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An obsession with ranking is harming India's universities

The metrics-focused system has created a situation which implies that education is a market rather than a citizen's right and the state's duty

In this digital age, we reduce everything to numbers. This trend has consumed the education ecosystem, as seen in the rise of global ranking agencies, which assign ranks to universities across the world every year. India has its own National Institutional Ranking Framework to rank universities in the country.

The purpose of a university is to teach and mentor future citizens; and to acquire and create knowledge through research. Research and teaching are two sides of the education coin: knowledge creation and dissemination. A university needs to excel in both in order to fulfil its obligations to students and society. Through its activities, a university also has social and economic impacts. It is impossible to capture a university's multidimensional nature with a single metric, represented by a global or national rank. Yet, this is what ranking systems claim to do.

Overemphasis on research

The global university ranking system is one-dimensional. It places huge emphasis on research activity. A university's research output is quantified using criteria such as the number of papers published, the impact factor of the journals in which they are published, the amount of research funding acquired, and the number of PhD students who were admitted and graduated. These numbers by themselves cannot capture the quality, content, relevance, and impact of research. Sadly, despite being aware of this flaw in the ranking process, Indian universities are all in the ranking race. A world rank makes the university 'visible' and helps attract international students, world-class faculty, and academic partners, philanthropists, and donors. Universities and the government even tweak or alter policies to improve ranks. A university that is not ranked may as well not exist — such is the power we have accorded to global rankings.

India has bought into the American education system, which is shaped by a strong belief in free market capitalism and unfettered private competition. To help improve the global ranking of India's top universities and premier institutes, the government set up the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) a few years ago. HEFA mobilises market resources to

fund the country's global rank-aspiring institutions in the form of repayable loans at competitive interest rates.

In tandem, the government also granted full autonomy to several public higher education institutions. This encompasses financial autonomy as well, which means that the government will cease to support them. In other words, public higher education institutions will need to generate their own funds by enhancing student fees. This is touted as a 'win-win' strategy for both the university and the government: the university has a shot at improving its rank and the government no longer has the onerous responsibility of funding it. But if the race for a global rank sacrifices the essential function of educating students (which is not factored into the ranking process), this is not a meaningful 'win' for either. Importantly, it is also not a 'win' for the economically weaker sections of society.

The importance of teaching and mentoring

The metrics-driven, global rank-aspiring higher educational system has had an adverse impact on the teaching community. The undue emphasis on research to the exclusion of other vital functions, especially teaching, has created a sorry situation in which university job aspirants are often judged by the number of research papers they have produced, the impact factor of the journals they were published in, and the numbers of their citations; and not by their ability to be an effective communicator, teacher, and mentor.

Once selected as a faculty member of the university, the candidate's subsequent career advancement depends on additional metrics such as the amount of research grant funds secured and the number of PhD degrees awarded. This obsession with metrics ignores the faculty member's actual teaching and mentoring capacity as a determinant of career advancement in the higher education ecosystem.

Unlike in the case of research, teaching is not amenable to quantification using metrics. It is the unmeasurable something that metrics cannot deal with. So, the role for teaching has declined in the education system. In fact, in the perspective of a typical university professor, writing a paper or working on a grant application takes precedence over teaching today. Ironically, teaching is a distraction from 'all important' research. University professors have become contractors churning out research papers to improve the university's ranking.

The higher education ecosystem is pervaded by a culture of 'publish or perish' without a meaningful and transparent mechanism for accountability in place. Is this kind of research, at the expense of educating students, really meaningful? Are instances of plagiarism, data manipulation, and other research misconduct emanating from our premier institutes and universities the undesirable and unintended consequences of our pre-occupation with metrics? In these cases, are not the teachers failing in their role as mentors and role models? Students who emerge from this system either quit in disillusionment or end up propagating this situation, propelling us into a downward spiral.

Creating two tracks

There is no doubt that research is the engine that drives growth and innovation, but it cannot be an excuse to neglect teaching, which prepares students for the real world. Universities should consider separate tracks for research-focused and teaching-focused faculty members. Interests of faculty members in these two tracks may extend beyond their primary focus, but they must not be expected to excel in both at all times. Otherwise, there will be scope for resentment and lack of commitment, undermining the very faculty members whose contributions are critical to the university's mission.

Universities must realise that the scientific content of a paper and its possible societal and economic impact are more relevant than the impact factor of the journal in which it is published or the number of citations it garners. Teaching must be recognised as an important function of the university and teachers must be encouraged to improve curricula. Careful, unbiased judgment must replace metrics. Universities must enable a paradigm shift in their institutional culture to value and enable the success of both research and teaching efforts that collectively contribute to their overall mission as being centres of higher education and learning.

The metrics-focused system or 'metricocracy', if you will, which we mistakenly believe is synonymous with meritocracy, has created a situation which implies that education is a market rather than a citizen's right and the state's duty; knowledge is a commodity and not a means of becoming more humane; and students are customers, instead of future citizens. This warped ecosystem views academic rigour as detracting from the business of delivering the product to the customer. It kills creativity and the enthusiasm to learn, does not prepare students for the real world, and is harmful to future generations.