

INFLUENCE OF UNIVERSITY RANKINGS ON STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: EVIDENCE FROM INDIA AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Abstract

Choosing a higher education institution is becoming an increasingly complex decision for students and their families in India. Students now access information from university websites, institutional brochures, social media platforms, online reviews, and personal networks. In this increasingly information-rich environment, university rankings - particularly the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in India - are widely regarded as important indicators of institutional quality. However, the extent to which rankings influence students' final enrolment decisions remains an important question.

This paper synthesises evidence from India and selected international studies, including research from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates, to examine the role of university rankings in students' choice of university. The reviewed evidence suggests that rankings are useful primarily during the initial shortlisting stage, whereas final enrolment decisions are more strongly influenced by practical considerations such as placement opportunities, expected salary outcomes, fees, location and infrastructure.

For international and geographically distant students, rankings appear to carry greater importance because they provide a credible signal when reliable local information is not readily available. Overall, the findings suggest that university choice is a multidimensional process in which rankings serve as one source of information among several rather than as a decisive factor in students' final enrolment decisions.

Keywords: *College Choice; NIRF Rankings; Placement Outcomes; Student Decision-Making; Higher Education; India.*

1. Introduction

The choice of a higher education institution is a major decision for students and their families. It can shape career opportunities, future income, professional relationships, and the financial burden on families. Traditionally, students often relied on parents, relatives, teachers, and members of their local communities when choosing a college. However, the rise of digital media has changed how students make these decisions.

Students seeking admission now have access to many sources of information, including college websites, online brochures, campus videos, student reviews, social media, and discussion forums. While access to more information can help students make better decisions, it can also result in too much information. In this situation, university rankings have become increasingly important because they provide a simple and familiar way of comparing different aspects of institutional performance.

In India, the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), introduced by the Government of India, provides a national system for assessing and ranking higher education institutions. Institutions often use their ranking positions in promotional and communication activities. This raises an important question: to what extent does a higher ranking influence a student's decision to enrol?

This paper examines evidence from India and selected international contexts to identify the factors that influence students' final choice of higher education institution. The reviewed studies suggest that a strong ranking can increase an institution's visibility and help students shortlist institutions, but it does not necessarily lead to higher enrolment. Students also consider practical factors such as placement opportunities, fees, location, infrastructure, safety, and programme quality when making their final choice.

2. Research Objectives

The study has three objectives:

1. To examine whether official university rankings, including NIRF rankings in India, influence students' final choice of higher education institution.
2. To identify the practical factors, such as placement opportunities, location, hostel safety, fees, and course-related considerations, that influence students' institutional choices.
3. To assess whether overall university rankings are more influential than practical factors in students' final enrolment decisions.

3. Research Questions

1. To what extent do university rankings influence students' final choice of higher education institution?
2. What factors, other than rankings, have the greatest influence on students' decision to select an institution?
3. Do high university rankings outweigh factors such as placement outcomes, fees, location, and course quality?

4. Review of Literature

An understanding of the NIRF framework is necessary before examining how students interpret rankings. The framework evaluates institutions across broad dimensions of institutional performance. The research review identifies the following major dimensions:

1. Teaching, Learning and Resources: This dimension considers the availability and quality of faculty, learning resources, laboratories, classrooms, and related academic infrastructure.
2. Research and Professional Practice: This dimension considers research activity, publications, patents, and related professional contributions.
3. Graduation Outcomes: This dimension considers student progression, completion, employment, and progression to higher studies.
4. Outreach and Inclusivity: This dimension considers aspects such as geographical diversity, inclusion, and participation of women and socially disadvantaged groups.
5. Perception: This dimension reflects perceptions of institutions among employers, academic peers, and the broader public.

Evidence from Indian studies presents a predominantly outcome-oriented picture of student decision-making. Students appear to evaluate higher education institutions in relation to the benefits, costs, and career opportunities associated with their investment.

Sharma et al. (2020) surveyed 618 undergraduate students in India and compared students' expectations with the parameters incorporated into university ranking frameworks. The findings indicate a notable difference between institutional ranking criteria and the factors students consider most relevant to their own educational decisions.

Placement and career support: Students want to know whether the institution can facilitate employment and attract credible recruiters.

Campus location: Location is relevant because it affects safety, access to internships, and exposure to employment opportunities.

Faculty quality: Students are concerned with teaching effectiveness and faculty competence rather than research output alone.

Fees and scholarships: Affordability and financial assistance are important considerations for students and their families.

The study therefore suggests that undergraduate students evaluate institutions using a broader and more practical set of criteria than can be represented by a single ranking position.

Sahu and Kumar (2023) examined the factors influencing 161 management students entering private B-schools in India. The study identified three particularly important considerations:

Placement opportunities, including the average and highest salary packages offered through campus recruitment.

Institutional location, particularly proximity to major corporate centres such as Bengaluru, Pune, and Gurugram.

