

Comparative Analysis of Indian Higher Education Rankings: IIRF, Outlook-I Care, and India Today-MDRA

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Abstract - This study critically examines three major private, non-governmental Indian higher education ranking frameworks: the Indian Institutional Ranking Framework (IIRF), Outlook-ICARE, and India Today-MDRA. As higher education in India expands, rankings have become essential tools for benchmarking institutional performance, guiding student choices, and shaping institutional strategy. Unlike government-endorsed systems such as NIRF, these private rankings operate independently, blending objective data with perceptual surveys and emphasizing parameters such as pedagogy, innovation, employer perception, infrastructure, and governance.

Using comparative parameter mapping, weightage distribution analysis, and case studies of leading institutions, this paper highlights divergences in institutional standings across frameworks. Findings reveal that IIRF emphasizes pedagogy and innovation, Outlook-ICARE prioritizes teaching, research, and inclusivity, while India Today-MDRA balances perception with objective data. The study argues that while private rankings provide flexibility and responsiveness to market needs, their methodological differences create inconsistencies in institutional evaluation. A unified hybrid model that integrates objectivity, innovation, and perception is proposed, offering institutions a clearer roadmap for improvement, reputation management, and policy alignment.

Keywords- Indian Higher Education, Private Rankings, IIRF, Outlook-ICARE, India Today-MDRA, Ranking Methodologies, Parameter Weightage, Perception vs. Objectivity, Institutional Reputation

1. Introduction

Higher education in India has expanded rapidly, with institutions competing for recognition, funding, and global visibility. Rankings have emerged as critical instruments for evaluating institutional quality, guiding student choices, and shaping policy decisions. While global frameworks such as QS and Times Higher Education dominate international discourse,

India has developed its own ranking systems tailored to national priorities.

Within India, three prominent private, non-governmental frameworks — the Indian Institutional Ranking Framework (IIRF), the Outlook-ICARE rankings, and the India Today-MDRA rankings — provide diverse perspectives on institutional quality. Unlike government-endorsed systems such as NIRF, these private rankings operate independently, often blending objective data with perceptual surveys. They emphasize parameters such as pedagogy, innovation, employer perception, infrastructure, governance, and leadership development, thereby offering alternative narratives of institutional performance that resonate strongly with students, parents, and industry stakeholders.

However, methodological differences among these private frameworks frequently lead to discrepancies in institutional standings. This paper aims to compare IIRF, Outlook-ICARE, and India Today-MDRA rankings, analyze their strengths and limitations, and propose recommendations for a more unified approach that balances objectivity, innovation, and perception.

Key Distinction

- Government-endorsed rankings (NIRF) → Policy credibility, funding relevance.
- Private rankings (IIRF, Outlook, India Today-MDRA) → Independent, perception-driven, market-oriented.
- Together, they shape a dual ecosystem of institutional evaluation in India.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Global Rankings

Global frameworks such as QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) emphasize research output, citations, and internationalization. While these models provide global visibility, scholars (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2007) caution that they often

privilege research-intensive institutions and overlook teaching quality, inclusivity, and contextual relevance.

3.2 Indian Ranking Ecosystem

India's ranking landscape includes both government-endorsed and private frameworks:

- NIRF: Government-backed, emphasizing teaching, research, inclusivity, and graduation outcomes.
- Private Rankings:
 - IIRF: Focuses on pedagogy, innovation, and employer perception.
 - Outlook–ICARE: Independent but methodologically similar to NIRF, emphasizing teaching, research, inclusivity, and perception.
 - India Today–MDRA: Combines perceptual surveys with objective data, balancing reputation, governance, and infrastructure.

This dual ecosystem reflects both policy credibility (NIRF) and market responsiveness (private rankings).

3.3 Scholarly Insights on Indian Rankings

Several scholars have examined the methodological and institutional implications of rankings:

- Agarwal (2009): Notes challenges in balancing global competitiveness with national relevance.
- Jayaram (2008): Explores how rankings shape institutional identity, influencing governance and reputation.
- Tilak (2016): Critiques reliance on quantitative indicators, advocating for qualitative measures of teaching and inclusivity.
- Mukherjee & Satija (2019): Compare NIRF with private rankings, noting how perception surveys can skew outcomes.
- Rupesh Chandrasen Londhe (2026):
 - *Innovation Ecosystem in Indian Higher Education Institutions Through Design Thinking*: Supports IIRF's emphasis on pedagogy and innovation.
 - *Operationalizing Innovation in Indian Higher Education*: Aligns with Outlook–ICARE's teaching and research focus, critiquing global models while proposing context-specific adaptations.
 - *Stewardship Management in Organizational Contexts*: Resonates with India Today–MDRA's governance and leadership

parameters, linking ethical stewardship to institutional reputation.

