
From where I sit - World-class aims demand quality

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The *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2010-11 (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/>) featured six universities from mainland China, two from Turkey and none from India. The easiest defence for India is to attack the rankings' methodology, but this league table is yet another reminder of the ugly truth of Indian higher education: quality is simply not a priority at institutional or policy level.

There is no dearth of self-proclaimed world-class institutions in India, even though when claims of world-class faculty, research or infrastructure are benchmarked to global institutions through proxies such as the *THE* rankings, they fail miserably. Nevertheless, the term "world-class" is loosely used not only by institutions but also by the government. Unfortunately, the recent announcement of the establishment of 14 "innovation universities" meeting world-class standards has yet to move beyond an attractive concept.

Why does India lack world-class universities? It is easy to point to the lack of resources - money and time - needed to build such institutions. More importantly, however, Indian higher education fails to fully recognise the value of the most essential resource in such an endeavour, namely talent. An awareness of the importance of attracting the best talent - students, faculty and administrators - in delivering quality is sorely missing.

Let us take a basic comparison of research productivity between Zhejiang University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/zhejiang-university>) in China, 197th in the *THE* rankings, and the University of Delhi (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-delhi>), which is one of the better-known public universities in India.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/from-where-i-sit/from-where-i-sit-world-class-aims-demand-quality/413829.article>

A simple search for "University of Delhi

(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-delhi>)" on Google Scholar produces about 30,000 results, compared with nearly 330,000 for "Zhejiang University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/zhejiang-university>)". This difference becomes even more stark when one considers the relative size of the institutions. Delhi has almost 138,000 students enrolled in formal education programmes against Zhejiang's 39,000.



Such inefficient research productivity reflects not only a lack of recognition of research as one of the core measures of a world-class university but also a lack of an ecosystem of talent. For example, consider the number of PhD candidates at the two universities. Only one in 50 students at the University of Delhi (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-delhi>) is enrolled in a doctoral programme, compared with one in six at Zhejiang.

Admittedly, Indian universities have at least two significant systemic challenges. First, the landscape of Indian higher education is quite complex. Both public and private colleges are affiliated to public universities, resulting in a high variability of quality within institutions. Second, in just over 60 years of independence, India has struggled to pull together resources, focusing on access and quantity instead of quality.

Although India cannot turn its back on access, nor can it afford to waste its higher-education resources by expanding an inefficient system. Continued expansion without a keen focus on quality will merely result in a larger inefficient system. It is time that quality orientation takes precedence, at least in the short term.

One may argue that India has no need of "world-class" higher education institutions, given the country's resource constraints and widening-access priorities. But I believe that India needs exemplars to raise the overall quality of the system and to provide world-class solutions to its many challenges. Building truly excellent universities will require a comprehensive approach to attract and retain top talent.