

# Global Metrics, Local Realities: Policy Transfer, Marketisation, And Equity In India's Adoption Of UK-Modelled University Rankings

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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines India's adoption of UK-modelled university ranking frameworks, focusing on the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and the Karnataka State Universities Rating Framework (KSURF). Drawing on Policy Transfer Theory, Marketisation of Higher Education, and Educational Stratification Theory, it assesses how models such as QS and THE have been transplanted into national and regional contexts, their localisation, and socio-economic impacts. The study adopts a non-doctrinal, qualitative, analytical design, combining comparative document analysis, thematic coding of policy and institutional materials, and disaggregated AISHE/UGC statistical analysis to evaluate structure, implementation, and effects. Findings show high structural replication from UK rankings, minimal contextual adaptation, and market-driven shifts prioritising visibility over teaching or community goals. The systems advantage resource-rich institutions, reinforce socio-economic hierarchies, erode institutional diversity, and have limited transparency, creating tensions with NEP 2020's equity and excellence goals. Recommendations include contextualised and competency-focused metrics, stronger qualitative evaluation via NAAC, enhanced transparency, diversity protection, and integration of indigenous academic perspectives

**Keywords:** Indian Higher Education Policy, UK Model Rating System, NIRF, KSURF, Policy Transfer, Marketisation, Educational Stratification, NAAC, Institutional Diversity, NEP 2020, Indigenous Models.

## 1. Introduction

Higher Education Institution (HEI) rating systems have become prominent global tools to assess, compare, and promote institutional performance. In India, the higher education system has been significantly shaped by its colonial past, as British colonial rule established universities modeled closely after the University of London. This colonial legacy continues to influence institutional structures and priorities, setting the foundation for the adoption and adaptation of foreign academic standards and metrics in the post-independence era (Altbach, 2016).

Building on this historical context, India continued to adopt UK-model-inspired rating frameworks many decades even after getting its independence. However, India has introduced its own rating framework - the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2015. This initiative was partly motivated by the global exclusion of Indian universities from top international rankings such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Times Higher Education (THE), where no Indian HEIs featured in the top 100 positions (MHRD, 2015). The government sought a nationally contextualized ranking system to challenge global biases and better represent India's distinct educational landscape. At the regional level, Karnataka became the first Indian state to launch its own university rating system - the Karnataka State Universities Rating Framework (KSURF) in 2017 - aimed at addressing specific state-level higher education contexts (Government of Karnataka, 2017). This regional development, implemented alongside the national framework, offers a valuable case for examining the complexities and challenges involved in adopting UK-model rating systems across diverse Indian contexts. UK-based metrics such as QS and THE exert a profound influence on shaping global perceptions of institutional quality (Hazelkorn, 2015). However, these rankings are embedded within socio-economic and cultural

parameters specific to the UK, where higher education is highly commercialized and driven by a substantial international student market (Marginson, 2011; Arthurs, 2016). By contrast, India's higher education system is highly heterogeneous, comprising both public and private institutions marked by significant socio-economic stratifications. These unique complexities pose challenges that may not be adequately addressed by the direct transplantation of foreign rating frameworks (Tilak, 2020).

Both NIRF and KSURF reflect efforts to reconcile global ranking models with national and regional educational priorities, yet they predominantly replicate many UK-inspired structural features and key performance indicators, raising concerns about its suitability to India's complex socio-economic realities without adequate localization (Reddy, 2017). This raises concerns that such frameworks may foster unhealthy competition among Indian HEIs and exacerbate socio-economic disparities - particularly since better-resourced private institutions often dominate higher rankings compared to their public counterparts (Rao & Sahu, 2018).

The UK's historical mercantilist tradition has led to the commercialization of education. The UK's higher education sector has experienced significant commercial growth, with international education exports reaching approximately £20 billion between 2016 and 2018, marking a 26% increase since 2010 (Department for Education, 2020). Higher education constitutes a major export sector, with most UK HEIs operating in hyper-competitive markets to attract overseas students. Private entities such as Quacquarelli Symonds profit significantly from ranking activities, raising concerns that rankings often function more as marketing tools than objective measures of quality. (Department for Education, 2023; Leiter, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2015).