Social media and peer reviews, including information shared by current students and alumni through platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and online forums.

These findings suggest that students making relatively high financial investments in private management education place substantial importance on employment outcomes and first-hand or peer-generated information.

Kumar, Tandon and Taneja (2022) analysed admission and enrolment data from the top 75 NIRF-ranked management institutions in India. Their analysis found no statistically significant relationship between NIRF ranking and the number of students enrolling. In other words, an improvement in ranking did not necessarily lead to higher enrolment.

The study suggests that students also consider factors such as tuition fees, institutional reputation among employers, and infrastructure when deciding whether to choose an institution. A higher ranking may improve an institution's visibility, but it does not by itself guarantee higher student demand.

International research provides further insight into how university rankings influence students' choices. The literature shows an important difference between students who have good knowledge about local

institutions and those who face greater uncertainty when choosing institutions outside their familiar geographical or social environment.

Katsumoto, Bowman, and Tennesen (2024) examined 4,698 observations from 502 U.S. institutions over several years to study the relationship between changes in U.S. News & World Report rankings and student enrolment.

- **International students:** Improvements in university rankings were associated with significant increases in international student enrolment, particularly among highly ranked institutions.
- **Domestic students:** The relationship between changes in rankings and domestic student enrolment was relatively weak and, in some cases, statistically insignificant.

One possible explanation for this difference is the amount of information available to students. Domestic students are more likely to be familiar with local institutions, including their reputation, academic strengths, campus environment, safety, and student experience. International students, on the other hand, may have fewer opportunities to visit campuses or obtain reliable information directly. For these students, a recognised ranking can provide a useful and credible indication of an institution's quality and reputation.

- **United Kingdom (Gibbons et al., 2015):** University league tables were found to influence undergraduate applications, although the effect was relatively small. The influence was more noticeable for highly competitive courses and among high-achieving students.
- **United Arab Emirates (Wilkins et al., 2012):** Among students considering international branch campuses, factors such as institutional reputation, course features, and cost were important in their decisions. This suggests that students did not rely only on global university rankings.
- **Australia (Ha et al., 2024):** A review of 46 studies identified 27 different factors that influenced international students' decisions. The findings show that students consider factors at different levels, including the country, city, institution, and specific course.

The evidence reviewed suggests that the importance of rankings is closely related to the amount of information available to students. Local students generally have better access to informal sources of information. They may seek advice from relatives, school seniors, alumni, parents, and local student groups. These sources can provide practical information about placements, teaching quality, campus facilities, hostel conditions, and student life that may not be reflected in university rankings.

Students moving to another state or country often face greater uncertainty because they may have fewer personal contacts and fewer opportunities to verify information provided by institutions. In such situations, an official national ranking such as NIRF or an internationally recognised ranking can provide a useful and relatively reliable source of information and help reduce uncertainty.

5. Findings & Suggestions

Institutions should continue to work towards improving their rankings, but rankings should not be the main focus of their marketing efforts. Students increasingly look for clear and reliable information about outcomes and the value they can expect from an institution.

Provide clear placement information: Institutions should report placement rates, median salary packages, and the names of recruiting organisations instead of focusing only on the highest salary package.

- **Tailor communication to different student groups:** Domestic undergraduate students may be more interested in local career opportunities, affordable fees, campus life, and hostel facilities.
- **Focus on the needs of international and out-of-state students:** Institutions should provide information about safety, official approvals, campus security, student support services, and assistance for students moving from other regions.
- **Highlight research opportunities for postgraduate and doctoral students:** Institutions should provide information about research facilities, funding opportunities, faculty expertise, laboratory facilities, and research publications.

6. Limitations of the Study

1. The study is based on a review of existing studies and official reports and does not include a new primary survey of students.
2. The reviewed studies employ different sample sizes, research designs, and national contexts; therefore, their findings cannot be combined into a single statistical dataset.
3. University rankings change over time, while student preferences are also influenced by changing economic conditions, employment opportunities, and other contextual factors.

7. Scope for Future Research

To address the limitations of the secondary data used in this study, future research can examine student decision-making directly in Karnataka. A structured survey of around 300–500 higher education students from major educational centres such as Bengaluru, Mysuru, and Mangaluru could provide primary data.

8. Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that university rankings influence students' choices, but their influence is not the same for all students and does not always determine the final decision. Rankings are particularly useful during the initial screening stage because they provide a simple indication of an institution's standing and help students narrow down their options.

Once students move beyond the initial screening stage, practical factors become more important. Placement outcomes, expected salary, fees, location, infrastructure, safety, programme quality, and peer experiences can have a greater influence on the final enrolment decision. This is especially true for students who have access to strong local sources of information.

For higher education institutions, the findings suggest that a strong ranking can attract students' attention, but sustained student demand is more likely to depend on clear educational and career outcomes. For students and parents, rankings can be used as an initial reference point, followed by a detailed evaluation of programme quality, affordability, career opportunities, location, and personal goals.

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