

Ranking Reforms: NIRF Through the Lens of NEP 2020

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Abstract

The evaluation of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become progressively significant in India's academic and policy landscape, particularly with the emergence of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020; Chattopadhyay, 2019). NIRF provides a significant mechanism for evaluating and benchmarking the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) in India. Introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2015, it gained wider institutional acceptance after 2017 (MHRD, 2015; MoE, 2019). NIRF works closely on parameters such as teaching and learning, research output, graduation outcomes, outreach, and peer perception (MoE, 2023). The NEP 2020 sets forth transformative goals for the panoramic and inclusive development of higher education (Government of India, 2020). The crossover of these frameworks creates a fruitful ground for evaluating the success of higher education systems in India (Raghuram, 2021).

This paper examines the institutional ranking frameworks with a regional focus on Himachal Pradesh, a hill state that faces distinctive geographical, infrastructural, and socio-economic challenges (Choudhary & Sharma, 2022). By utilizing secondary data drawn from NIRF rankings (last 5 years), All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports, and the Ministry of Education databases (AISHE, 2022; MoE, 2023), the study examines the institutional performance of the universities, colleges, and technical institutes in the state participating in NIRF ranking and its alignment with the NEP 2020.

The findings revealed that while giants like IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, and private universities like Shoolini University have demonstrated steady progress in the NIRF rankings, public universities like Himachal Pradesh University (HPU) and the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, still lag in a few areas, including research output, international collaborations, and exposure to the industry (Chattopadhyay, 2019; AISHE, 2022). By mapping NIRF parameters with NEP 2020 goals, the paper uncovers the critical gaps between the policy vision, parameters lacking in the NIRF ranking, which will also cater to the NEP objectives and institutional performances in Himachal Pradesh. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for enhancing the parameters both in the interest of the NIRF ranking and NEP 2020, such as research productivity, governance mechanisms, digital infrastructure, and equity in access. Therefore, aligning institutional performance with the broader aspirations of NEP 2020.

This study contributes to the emerging body of literature on ranking frameworks by demonstrating the need for context-sensitive evaluations of higher education, particularly in geographically diverse regions such as Himachal Pradesh (Sharma & Thakur, 2021). This paper underscores the importance of linking the NIRF ranking metrics with policy imperatives to achieve inclusive, sustainable, and globally competitive higher education in India (Chattopadhyay, 2019; Government of India, 2020).

Keywords: National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), National Education Policy (NEP), Higher Education Reforms in India, Ranking Methodology Quality Assessment in Higher Education, Accreditation and Evaluation Institutional Benchmarking.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Higher Education in India

India's higher education system is one of the largest education systems in the world, still growing to become the biggest educational superpower with over 1,100 universities and 43,000 colleges serving nearly 40 million students (AISHE, 2022; MoE, 2023). Over the past decades, Indian higher education has gone through various significant reforms, specifically since the liberalization of the economy in 1991, which opened ways for private sector participation, international collaborations, and technology adoption (Tilak, 2015; Varghese, 2015). Despite this quantitative and progressive growth, the questions of quality education, equity, and global competitiveness remain at the forefront of policy debates (Agarwal, 2009; Jayaram, 2021). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, launched by the Government of India, speaks for the most diverse attempt in recent decades to transform higher education into a meaningful system that is all-around, flexible, multidisciplinary, and research-driven (Government of India, 2020). This is also parallel to the policy reforms; the need for transparent ranking and accreditation systems has escalated. Rankings serve not only as a strong benchmarking system for institutional performance but also as tools for guiding student choices, funding allocations, and policy interventions (Chattopadhyay, 2019; Hazelkorn, 2015).

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), launched in 2015 by the Ministry of Education, has become the primary national ranking system in India, driving institutions on various dimensions such as the teaching & learning, and resources (TLR), research and professional practices (RP), graduation outcomes (GO), outreach and inclusivity (OI), and perception (PR) (MHRD, 2015; MoE, 2023). Over the years, NIRF has expanded to cover multiple categories of institutions, including overall rankings, universities, engineering, management, law, pharmacy, and medical institutions (MoE, 2023).

Together, NIRF and NEP 2020 represent two sides of the same coin: one serves as a quantitative evaluative framework, while the other offers a qualitative vision for reform. Their intersection raises questions about whether ranking metrics adequately reflect policy aspirations and whether higher education institutions are aligning themselves with these transformative goals (Raghuram, 2021; Sharma & Thakur, 2021).