Based on the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 report, private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India significantly outnumber public HEIs, representing over 65% of all colleges, with private unaided colleges making up this large share and only about 21.5% being government colleges. The survey records 1,162 universities and 42,825 colleges enrolled nearly 43.3 million students, with the private sector playing a dominant role in this expansion (AISHE, 2022). This growth highlights a marketization or commercialization trend in Indian higher education similar to that in the UK, where education is a major export sector characterized by hyper-competitive dynamics among institutions to attract students. Parallel to this, in India, the Karnataka State Universities Rating Framework (KSURF) is prepared by the Indian Centre for Academic Rankings & Excellence Pvt. Ltd. (ICARE), a private company also responsible for the Gujarat State Institutional Rating Framework. Outsourcing publicly funded ranking exercises to private agencies raises governance and credibility concerns, and suspicion about government–private nexuses. Critiques of such ranking systems point to methodological opacity, questionable parameter weightings, and the exclusion of significant qualitative factors (AISHE, 2022; Government of Karnataka, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the present study critically examines the implications of adopting the UK-model rating system within the Indian higher education sector, focusing on how this policy shift interacts with socio-economic realities at both national and Karnataka state levels. It specifically addresses three interrelated research questions:

RQ1: How have UK-origin frameworks influenced India's higher education ranking systems nationally (NIRF) and regionally (KSURF), and to what extent have they been localised to the Indian context? (Policy Transfer Theory)

RQ2: What socio-economic and governance consequences have arisen from adopting these frameworks, particularly regarding equity, institutional diversity, and public–private sector dynamics? (Marketisation of Higher Education and Educational Stratification Theory)

RQ3: How do these ranking systems affect the balance between quality, equity, and governance envisaged in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and how credible, transparent, and contextually appropriate are their methodologies? (Integrated application of all three theories)

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Colonial Legacy and the Evolution of Indian Higher Education Evaluation

The British colonial authorities established universities based on the University of London model, emphasizing examination-centric assessment, standardized curricula, and centralized control (Altbach, 2016). This legacy not only shaped institutional governance but also fostered a continued reliance on external benchmarks of quality and prestige. Post-independence, while India expanded access to higher education, quality evaluation systems remained heavily influenced by Western epistemic traditions (Choudaha, 2018). Scholarship shows that this pattern of "borrowing" educational structures from global powers is consistent with theories of policy transfer and policy borrowing (Phillips & Ochs, 2004), where educational policies are adapted from one context to another, often without adequate localization to socio-economic realities.

### 2.2 Global University Rankings: Purpose, Influence, and Critiques

Global ranking systems, most notably QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) - emerged in the early 2000s as comparative quality indicators in a competitive higher education market. These systems use multiple parameters, including research output, citations, faculty - student ratios, international collaborations, and reputation surveys (Marginson, 2014; Hazelkorn, 2015).

However, extensive research highlights multiple limitations of these frameworks: Methodological biases that privilege research-intensive, English-speaking institutions (Fauzi, 2020). Heavy reliance on reputational surveys, which can perpetuate status hierarchies rather than reflect actual quality (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Encouragement of hyper-competition and marketization over collaborative and contextually relevant educational goals (Hazelkorn, 2015).

From the perspective of marketization theory (Olssen & Peters, 2005), these rankings transform education into a commodified service where institutional worth is tied to global brand positioning rather than societal contribution. Several UK scholars have criticized their national reliance on rankings, noting that it undermines academic values and incentivizes superficial performance measures (Brown, 2011).

### **2.3 The UK Model and Its Global Diffusion**

The UK's higher education evaluation ecosystem reflects a long-standing emphasis on market competition. Systems like QS and THE, both connected to UK-based origins, align institutional performance with visibility in international student markets (Bekhradnia, 2016). The UK approach often intertwines government policy - through mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) - with private ranking enterprises, reinforcing a commercial logic where rankings serve as both marketing tools and policy levers (Shattock, 2017). Critics argue that this creates behaviour-shaping incentives that may not advance academic missions but do enhance profitability and global market share (Marginson, 2011). This global visibility has spurred widespread adoption in various countries, sometimes referred to as "ranking mimicry" (Hazelkorn, 2015).