- *NIRF and Global Rankings: A Comparative Academic Analysis*: Highlights methodological overlap between government and private frameworks, reinforcing the need for hybrid models.

3.4 Synthesis

- Government Rankings (NIRF): Provide credibility, accreditation benchmarks, and policy alignment.
- Private Rankings (IIRF, Outlook–ICARE, India Today–MDRA): Capture innovation, perception, and market responsiveness, offering alternative narratives of institutional quality.
- Scholarly Insight: Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate how pedagogy, innovation, governance, and perception interact to shape institutional reputation.
- Challenge: Methodological differences across frameworks lead to discrepancies in institutional standings. This underscores the need for a hybrid model that integrates objectivity, innovation, and perception, while ensuring transparency and reducing bias

4. Research Design

4.1 Research Objectives

- To compare the methodologies of IIRF, Outlook–ICARE, and India Today–MDRA rankings.
- To analyze parameter weightages and their impact on institutional standings.
- To identify strengths, limitations, and biases in private ranking frameworks.
- To propose a hybrid model integrating objectivity, innovation, and perception.

4.2 Research Questions

- How do private ranking frameworks differ in their parameters and weightages?
- What discrepancies arise in institutional standings across IIRF, Outlook–ICARE, and India Today–MDRA?
- How do perception-driven metrics influence institutional reputation compared to objective data?
- What lessons can be drawn for institutions seeking to improve their ranking outcomes?

4.3 Research Methodology

- **Comparative Parameter Mapping:** Identify and categorize parameters across the three frameworks.
- **Weightage Distribution Analysis:** Quantify emphasis on teaching, research, pedagogy, perception, and infrastructure.
- **Case Study Approach:** Examine top 10 institutions across frameworks to highlight rank shifts.
- **SWOT Analysis:** Evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each ranking system.
- **Triangulation:** Cross-validate findings using institutional reports, placement data, and published rankings.

4.4 Data Sources

- Official ranking publications (IIRF reports, Outlook–ICARE rankings, India Today–MDRA surveys).
- Institutional annual reports and placement statistics.
- Secondary literature on global and Indian ranking methodologies.

4.5 Analytical Framework

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Parameter weightage comparison, rank shifts, statistical trends.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Perception surveys, governance quality, leadership development.
- **Visualization Tools:** Comparative tables, graphs, and SWOT matrices.

4.6 Expected Outcomes

- Clear identification of methodological divergences among private rankings.
- Insights into how perception vs. objectivity shapes institutional reputation.
- Recommendations for institutions to align strategies with multiple frameworks.
- Proposal of a unified hybrid model for ranking Indian HEIs.

5. Analysis

5.1 Comparative Parameter Mapping

Framework	Key Parameters	Weightage Focus
IIRF	Academic reputation, pedagogy, innovation,	Academic reputation 25%

	employer perception	
Outlook–ICARE	Teaching, research, graduation outcomes, inclusivity, perception	TLR 30%, RP 30%
India Today–MDRA	Reputation, governance, infrastructure, placements, leadership	50% objective + 50% perceptual

Observation: While IIRF rewards innovation and pedagogy, Outlook–ICARE aligns closely with government-endorsed metrics, and India Today–MDRA integrates perception surveys more heavily.

5.2 Weightage Distribution Analysis

- **IIRF:** Academic reputation (25%), employer perception (20%), pedagogy & innovation (30%).
- **Outlook–ICARE:** Teaching & Learning Resources (30%), Research & Professional Practice (30%), inclusivity & perception (20%).
- **India Today–MDRA:** 50% objective (placements, infrastructure, governance) + 50% perceptual (reputation, alumni feedback).

Insight: Divergences in weightage explain rank shifts — institutions strong in pedagogy may excel in IIRF but underperform in perception-driven MDRA.

