Institute faculty including the outgoing Director. Therefore, this appointment is susceptible to external influences. The selection committees for the appointment of faculty and support staff are chaired by the Director or his/her nominee. Subjective factors sometimes come into play, but by and large the system has served well. Faculty appointments are usually preceded by discussions at different levels to eliminate mishaps. Admission of students is also made through an elaborate process to ensure that best candidates are chosen. On the whole, the students of the Institute belong to the cream of young India.

Bureaucracy is a bane of science in India (I have complaints only about bureaucracy as a system and not about individual bureaucrats, many of whom are splendid persons). There is considerable flexibility within the rules and regulations of the Government. The effort in institutions of eminence should be to interpret the rules and regulations in the most liberal manner. For this to happen, it is important that academics occupying administrative positions are well versed in appropriate rules and regulations. Bureaucracy cannot be wished away, but in autonomous institutions with internal democracy, it can be honed to facilitate and not obstruct legitimate activities.

As in the case of liberty, the price of autonomy, internal democracy, emphasis on merit, absence of rigid bureaucracy, etc. is eternal vigilance. Distortions of and deviations from these attributes can, and indeed do, occur in the best of institutions. They have to be continuously fought against. This is particularly important in view of the recent tendency to erode the positive attributes, particularly, autonomy. The traditions and quality of many of our institutions of higher learning and research, are worth fighting for.

Most of what I wrote is applicable to a substantial extent to IITs and some central universities as well. Most of them also suffer from some common disadvantages. IISc, IITs and some of the central universities are medium sized institutions by global standards. Their impact would have been greater, had they been larger. Although it is not an important issue, one of the reasons why they do not figure high up in international rankings, has to do with size. The humanities component of IISc and IITs also needs to be enlarged.

Research in IISc, IITs and universities is carried out primarily using competitive grants obtained from different government agencies. The internal support for research is extremely small. This of course keeps the faculty alert and competitive. However, often one is obliged to align one's research activities with the requirements of the agencies. Perhaps, an ideal situation would be one in which assured support of half the research expenses comes from the parent institution. The other half could be met from competitive grants.

Research programmes in institutions of the type we are discussing tend to be highly individualistic. This is the price one pays for autonomy at the faculty level and unlimited academic freedom. This often comes in the way of tackling large problems in a concerted manner. The way to get around this difficulty is to collaborate extensively and share facilities. The culture of collaboration is now developing, which needs to be further strengthened.

Autonomy, internal democracy, emphasis on quality in appointments and admission, flexibility in administration, ability of the faculty to attract funds, academic freedom, etc. are pre-requisites

for eminence in institutions of higher learning and research. These attributes are shared to a lesser or greater extent by such institutions funded centrally. The same cannot be said about state universities. There is considerable variation in the attributes among these universities. The nexus among academics, bureaucrats, politicians and other local interests sometimes causes great damage to institutions. It is remarkable that even under adverse circumstances, some state universities have done so well. Great variation in quality is observed among private universities as well. Some of them have done exceedingly well while some others are commercially oriented teaching shops.

IISc and two IITs have been identified as Institutions of Eminence, which is good. However, it is surprising that several other IITs and universities which appear at the top of the NIRF ranking, have not been accorded this recognition. At the same time, 2 private universities which are ranked 18 and 26, have been given this recognition. It would have been fairer if all the top 25 institutions had also been identified as Institutions of Eminence. In fact, the whole approach of treating *a priori* public and private institutions as two equally meritorious streams, is fundamentally flawed. The basis of recognition should be rooted in proven merit of individual institutions, irrespective of whether they are public or private. There should be a level playing field for all concerned. Private institutions need to be encouraged, but not at the expense of institutions supported by the government. IISc, IITs and many universities which appear at the top of the NIRF ranking have done the nation proud and are acclaimed in India and abroad. It is unfortunate that many of them have not been chosen as Institutions of Eminence.

1. National Institutional Ranking Framework. Overall; (<https://www.nirfindia.org/2018/overallranking.html>)

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