### **2.4 NIRF: India's National Response and Its Critiques**

India's NIRF, launched in 2015 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, sought to develop a ranking system tailored to Indian contexts while improving the country's global higher education image (MHRD, 2015). It includes parameters such as teaching and learning resources, research and professional practices, graduation outcomes, outreach and inclusivity, and perception. While innovative in scope, research highlights three main critiques: Heavy weighting for research outputs disadvantages teaching-focused or resource-limited institutions (Reddy, 2017). Reliance on perception surveys introduces subjective bias, similar to QS/THE (Bhushan, 2019). Risk of reproducing inequalities, as better-funded private institutions excel on these criteria (Rao & Sahu, 2018).

### **2.5 KSURF: Regional Experimentation in Karnataka**

Karnataka is the only Indian state to implement a state-specific university rating system, the KSURF in 2017 (Government of Karnataka, 2017). The KSURF includes additional metrics relevant to the state's priorities, such as innovation and social outreach (ICARE Ratings, 2018). While this represents a form of localized policy adaptation, empirical studies show KSURF closely mirrors NIRF's structural approach, inheriting many of its limitations, including replication of UK-style performance hierarchies.

### **2.6 Socio-Economic Impacts of Ranking Systems in India**

The socio-economic consequences of adopting ranking and rating systems in India have been widely noted in the literature. Evidence indicates that better-resourced private institutions are more likely to perform well in ranking exercises, as they can invest in research infrastructure, faculty recruitment, and international collaborations - factors heavily weighted in most rating frameworks (Tilak, 2020; Raza, 2020). Conversely, public universities, which serve a more socio-economically diverse and often disadvantaged student body, face persistent underfunding, bureaucratic constraints, and political interference that limit their competitive performance (Jayaram, 2017).

This disparity reinforces stratification within the higher education system, where wealthier students tend to secure admission into "top-ranked" private institutions, while students from rural areas, marginalized communities, and lower-income families often remain in lower-ranked or unranked public universities. Over time, these patterns contribute to a reputational divide that influences student choices, employer perceptions, and policy priorities. Drawing on educational stratification theory (Trow, 2006), rankings can thus inadvertently entrench existing social hierarchies, exacerbate inequities in access to quality education, and limit the transformative potential of higher education as a means of social mobility.

### **2.7 Research Gaps and Policy Linkages**

Although scholarship on higher education rankings is expanding, key gaps remain. First, there is limited comparative research that examines the interaction between global frameworks such as QS and THE, national frameworks such as NIRF and state-level adaptations such as KSURF within a single analytical frame. Second, the persistence of the colonial legacy in India's quality assessment frameworks - manifested through continued reliance on externally derived metrics - has received insufficient empirical and theoretical attention (Altbach, 2016; Choudaha, 2018). Third, while socio-economic consequences of global rankings have been explored internationally, their specific manifestations and intensities within India's multi-layered higher education landscape remain under-researched.

Furthermore, there is scant inquiry into the dual-level policy transfer process - from global to national (UK models → NIRF) and from national to regional (NIRF → KSURF). Understanding these multi-scalar

adaptations is crucial, particularly in light of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes improving quality benchmarks to achieve global competitiveness. This study addresses these gaps by providing a policy critique that situates rating systems within the broader debates on governance reform, equity, and the appropriate balance between quantitative metrics and qualitative, context-sensitive measures of higher education quality.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This research blends three theoretical perspectives with the unique contextual realities of India's higher education sector.

**Policy Transfer Theory:** Policy Transfer Theory (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) explains how policy ideas, institutional structures, and evaluation models are borrowed from one context and applied in another. Global university rankings such as QS and THE, developed in the socio-economic and cultural setting of the UK, prioritise quantitative research outputs, citation impact, and perception-based indicators (Hazelkorn, 2015). When adopted in different contexts without sufficient adaptation, these models can create tensions between imported design features and local structural or cultural needs.

**Marketisation of Higher Education:** According to Marketisation theory (Olssen & Peters, 2005), higher education is increasingly shaped by market-oriented logics, branding imperatives, and competitive positioning. In commercialised systems such as the UK's, rankings are integral to attracting students, faculty, and investment. When similar ranking mechanisms are transferred elsewhere, they can influence institutional priorities, incentivising visibility-oriented outputs over broader educational missions if not balanced by robust governance safeguards.

**Educational Stratification Theory:** Educational Stratification Theory (Trow, 2006) examines how education systems reproduce socio-economic hierarchies through unequal access to resources, prestige, and opportunities. Standardised ranking metrics tend to advantage already resource-rich and research-intensive institutions, while disadvantaging those with fewer material or infrastructural inputs. Without context-sensitive adjustments, ranking systems risk narrowing institutional diversity and deepening inequality in access and outcomes.