5.3 Case Study Analysis

- **IIT Bombay:** Consistently top-ranked across frameworks, showing alignment between objective metrics and perception.
- **JNU:** Excels in pedagogy and inclusivity (IIRF, Outlook) but ranks lower in perception-driven MDRA.
- **Ashoka University:** Rewarded by IIRF for innovation, but perception surveys place it lower due to infrastructure gaps.
- **XLRI Jamshedpur:** Strong reputation elevates its MDRA ranking, even when objective metrics are comparable to peers.

Observation: Case studies confirm that methodological emphasis directly shapes institutional standings.

5.4 SWOT Analysis of Frameworks

- **IIRF:**
 - Strength: Innovation & pedagogy focus.

- Weakness: Limited transparency in data sources.
- Opportunity: Positioning India as a hub for innovative teaching.
- Threat: Underrepresentation of research output.
- Outlook–ICARE:
 - Strength: Balanced teaching & research metrics.
 - Weakness: Overlap with NIRF reduces distinctiveness.
 - Opportunity: Flexibility as a private framework.
 - Threat: Risk of being overshadowed by government rankings.
- India Today–MDRA:
 - Strength: Strong perceptual influence, reputation capture.
 - Weakness: Susceptible to bias from surveys.
 - Opportunity: Reflects student and employer sentiment.
 - Threat: Reliability questioned due to perception dominance.

5.5 Triangulation of Findings

By cross-validating institutional reports, placement data, and published rankings:

- Institutions with strong research output (e.g., IITs) perform consistently across frameworks.
- Institutions with strong pedagogy and innovation (e.g., Ashoka, BITS Pilani) excel in IIRF but face perception challenges in MDRA.
- Institutions with strong reputation and alumni networks (e.g., XLRI) benefit disproportionately in MDRA.

Triangulation confirms that discrepancies are not anomalies but systematic outcomes of methodological differences.

6. Findings

- IIRF: Rewards innovation, pedagogy, and storytelling in teaching, with a strong focus on employer perception. This makes it particularly favorable to institutions that emphasize experiential learning and industry partnerships. However, its limited emphasis

on research output creates a methodological gap compared to global standards.

- Outlook–ICARE: Prioritizes teaching and research excellence, with inclusivity as a differentiator. It mirrors government-endorsed frameworks like NIRF but operates independently, giving it credibility while retaining flexibility. Yet, its overlap with NIRF reduces distinctiveness, raising questions about its added value as a private ranking system.
- India Today–MDRA: Adopts a balanced approach, integrating perception with objective data. Reputation, alumni networks, and infrastructure weigh heavily, making it highly influential in shaping public opinion. However, reliance on perceptual surveys risks reinforcing historical prestige rather than capturing current institutional performance.
- Discrepancies: Institutions rank differently across frameworks due to methodological emphasis — pedagogy vs. research vs. perception. For example, Ashoka University excels in IIRF due to innovation but underperforms in MDRA because of weaker perception scores, while XLRI Jamshedpur benefits disproportionately from reputation in MDRA despite comparable objective metrics.

Critical Insight: These divergences are not anomalies but systematic outcomes of methodological design. They reveal how each framework privileges certain dimensions of institutional quality, thereby shaping distinct narratives of excellence.

7. Discussion

7.1 Implications for Institutional Strategy

- IIRF: Its emphasis on pedagogy, innovation, and employer perception encourages institutions to invest in teaching quality, curriculum innovation, and industry partnerships. Universities that prioritize skill-based education benefit most, but those with strong research portfolios may feel undervalued.
- Outlook–ICARE: By focusing on teaching, research, and inclusivity, it pushes institutions to strengthen faculty development, research output, and diversity initiatives. Institutions aiming for credibility in accreditation align closely with this framework, though its similarity to NIRF may limit differentiation.
- India Today–MDRA: Its perceptual surveys highlight the importance of reputation, alumni networks, and infrastructure. Institutions must therefore balance

objective performance with branding, visibility, and stakeholder engagement. This creates pressure to invest in marketing and reputation management alongside academic quality.

7.2 Impact on Student Decision-Making

- Students often rely on rankings as a proxy for institutional quality.
- Perception-driven rankings (India Today–MDRA) influence aspirants who value reputation and peer recognition, often privileging historically prestigious institutions.
- Objective-driven rankings (Outlook–ICARE, IIRF) guide students seeking measurable outcomes in teaching, research, and placements.
- Divergences across frameworks can create confusion, underscoring the need for transparency in methodologies and clearer communication of what each ranking measures.