1.2 Rationale for Focusing on Himachal Pradesh

While much of the scholarly debates on higher education in India focus on metropolitan states and Top-notch institutions such as the IITs, IIMs, and central universities, less attention is paid to hill states like Himachal Pradesh (Tilak, 2015; Agarwal, 2009). Himachal Pradesh comes out as a unique case for higher education analysis due to its geographical constraints, limited industrial exposure, small population size, and socio-economic challenges (Choudhary & Sharma, 2022; Sharma & Thakur, 2021). Despite these constraints, the state has made significant progress in educational access, achieving one of the highest

literacy rates in India, 82.80% (2025 [India Census](#)), and ensuring relatively high enrollment in higher education compared to other hilly regions (Census of India, 2025; AISHE, 2022).

The state serves as a home for a mix of public and private universities, technical institutions, and colleges. A Considerable number of institutions, such as IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), Shoolini University, and the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, their performance in NIRF rankings provides an important lens for evaluating the overall quality of higher education in Himachal Pradesh (Chattopadhyay, 2019).

A regional focus is particularly valuable for three reasons:

1. **Policy Relevance:** State governments are one of the main stakeholders in implementing NEP 2020 and require state-specific evidence for decision-making (Government of India, 2020).
2. **Comparative Insights:** Comparing Himachal Pradesh HEIs with other hill states HEIs, such as Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir, allows for a better understanding of structural challenges in geographically difficult terrains (Varghese, 2015; Mehrotra, 2021).
3. **Equity and Inclusion:** Himachal Pradesh faces different issues, such as remote tribal districts having less access to higher education, gender parity, and affordability, which cannot be adequately captured by national-level studies alone (Jayaram, 2021; Sharma & Thakur, 2021).

1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

Despite the growing dependence on NIRF rankings and the aspiring reforms under NEP 2020, there is still limited explanation on how these frameworks intersect in the context of a hilly state like Himachal Pradesh (Chattopadhyay, 2019; Raghuram, 2021; Sharma & Thakur, 2021). This gap raises the key research problem: To what extent do institutional ranking frameworks such as NIRF mirror the goals and objectives of NEP 2020, and how do higher education institutions in Himachal Pradesh carry out within this evaluative framework (Government of India, 2020; MoE, 2023)?

The study pursues the following objectives:

1. To critically examine the alignment between NIRF parameters and NEP 2020 objectives
2. To study the performance trends of higher education institutions in Himachal Pradesh using secondary data from 2020–2025.
3. To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of higher education institutions in Himachal Pradesh (Choudhary & Sharma, 2022).
4. To provide policy recommendations for enhancing institutional performance and aligning it with national goals.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study carries significance for both academic research and policy-making. On the academic front, it hands out to the literature on ranking frameworks, a growing field that has typically been dominated by global rankings such as the QS and the Times Higher Education. By placing NIRF ranking within the policy context of NEP 2020, the study provides a more integrated approach to how rankings intersect with policy aims.

For policy-making, the study yields state-specific understandings that are crucial for designing interventions in Himachal Pradesh. For instance, identifying the gaps in research productivity can guide targeted funding for research purposes, capacity-building programs, and collaborations. Furthermore, by highlighting the contribution of private universities like Shoolini University, J.P. University, the study adds nuance to the debates around public-private dynamics in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspectives on Higher Education Rankings

The global discussion on institutional ranking systems has primarily been shaped by leading international frameworks like the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, the QS World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Rankings. These frameworks analyze institutions on various parameters such as international collaborations, research output, student-teacher ratio, and employer reputation (Hazelkorn, 2015). Although frequently referenced, they have been critiqued for privileging Anglo-American institutions and depending heavily on research citations in English-language journals, which creates a bias for institutions in developing countries (Altbach, 2012).

Scholars debate that while global rankings provide perks and standards, they often fail to account for regional and contextual variations in higher education (Salmi, 2020). For illustration, institutions in geographically challenged regions like the Himalayas face different curb in parameters like good infrastructure and vast industry linkages, which makes it difficult for them to compete on the metrics which are designed for research-intensive universities in the West. This critique has impacted many countries, including India, to gear up for national ranking systems, which are aligned with domestic actuality.