Along with these theories, historical, political, economic, and social contexts, provide an analytical foundation for assessing the structural origins, market pressures, and equity implications of India's ranking frameworks. They guide the interpretation of how transplanted models interact with national policies, institutional diversity, and equity objectives, as further explored in the Findings & Discussion section.

### 4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, explanatory, and non-doctrinal research design to critically examine the adoption and adaptation of the UK model rating system within the Indian higher education landscape. The analysis is designed to critically examine how these frameworks were transplanted, the socio-economic and governance effects they generate, and the extent to which they align with NEP 2020's objectives. The methodological design is theory-driven, with each research question linked to analytical procedures derived from the relevant theoretical lens, ensuring that findings can be directly traced back to both theory and data.

The study applies a theory driven qualitative policy analysis to trace both (a) global to national transfers (UK ranking models → NIRF) and (b) national to regional transfers (NIRF → KSURF). The design integrates comparative document analysis, thematic coding, and descriptive statistical analysis to evaluate how ranking frameworks are structured, implemented, and experienced across governance levels.

The study relies entirely on secondary data consisting of: government's official policy documents and reports, Global ranking datasets, Academic literature (peer-reviewed papers, articles, books, and conference), Media reports and editorials and Statistical data published by agencies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), AISHE. Data were collected through a systematic desk research procedure.

The analytical lens for this study is grounded in the three interrelated theories outlined in the Theoretical Framework—Policy Transfer Theory, Marketisation of Higher Education, and Educational Stratification Theory—which together provide the conceptual basis for evaluating the structural origins, behavioural effects, and equity implications of NIRF and KSURF.

Policy Transfer Theory/RQ1 informed a comparative document analysis of UK-origin ranking models such as QS and THE with India's NIRF parameters, and in turn the relationship between NIRF and KSURF. This parameter-mapping exercise examined weighting patterns, indicator definitions, and reputational survey reliance to identify structural borrowings, scope for localisation, and adaptation gaps at both the global-national and national-regional levels

Marketisation of Higher Education theory/RQ2 was operationalised through thematic coding of national and state policy statements, government tender documents, institutional marketing materials, and public communications. This coding focused on patterns of competitive positioning, branding rhetoric, outsourcing of evaluation functions to private agencies, and evidence of resource reallocation towards ranking-weighted activities such as high-impact publications and international collaborations.

Educational Stratification Theory//RQ2 guided a systematic disaggregation and descriptive statistical analysis of AISHE and UGC data by institution type (central, state, private, deemed), funding source, and geographic location. This enabled an assessment of patterns in enrolment, faculty distribution, infrastructure, and performance that correlate with ranking positions. By linking these patterns to the mechanisms of inequality reproduction described in theory, the study connected empirical disparities to broader structural dynamics. The analysis proceeded in three integrated (RQ3) stages designed to align closely with the study's theoretical underpinnings.

Throughout these stages, a triangulation strategy was used to cross-verify observations from documentary analysis, statistical data, and secondary literature, ensuring that interpretations were supported by multiple sources. This staged, theory-driven approach ensured empirical consistency with the conceptual foundations set out in the Theoretical Framework, enabling a coherent transfer from theory through method to the findings and discussion.

The limitations of the study are - reliance on secondary sources means that the analysis is dependent on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of publicly available data. The study does not conduct primary surveys or interviews, which could have provided additional insights into institutional strategies and perceptions. Findings regarding socio-economic impacts are interpretive and derived from documented trends, which may not capture the full diversity of institutional contexts across India. The focus on NIRF and KSURF as representative cases means conclusions may not fully apply to other state-level or specialised ranking systems.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

This section offers a critical evaluation and policy critique of the decision to adopt the UK's global higher education ranking models in India through frameworks like NIRF and KSURF. By interpreting the findings through Policy Transfer and Borrowing Theory (Phillips & Ochs, 2004), Marketization of Higher Education (Olssen & Peters, 2005), and Educational Stratification Theory (Trow, 2006), the discussion illuminates both the intended and unintended consequences of this policy choice, and how it interacts with India's unique socio-political landscape. The analysis explicitly addresses the three research questions set forth, revealing how this policy choice has reshaped institutional behaviour, governance priorities, and equity outcomes - and where corrective reforms are necessary.