7.3 Policy Relevance

- Government-endorsed rankings like NIRF provide accreditation benchmarks, but private rankings complement them by capturing market responsiveness and innovation.
- Policymakers must recognize the dual ecosystem:
 - Government rankings ensure standardization and accountability.
 - Private rankings reflect innovation, perception, and industry relevance.
- A hybrid model could integrate both, offering a balanced evaluation system that supports institutional improvement and policy alignment.

7.4 Challenges and Limitations

- Methodological inconsistencies: Different weightages lead to rank discrepancies, making cross-framework comparisons difficult.
- Perception bias: Reputation surveys risk reinforcing historical prestige rather than current performance, disadvantaging newer institutions.
- Data transparency: Private rankings often lack detailed disclosure of data sources, limiting replicability and academic credibility.

7.5 Towards a Unified Hybrid Model

- Integrating objectivity (teaching, research, inclusivity) with innovation (pedagogy, employer perception) and perception (reputation, alumni networks) can create a more holistic framework.

- Such a model would:
 - Reduce discrepancies across rankings.
 - Provide institutions with clearer improvement roadmaps.
 - Offer students and policymakers a more reliable benchmark.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Conclusion

This study critically examined three major private, non-governmental Indian higher education ranking frameworks — IIRF, Outlook–ICARE, and India Today–MDRA. Each framework privileges different dimensions of institutional quality: IIRF emphasizes pedagogy and innovation, Outlook–ICARE prioritizes teaching and research excellence, and India Today–MDRA balances perception with objective data.

The comparative analysis revealed systematic divergences in institutional standings, driven by methodological differences in parameter selection and weightage distribution. These discrepancies highlight the fragmented nature of India's ranking ecosystem, where institutions must navigate multiple narratives of excellence. The findings underscore the need for a unified hybrid model that integrates objectivity, innovation, and perception, while also addressing transparency and bias mitigation.

8.2 Recommendations-

For Institutions-

- Strategic Alignment: Develop multi-dimensional strategies that strengthen pedagogy, research, and reputation simultaneously.
- Industry Partnerships: Enhance employer perception through collaborations, internships, and alumni engagement.
- Inclusivity & Governance: Invest in diversity initiatives and transparent governance to align with Outlook–ICARE metrics.

For Ranking Bodies-

- Transparency: Disclose methodologies and data sources to improve credibility and replicability.
- Bias Reduction: Balance perceptual surveys with verifiable performance indicators.
- Innovation Metrics: Incorporate pedagogy, curriculum design, and industry-oriented initiatives into evaluation frameworks.

For Policymakers-

- **Dual Ecosystem Recognition:** Acknowledge the complementary roles of government and private rankings.
- **Hybrid Framework Development:** Facilitate collaboration between ranking bodies to create unified models.
- **Policy Alignment:** Use rankings strategically to guide funding, accreditation, and institutional improvement.

A hybrid model that integrates objectivity, innovation, and perception can reduce discrepancies, provide institutions with clearer improvement roadmaps, and offer students and policymakers a more reliable benchmark. Such a framework would not only strengthen India's higher education evaluation system but also enhance its global competitiveness.

9. Limitations and Scope for Future Research**9.1 Limitations**

- **Data Scope:** The study relies primarily on secondary sources such as ranking reports, institutional dashboards, and published surveys. Informal innovation activities and unreported collaborations may be underrepresented.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** Findings are based on a single time frame, limiting insights into long-term trajectories of institutional performance.
- **Regional Variability:** Differences in state-level enforcement and ecosystem maturity may not be uniformly captured, potentially skewing results toward stronger regions.
- **Measurement Constraints:** Indicators such as reputation, governance, and innovation are operationalized through proxies (surveys, MoUs, placements), which may not fully reflect qualitative outcomes like societal impact or inclusivity.
- **Generalizability:** The findings are specific to Indian higher education institutions under the AICTE/NIRF framework. Application to other national contexts may require adaptation.