2.2 The Emergence of NIRF in India

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) was launched by the Ministry of Education in 2015 by the Government of India, as a counter to the limitations of global ranking frameworks. Unlike international systems, NIRF contains parameters such as Outreach and Inclusivity (OI), which considers gender equity, representation of disadvantaged groups, and regional diversity (Ministry of Education, 2023). This makes NIRF particularly appropriate and reliable for a diverse country like India, where access and impartiality are as important as research, infrastructure, and teaching quality.

Several studies highlight NIRF's role in promoting a healthy competition, noticeable transparency, and accountability among Indian higher education institutions (Chattopadhyay, 2019; Singh, 2021). For instance, universities have started to allocate more budget to research infrastructure, ICT-enabled tools, and faculty development to refine their rankings. However, critiques stay. Scholars argue that NIRF disproportionately favors top-notch institutions like the IITs and IIMs, while state universities and emerging colleges struggle to secure high scores due to limited resources (Tilak, 2020) and high competition.

In Himachal Pradesh, the impact of NIRF is a lot visible in the cases of institutions like IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, and private institutions like Shoolini University, which regularly participate in the rankings. In contrast, institutions such as Himachal Pradesh University (HPU) still struggle to maintain competitive performance, reflecting broader challenges faced by capable public universities in smaller states.

2.3 Critiques of NIRF and Institutional Challenges

Despite its significance, NIRF has faced a lot of criticism on multiple fronts. Firstly, the framework's stress on research publications and citations disadvantages universities in states with weaker research output (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). Secondly, the Peer Perception (PR) metric, which focuses on peer and employer reputation, tends to benefit older and metropolitan institutions, keeping regional universities at a disadvantage. Third, the voluntary nature of participation means that many institutions, specifically in smaller and hilly states like Himachal Pradesh, stay away from its scope, leading to data asymmetry (Mishra, 2022).

Furthermore, NIRF ranking is unsuccessful in capturing the unique socio-cultural role of the regional universities, especially in encouraging local knowledge, regional development, and inclusivity (Varghese, 2018). This is especially valuable in Himachal Pradesh, where universities serve not just to academic requirements but also to cultural sustainment and socio-economic boost of tribal and rural communities.

2.4 National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Vision and Goals

The National Education Policy 2020 marks a case in point shift in India's higher education landscape. It visualizes the construction of a system that is integrated, flexible, multidisciplinary, and competitive. Its key goals are as follows:

1. Setting up Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) to promote forefront research.
2. Achieving a 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by 2035.
3. Promoting digital learning and online education through initiatives like SWAYAM and the National Digital Library.
4. Encouraging internationalization by allowing overseas universities to set up campuses in India.
5. Rearranging governance through the creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI).
6. Making India an educational superpower, Scholars suggest that NEP 2020 is aspiring yet challenging, particularly for smaller states that face barriers in terms of funding, infrastructure, and faculty capacity (Rani, 2021). While the policy stresses research, innovation, and entrepreneurship, the ground reality in states like Himachal Pradesh reflects gaps in industry linkages and technology adoption (Kumar & Chauhan, 2022).

2.5 Mapping NIRF and NEP 2020

One of the central debates in the literature concerns the alignment between rankings and policy objectives. While NIRF grades institutions based on measurable parameters, the NEP 2020 functions with broad goals such as equity, comprehensive learning, and sustainability. Several scholars argue that unless ranking frameworks are readjusted to reflect NEP 2020's vision and goals, there will remain a disconnect between rankings and reforms (Chattopadhyay, 2021; Singh, 2022).

For case in point, NEP emphasizes multidisciplinary and holistic learning, whereas NIRF aims to rank institutions in discipline-specific categories like overall, engineering, law, pharmacy, etc. Similarly, while NEP focuses on regional equity and inclusion, NIRF's parameters pay less attention to outreach and inclusivity compared to research and citations. This mismatch raises attention about whether the institutions are prompt to pursue ranking goals over policy objectives.

2.6 Higher Education in Himachal Pradesh: Regional Studies

The higher education system in Himachal Pradesh has been the subject of limited but growing study. Studies highlight that the state has achieved extraordinary progress in access to education, with a relatively high Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) compared to other hill states (Mehta, 2019). However, issues of quality, research output, and employability remain.