### 5.1 Colonial Legacy and UK Model Influence on NIRF and KSURF

From a Policy Transfer perspective (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000), the structural design of NIRF and KSURF reveals a high degree of borrowing from UK-origin rankings such as QS and THE. Both adopt core features — heavy emphasis on research output, citation impact, and reputational surveys — with weightings closely aligned to the UK models (MHRD, 2015; Government of Karnataka, 2017). This reflects not just policy learning but direct model transfer, rooted in India's colonial legacy of British-modelled universities, which normalised external benchmarking as a legitimacy marker (Altbach, 2016).

Evidence of a two-layer transfer emerges: first, global → national transfer, where NIRF inherits the QS/THE architecture with minor contextual additions (e.g., Outreach & Inclusivity), and second, a national → regional transfer where KSURF replicates NIRF's structure with minimal additional localisation. The KSURF adaptation illustrates vertical policy diffusion within India, yet maintains NIRF's core parameters and quantitative approach largely intact, reinforcing uniformity over regional specificity.

These patterns indicate that while the rhetoric of NIRF/KSURF promises contextualisation, in practice the frameworks retain a global design logic privileging elite, research-intensive institutions. The reliance on perception-based scoring further embeds subjective bias favouring historically advantaged players, which the transfer approach does not mitigate.

### 5.2 Marketisation and Shifts in Institutional Behaviour

Consistent with Marketisation theory (Olssen & Peters, 2005), the findings show that rankings in India increasingly operate as market-driven tools for competitive positioning rather than purely as academic quality benchmarks. With over 65% of colleges now private unaided institutions (AISHE, 2021–22), the higher education landscape is moving towards a competitive, quasi-market environment similar to that of the UK (Marginson, 2011). Elite institutions prominently market their NIRF performance to attract high-value students, faculty, and partnerships, while at the state level, KSURF's outsourcing to private ranking agency ICARE exemplifies the privatisation of public educational evaluation. The thematic analysis reveals patterns of resource diversion towards ranking-weighted outputs such as publications in high-impact journals and

international collaborations — strategies aligned with brand enhancement more than core teaching or community engagement.

By drawing parallels to the UK model, where rankings both reflect and drive commercial imperatives, these results highlight the governance risks posed by marketisation when robust safeguards are absent. Outsourcing ranking administration to private actors invites concerns over impartiality, the use of public resources, and potential conflicts of interest between government and commercial stakeholders.

### **5.3 Socio-Economic Stratification and Inequity**

In line with Educational Stratification Theory (Trow, 2006), the ranking order entrenches socio-economic hierarchies in Indian higher education. AISHE data show that government universities account for only 59% of the sector, while elite, centrally funded IITs/IIMs and select private universities dominate top NIRF and KSURF positions (AISHE, 2021–22). Affluent students disproportionately occupy places in these institutions, while rural, lower-income, and marginalised students cluster in state universities or unranked colleges.

The mechanism of stratification unfolds in three steps: One, ranking criteria heavily weight research output and reputational surveys, metrics that correlate strongly with financial resources and global visibility. Two, resource concentration enables top institutions to attract and retain higher-quality faculty, secure large research grants, and maintain superior infrastructure (UGC, 2019). Three, Cyclical reinforcement follows — high rankings bring further funding, prestige, and talent, widening the gap with lower-ranked institutions. This cycle means disparities in GER and faculty quality persist or even widen across states despite overall national growth. Importantly, these inequities are not simply the product of lower-performing institutions' choices, but of structural disadvantages rooted in governance deficits, chronic underfunding, and policy neglect of the public HEI sector.

### **5.4 Governance Contradictions and the NEP 2020 Gap**

While NEP 2020 emphasises equity, inclusion, and holistic excellence, the ranking-driven governance model prioritises measurable, globally-aligned research outputs over context-sensitive dimensions such as community engagement and vocational education (Reddy, 2017; Tilak, 2020). The result is a narrowing of institutional missions towards a single research-intensive archetype, undermining diversity of institutional roles.

Governance reliance on rankings — often administered or influenced by private actors — risks sidelining statutory quality bodies such as NAAC, which could provide more qualitative and process-oriented assessments. Other gaps, including weak integration of rankings with accreditation, reliance on horizontal rather than discipline-specific comparisons, and limited recognition of regional socio-economic realities, reduce both the credibility and contextual appropriateness of outcomes. Seen through the combined lens of the three theories, these contradictions point to a structural misalignment between imported ranking models, India's equity-oriented policy goals, and the realities of a diverse, stratified higher education system.

