

# Meaning over metrics

By focusing on rankings, our current education model equates visibility with value and reputation with reality.

Hindu 23.06.25



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Academic brilliance was once defined by the depth of scholarship, rigorous institutional processes, and a culture of inquiry nurtured by universities. Today, the focus has shifted to metrics, badges, and rankings. Institutions showcase it, scholars highlight it, and stakeholders treat it as a seal of quality. Yet, as with all that glitters, one must ask: what lies beneath?

Today, Stanford is gaining recognition, alongside THE and QS rankings, despite the inherent flaws in all three. The Stanford ranking, for instance, seeks to identify the top 2% scientists in various disciplines based on a composite indicator. This includes bibliometric indicators such as total citations, h-index, co-authorship-adjusted metrics, and citations to papers in different authorship positions. While it appears scientific and data-driven, the exercise is not without flaws. For one, it depends entirely on Scopus data, a commercial database that does not cover all disciplines equally. Humanities and some Social Sciences are grossly under-represented, leaving a large swath of global academia invisible in the analysis. Moreover, the focus on citation-based metrics incentivises quantity over quality. A well-written, widely-cited review paper can push a researcher up the ranks, while a game-changing monograph in philosophy may not even register.

What makes it even more problematic is the blind application of these rankings by institutions. Without context, nuance, or disciplinary sensitivity, they are turned into marketing tools. The ranking becomes currency; a transactional marker to attract funding, students, and media attention.

### Indian context

In India, the situation is more troubling. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has come under intense scrutiny after the recent revelation of a university in Andhra Pradesh allegedly paying crores to secure an A++ grade. Shockingly, nearly 20% of NAAC assessors were later removed due to various irregulari-

ties. The demand for a comprehensive probe into the assessments conducted by these discredited evaluators is reasonable and urgent. In recent years, many institutions have managed to secure top grades, which many argue is inconsistent with the ground reality of poor infrastructure, faculty shortages, and abysmal student outcomes. This raises a troubling question: Have we reduced institutional quality to a game of strategic networking, financial leverage, and performative documentation?

One cannot ignore the systemic pressures at play. The increasing corporatisation of academia has introduced market logic into the university system. As public funding shrinks, un-

iversities – especially private ones – are forced to rely on student fees and external rankings to remain afloat. This leads to a dangerous feedback loop. To attract students, institutions ease academic regulations, reduce penalties for indiscipline, and adopt student-centric policies that often border on appeasement. Faculty, burdened with teaching, administrative tasks, and publication requirements, face burnout. In such an environment, rankings become not just desirable but necessary. They are wielded as shields in an ever-intensifying battle for survival. Institutions chase Scopus-indexed journals to meet regulatory demands, not for the love of scholarship. Researchers pay exor-

bitant fees to get published and, when that fails, some resort to unethical practices, only for their papers to be retracted later.

### Flawed model

In this matrix of manipulation, it is easy to blame the institutions. But the deeper malaise lies in the very education model we have embraced: one that equates visibility with value, metrics with meaning, and reputation with reality. Awards, too, have not been spared. Today, one can pay a tidy sum and receive an "Excellence in Research" award in a foreign country with a sightseeing tour and conference pass thrown in. We must ask: did our finest institutions of yesteryear depend on such scaffolding?

The situation may seem bleak, but not hopeless. To reverse the tide, we need to recalibrate our priorities. First, we must advocate for more context-sensitive and peer-reviewed models of assessment that go beyond metrics. Second, public funding for education must be restored and enhanced. The commodification of education is not an inevitable outcome; it is the result of deliberate policy choices. Third, academia must reclaim its soul. Universities are not businesses, and education is not a product. Rankings can be tools, but they must not become our tyrants. The rot will deepen until we resist the seduction of easy prestige and short-term gains. It's time to stop asking how to climb the ranks and start asking how to make learning meaningful again.

*Views are personal*

The writer is a retired professor and former Dean, School of Arts and Humanities, Christ Deemed-to-be University, Bengaluru.

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