

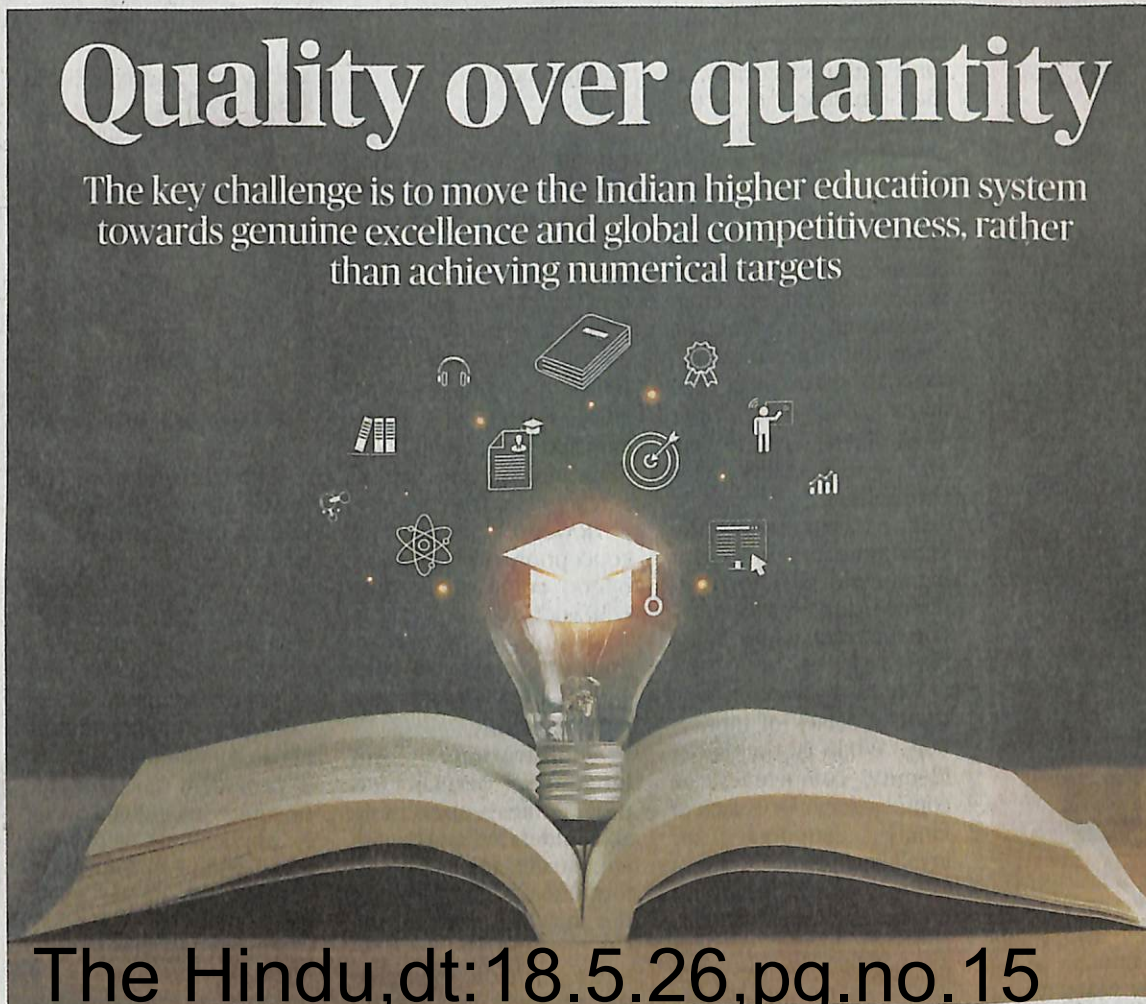
Recently, some of India's leading higher education institutions have improved their standing in global rankings. The IITs of Bombay, Delhi, Kanpur and Madras and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) were ranked among the world's top 250 universities in the QS World University Rankings 2026. The IISc was the only Indian institution to feature in the global top 100, securing 96th place in Computer Science, in THE World University Rankings by Subject 2026.

Continuing problems

Yet, these reports and other studies point to continuing problems in Indian higher education, including inadequate funding for research, irrelevant and low-quality research, limited innovation, and outdated curricula that prevent even India's best institutions from breaking into the world's top 50 or 100 universities.

Although these concerns have been discussed widely, poorly planned "reforms" and ill-conceived policy measures risk weakening the education system instead of improving it.

In this context, the story of the "cobra effect" has some relevance to Indian higher education. During the British colonial period, when venomous cobras posed a serious threat to human life, the government



Quality over quantity

The key challenge is to move the Indian higher education system towards genuine excellence and global competitiveness, rather than achieving numerical targets

The Hindu, dt: 18.5.26, pg.no. 15

introduced a scheme of offering cash rewards for dead snakes.

However, the policy produced an unintended and counter-productive outcome: people began breeding cobras to kill them and claim the reward. When the government withdrew the scheme, the bred cobras were released, leading to an even larger snake population and greater danger than before.

A similar concern arises in contemporary higher education. Ever since the Ministry of Education introduced the NIRF

system to rank institutions on various parameters, institutions have been competing to boost measurable outputs such as the number of Ph.D.s awarded and research publications, often by offering monetary incentives and linking them to academic promotions.

Impact

At first glance, these measures appear promising. But have they truly enhanced the quality of higher education, or have they produced a version of the cobra effect? The answer lies in a

careful assessment of outcomes: the quality and originality of research produced, its tangible impact on society, and the extent to which it leads to meaningful innovation. Without such scrutiny, well-intentioned policies risk encouraging quantity over quality, precisely the kind of unintended consequence the cobra effect warns us against.

The Global Innovation Index ranks leading innovators worldwide and evaluates the performance of 139 countries. In the 2025 edition, Swit-

zerland retained the top position for the 15th consecutive year, while Sweden and the U.S. continue to hold second and third place for the third consecutive year. China entered the top 10 for the first time, and India was ranked 39th.

What constrains India's innovation potential? According to reports such as Patent Pulse 2025 and Praxis Analysis, patent filings in India increased by 63.5% over five years, surpassing 90,000 in 2024. In 2024, more than 100,000 patents were granted. Ho-

wever, only a small fraction (approximately 0.4%) was commercialised or effectively put to use.

Several factors influence the conversion of patents into tangible innovation. A key constraint could be India's relatively low investment in research and development (around 0.64% of GDP). This is significantly lower than the corresponding figures for, say, China (2.4%), the U.S. (3.5%), or Israel (5.4%).

Learnings

What can we learn from higher education institutions that have consistently performed well over the years? First, the importance of a strong academic vision rooted in excellence in teaching, research, and innovation. These institutions not only produce knowledgeable and skilled graduates but also foster critical thinking, encourage innovation, and nurture the ability to develop creative solutions to emerging challenges.

By studying their best practices and cultures of excellence, we can iden-

tify the key factors behind their sustained global success. Meaningful reforms based on these lessons can help place our institutions on a stronger path of growth and international competitiveness. Although many institutions in India present ambitious goals in their vision and mission statements, only a few translate these ideas into effective action and lasting results.

Higher education strength depends on quality rather than quantity. Simply increasing research papers, patents, or doctorates does not ensure excellence. What matters is originality and impact. Overemphasis on numerical targets may create a "cobra effect," producing unintended harms.

The key challenge is shifting India's system toward genuine excellence and global competitiveness.

Views expressed are personal

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