### **5.5 Erosion of Institutional Diversity**

The erosion of institutional diversity in Indian higher education is a significant consequence of adopting UK-modelled ranking systems like NIRF and KSURF. These frameworks incentivize universities to conform to a narrow set of research-intensive, high-impact performance criteria that prioritize global visibility over local relevance, leading many teaching-focused and regionally specialized institutions to mimic the strategies of elite universities. This homogenization undermines the unique missions of diverse institutions, such as vocational training, community engagement, and region-specific knowledge production, which are vital for addressing India's varied educational and social needs. Consequently, the monoculture induced by rankings threatens to diminish the heterogeneity essential for a resilient and inclusive higher education ecosystem, as argued by Tilak (2020) and Reddy (2017), who warn that such standardization marginalizes distinct institutional identities and limits innovation in responding to local challenges. This trend raises concerns about the long-term sustainability and equity of India's higher education landscape (Altbach, 2016; Rao & Sahu, 2018).

### **5.6 Pathways for Contextual and Indigenous Reform**

Evidence points to the need for context-sensitive ranking adaptations. This includes vertical quantification (discipline-specific comparisons) and contextualised evaluation that consider regional socio-economic realities, ensuring fairer comparisons between institutions with different missions. Drawing inspiration from India's own traditions, such as Nalanda and Taxila, could help design indigenous frameworks valuing holistic education, societal contribution, and locally relevant knowledge production - countering the homogenising pull of Western market-oriented rankings.

### **5.7 Integrated Interpretation**

Policy Transfer Theory explains the structural mimicry and its colonial and political roots; Marketisation Theory reveals the commercial and competitive behaviours fostering brand-led resource allocation; and Educational Stratification Theory accounts for the deepening inequities in access and institutional prestige. These empirical patterns echo Hazelkorn's (2015) and Altbach's (2016) cautions on uncritical adoption of global rankings, while this study adds fresh insight into dual-level policy transfer (national to state) and

governance risks from private sector involvement. The discussion thus sets the stage for reforms that prioritise competency over competition, strengthen NAAC, adopt differentiating metrics, protect diversity, and align evaluation systems with NEP 2020's inclusive vision.

The analysis above makes clear that India's adoption of UK-modelled higher education ranking systems has produced a complex mix of visibility gains, competitive pressures, inequities, and governance tensions. While these frameworks have enhanced benchmarking capacity, their limited localisation, over-emphasis on quantitative metrics, reputational biases, and susceptibility to marketisation threaten to undermine the inclusive and context-responsive vision outlined in NEP 2020. The risks identified - from erosion of institutional diversity, elite capture, and widening socio-economic gaps to governance challenges and over-reliance on private actors - point to an urgent need for systemic recalibration. Addressing these concerns requires policy interventions that shift the focus from competition to competency-building, strengthen qualitative and context-sensitive evaluation mechanisms, protect diversity, and align evaluation systems with indigenous strengths and equity goals. The following Policy Recommendations translate this critical appraisal into concrete, actionable measures for reform.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the study's critical analysis and the policy critique of adopting UK-modelled ranking systems in India, several comprehensive reforms are necessary to ensure that frameworks like NIRF and KSURF promote quality, equity, institutional diversity, and effective governance in line with India's unique socio-political context and NEP 2020 vision.