9.2 Scope for Future Research

Hybrid Ranking Models: Develop integrated frameworks that combine objective metrics (teaching, research, and infrastructure) with perception metrics (reputation, employer feedback), reducing discrepancies across NIRF, IIRF, Outlook-ICARE, and India Today-MDRA.

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Track institutional performance over multiple years to assess whether rankings drive sustainable improvement or short-term adjustments.
- **Stakeholder Impact:** Examine how rankings influence student choice, faculty recruitment, and employer perceptions, providing evidence of their real-world consequences.
- **Comparative Global Studies:** Position Indian frameworks against QS, THE, and ARWU to highlight differences in priorities such as inclusivity, pedagogy, and governance.
- **Innovation and Pedagogy:** Extend Londhe's *Innovation Ecosystem* (2026) by evaluating how design thinking, experiential learning, and digital pedagogy are incorporated into ranking criteria.
- **Governance and Ethical Leadership:** Building on Londhe's *Stewardship Management* (2026), assess how governance practices and ethical leadership influence both objective outcomes and perception scores.
- **Bias and Transparency:** Investigate biases in perception surveys and propose mechanisms to improve transparency, reliability, and stakeholder trust in private rankings.

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India Today–MDRA	Reputation, governance, infrastructure, placements, leadership	Reputation & infrastructure
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Appendix B: Weightage Distribution-

Framework	Parameter Weightage	Notes
IIRF	Academic reputation (25%), pedagogy & innovation (30%), employer perception (20%), others (25%)	Strong focus on pedagogy and innovation
Outlook–ICARE	Teaching & Learning Resources (30%), Research & Professional Practice (30%), Inclusivity (20%), Perception (20%)	Balanced, similar to NIRF
India Today–MDRA	Objective (50%), Perceptual (50%)	Reputation and alumni influence dominate

Appendices

Appendix A: Comparative Parameter Mapping

Framework	Parameters	Distinctive Emphasis
IIRF	Academic reputation, pedagogy, innovation, employer perception	Pedagogy & innovation
Outlook–ICARE	Teaching, research, graduation outcomes, inclusivity, perception	Teaching & research

Appendix C: Case Study Rank Shifts

Institution	IIRF Rank	Outlook – ICARE Rank	India Today – MDR A Rank	Observed Divergence
IIT Bombay	1	1	Top 3	Consistent across frameworks
JNU	1	Top 3	Top 5–7	Strong pedagogy, weaker perception

Ashoka University	1 (Private)	Top 5	Top 10	Innovation rewarded, perception weaker
XLRI Jamshedpur	Top 3	Top 5	1–2	Reputation drives MDRA success
BITS Pilani	1 (Deemed)	Top 3	Top 5–7	Innovation strong, infrastructure perception weaker



“Higher Education Ranking Parameters” visually compares the evaluation criteria used by three major private Indian ranking frameworks — IIRF, Outlook–ICARE, and India Today–MDRA.

Appendix D: SWOT Matrices

Framework	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
IIRF	Innovation & pedagogy focus	Limited transparency	Position India as pedagogy hub	Underrepresentation of research
Outlook–ICARE	Balanced teaching & research	Overlaps with NIRF	Flexibility as private framework	Risk of redundancy
India Today–MDRA	Strong perceptual influence	Susceptible to bias	Captures student/employer sentiment	Reliability questioned

Appendix E: Triangulation Sources-

Ranking Publications:	IIRF annual reports, Outlook–ICARE rankings, India Today–MDRA surveys
Institutional Data:	Annual reports, placement statistics, faculty profile
Secondary Literature:	Studies on global rankings (QS, THE, ARWU) and Indian methodologies.

Graphical Representation – Higher Education Ranking Parameters-

- Color Coding:
 - Objective Metrics (Blue): Represent *data-driven indicators* such as teaching quality, research output, infrastructure, and placements. These are measurable and verifiable through institutional records.
 - Perception Metrics (Orange): Represent *reputation-based indicators* derived from surveys of students, alumni, and employers. These capture stakeholder sentiment and institutional image.
- Framework Focus:
 - IIRF: Emphasizes pedagogy, innovation, and employer perception — blending objective and perceptual dimensions.
 - Outlook–ICARE: Balances teaching, research, inclusivity, and perception — closest to government-endorsed standards.
 - India Today–MDRA: Integrates reputation and infrastructure equally — reflecting a 50:50 balance between objective and perceptual metrics.