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Every year, global university rankings bring a mix of pride and disappointment for India. While some institutions deserve praise for consistent performance, others don't find a place or slip in the rankings. The paradox is stark: a country with a rich intellectual heritage still struggles to join the world's academic elite.

In the QS Asia Rankings 2025, India tops the list with 193 universities, well ahead of China's 135, marking a strong numerical presence. But quality gaps remain. In the QS World University Rankings 2025, only IIT-Delhi (123rd), IIT-Bombay (129th), and Delhi University (328th) make the cut. The THE World Reputation Rankings 2025 feature just four Indian names – IISC, IIT-Delhi, IIT-Madras, and Siksha 'O' Anusandhan; all between 201-300. IIT-Bombay, once a regular, is absent. The gulf between regional dominance and global prestige is growing.

Deep-rooted issues

India's higher education quality gap stems from deep-rooted issues. Only about 39% of universities and 20% of colleges are NAAC-accredited and the share with 'A' grades is far below the often-quoted 30-45%, revealing uneven standards and major deficiencies. Chronic underfunding, outdated labs, and inadequate digital infrastructure suppress research output and citations, eroding global standing.

In addition, the faculty crisis intensifies these problems. Indian universities struggle to

attract and retain world-class faculty due to a funding crunch, limited exposure to global networks, a rigid work culture, insufficient research time, limited professional development opportunities, and large class sizes. For example, the student-teacher ratio in India's higher education system is about 24:1, compared to 19:1 in China and 16:1 to 20:1 in the U.S. This not only impedes individualised attention but also disadvantages research productivity and mentorship. Administrative bottlenecks and excessive bureaucracy further limit innovation, preventing universities from responding to new research areas or academic shifts.

Importantly, research output remains a weak link in most institutions. Universities, squeezed by falling government support, are forced into survival mode rather than planning ambitious research agendas. The Indian government allocates approximately 0.17% of GDP specifically to higher education, compared to much higher total education outlays of around 4-4.6% of GDP. In contrast, China and the U.S. allocate a substantially higher percentage of GDP to higher and tertiary education as a component of their much larger public education expenditures. India's share of global research publications and citations remains low, a

symptom of underfunding and a lack of incentives for original work.

India vs. the world

Comparisons are revealing. In the 2025 THE Asia Rankings, Chinese universities, led by Tsinghua and Peking, dominate the top five due to extensive state investment. Much of China's education budget is directed toward infrastructure, cutting-edge labs, and attracting international faculty. Chinese universities enjoy greater autonomy, allowing flexibility in curriculum and research priorities, while strong industry partnerships fuel both funding and innovation. The West offers further lessons.

Germany, for instance, ensures stable public funding and robust research grants, while the U.S. blends governmental support, endowments, and a tradition of alumni and industry giving. High faculty salaries, institutional autonomy, and internationalisation drive teaching and research excellence. In contrast, Indian institutions remain rigid, with uncertain funding streams and limited scope for innovation.

Rankings aren't perfect, but they matter; they indicate and influence academic quality. High rankings attract talent, researchers, and funding, driving global partnerships and further progress. Poor rankings, mean-

while, repel talent and reinforce underperformance. Ultimately, these league tables reflect a nation's innovation and competitiveness.

So, how should India progress? Incremental changes won't work; bold reforms are needed. Increasing government funding is vital but institutions must also boost research revenue through patents, corporate tie-ups, philanthropy, and alumni support, following best global practices. Strengthening institutional autonomy will let universities set their own academic and research priorities. Addressing the faculty shortage and quality concerns requires sustained training investment, global exposure, flexible work culture, and competitive salaries to attract top talent. Infrastructure upgrades should enhance digital learning and advanced labs, not just new buildings. Finally, promoting original research and internationalisation by incentivising global scholarship and updating curricula for a connected world is key to lasting progress.

Although India's rise in the rankings is encouraging, it should inspire reform rather than complacency. Without implementing these much-needed actionable goals, the coming decade may yield only incremental progress, falling short of the breakthrough needed for an Indian university to crack the global top ten. It is time to move beyond explaining our lag and start planning a leap forward, for our students, nation, and global standing.

The writer is a former professor and dean, Christ University, Bengaluru.

Numbers are not enough

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