1. **Foster Competency Rather than Competition:** Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should focus on developing authentic competencies tailored to their unique strengths, missions, and regional priorities rather than engaging in unhealthy competition driven by rankings. This requires sustained government support in terms of funding, faculty development, infrastructure, and a nurturing academic environment to enable meaningful growth beyond ranking metrics.
2. **Revitalise and Strengthen NAAC:** The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) must be empowered as an independent, transparent, and robust qualitative evaluation body. Its focus should encompass institutional processes, governance quality, teaching effectiveness, and continuous improvement, thus complementing ranking systems and emphasizing competency-based assessment over mere numerical scores.
3. **Adopt Vertical and Contextualised Quantification:** Ranking methodologies should move away from broad horizontal comparisons to vertical assessments within disciplines and contextualisation according to regional socio-economic realities. Tailored parameters for different types of institutions - research-intensive, vocational, teaching-focused - are essential to produce fair and meaningful evaluations.
4. **Protect and Reward Institutional Diversity:** Evaluation systems must explicitly recognise and support the diversity of institutional missions. This includes valuing community engagement, vocational training, and regional development contributions alongside research performance. Such recognition prevents the erosion of distinctive educational roles caused by imitative ranking-driven homogenization.
5. **Capacity Building for Under-Resourced Public Institutions:** To address inequities, targeted investments should be made in public HEIs serving marginalized and rural populations, focusing on infrastructure, faculty recruitment, research facilities, and quality enhancement, thereby enabling these institutions to compete more effectively on equitable grounds.
6. **Enhance Governance and Regulatory Transparency:** There is a critical need to ensure transparency in the management of ranking exercises, particularly when private entities are involved, to avoid conflicts of interest. Strengthening governance frameworks to integrate rankings with accreditation and ensuring accountability through independent regulatory bodies will enhance the credibility and impact of evaluation systems.
7. **Develop Indigenous Models Inspired by Indian Academic Traditions:** Instead of uncritically adopting Western market-oriented ranking frameworks, India should draw on its historic academic traditions, such as those exemplified by ancient institutions like Nalanda and Takshashila, which valued holistic education and societal contributions. Indigenous model development can better align ranking frameworks with Indian educational values and developmental goals.
8. **Align Ranking Systems with NEP 2020's Equity and Inclusion Goals:** Ranking parameters must be recalibrated to increase emphasis on inclusivity indicators, regional outreach, digital access, and socio-economic mobility. Institutions excelling in enrolling and supporting disadvantaged groups should be positively incentivised through rankings and related funding mechanisms.
9. **Improve Data Integrity and Stakeholder Involvement:** Enhancing the reliability of data inputs and expanding stakeholder representation - especially Indian academics, employers, and students - in reputation surveys will make rankings more reflective of national realities and increase acceptance among the academic community.

## 10. Regulate to Mitigate Over-commercialization and Ranking Manipulation:

Policies should monitor and discourage “gaming” behaviors in ranking processes, distinguishing between rankings as marketing tools and as genuine quality enhancement instruments. Maintaining academic integrity requires resisting over-commercialization trends evident in UK higher education's marketized model.

These recommendations advocate for reorienting India’s HEI evaluation frameworks from competitive ranking dominance towards supportive, competency-based, and context-sensitive approaches. Strengthening qualitative accreditation, protecting institutional diversity, investing in public sector capacity, and developing indigenous frameworks are pivotal to building an equitable, diverse, and high-quality higher education system aligned with national priorities.

## 7. Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine India’s adoption of UK-modelled university ranking frameworks through the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and the Karnataka State Universities Rating Framework (KSURF), assessing their origins, localisation, and consequences. Guided by Policy Transfer Theory, Marketisation of Higher Education, and Educational Stratification Theory, the analysis revealed a two-tier transfer process — from global models such as QS and THE to NIRF, and from NIRF to KSURF — characterised by high structural replication and minimal contextual adaptation.

From a policy transfer perspective, both frameworks embed UK-style indicator weightings and metrics that privilege research intensity and international visibility, rather than India’s diverse institutional missions and socio-economic realities. The marketisation analysis showed how rankings have become tools for competitive branding and private-sector involvement, influencing governance priorities and resource allocations in ways that risk subordinating teaching quality and community engagement. The stratification perspective highlighted how these systems disproportionately benefit resource-rich institutions, reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies, eroding institutional diversity, and impeding equitable access.

These dynamics generate structural tensions with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 vision, which calls for balancing excellence with equity, transparency, and contextual relevance. The evidence suggests that without substantial reform, current ranking practices may continue to entrench inequality, encourage homogenisation, and undermine public accountability. Addressing these challenges requires re-orienting metrics toward competency and contextualised assessment, strengthening qualitative and process-oriented evaluation bodies such as NAAC, enhancing transparency, protecting institutional diversity, and integrating indigenous academic traditions to ensure that global benchmarking serves rather than distorts India’s higher education priorities.

In conclusion, India’s pursuit of global recognition in higher education must be balanced with locally grounded, equity-oriented, and contextually relevant evaluation models. Only through such recalibration can rankings become tools for genuine quality enhancement rather than instruments that reinforce inequality and homogenisation.

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