For example, Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), established in 1970, still plays a central role in higher education in the state but still faces challenges related to faculty shortages, outdated curricula, and inadequate research infrastructure (Sharma & Rana, 2020). In contrast, private universities such as Shoolini University have emerged recently with outstanding performances in the rankings as research-oriented institutions, particularly in life sciences and biotechnology, gaining a spot in NIRF rankings (Chauhan, 2022).

The Institutions funded centrally, like IIT Mandi and NIT Hamirpur, display strong performance in research and innovation but often stay detached from regional development needs. That raises questions about the social relevance of top-notch institutions in a state with restricted industrialization.

2.7 Comparative Insights from Other Hill States

Collation with other hill states discloses both commonalities and differences. In Uttarakhand, institutions like IIT Roorkee and Doon University face identical challenges of aligning global competitiveness with regional development. Political instability in Jammu & Kashmir has restricted the higher education sector, although funding from the center has supported institutions like the University of Jammu. The North-Eastern states display another dimension, where geographic isolation and infrastructural limitations hamper higher education growth despite central initiatives.

These comparisons show that geographical constraints, faculty issues, and a shortage of industry linkages are common problems across hill states. However, Himachal Pradesh shows continuous progress in literacy rates, female participation in higher education, and the progressive growth of private universities, making it a unique instance within the Himalayan region.

2.8 Higher education institutes ranked from an Indian perspective.

In 2021, Dr. Abhay Maurya conducted a study in which he highlighted the criticism of the Indian educational system and discussed the steps taken by the Indian government, such as the introduction of various ranking agencies and rankings, such as NIRF, ARIIA, THE, and others. Abhay Maurya (2021)

2.9 An analysis of the 2020 rankings and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)

Strategic priorities for Indian universities. Dr. D.N. Rao conducted a study for the year following the 2020 NIRF ranking findings to improve the performance of the HEIs in the ranking. Dr. D.N. Rao¹, Dr. Seema Bushra², Dr. Kriti Gulati Mehta³, Dr. Shagufta Jabin⁴ (2021)

2.10 A study of NIRF reports for 2018-2020 was made, and the contribution of the top 25 universities in the NIRF ranking from 2018-2020. The parameter “Research and professional practices” was taken as the key parameter. Debda Mondal¹, Anil Singh², Debal C. Kar³ (2021)

2.11 An in-depth analysis of the National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF) India Rankings, taking into account sensitivity and uncertainty, offers a methodical and sequential examination of the rankings up until 2020. The ranking procedure being used and the many ranking criteria taken into account in the NIRF Rankings framework for the entire category in 2020 have also been thoroughly covered in the paper. [ED622528.pdf](#) Mohammad Ghulam Ali (2022).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design**, depending precisely on the secondary data sources to explore the alignment between the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with a specific focus on higher education institutions (HEIs) in Himachal Pradesh. The descriptive approach assists in documenting existing drifts and institutional performance, while the analytical approach permits critical comparisons of the ranking parameters, policy goals, and regional institutional actuality.

Unlike experimental or survey-based methods, this design suits the present study because the subject revolves around publicly available institutional performance data, policy documents, national reports, and government websites. It also assists in a structured examination of how rankings impact institutional

behavior, and the policy frameworks, like NEP 2020, find sufficient representation in evaluative ranking mechanisms such as NIRF.

3.2 Data Sources

The study is grounded in secondary data, systematically gathered and studied from various reliable and credible sources. Which include:

- **Government Reports and Policy Documents**
 - National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 issued by the Ministry of Education.
 - Annual reports of the University Grants Commission (UGC).
 - Reports from the Himachal Pradesh Department of Higher Education.
- **Ranking Data**
 - Official NIRF rankings (2020–2025), with a focus on overall, university, and discipline-specific categories.
 - Comparative analysis of performance for Himachal Pradesh institutions such as Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), Shoolini University, and the institutions that availed positions in NIRF ranking in the past 5 years, etc.
- **Institutional Reports and Websites**
 - Annual reports, strategic plans, and NAAC accreditation documents (SSR) of universities in Himachal Pradesh.
- **Academic Literature**
 - Journal articles, books, and websites on global ranking systems, NIRF, NEP 2020, and higher education in India.

The collection and study of data from multiple sources ensures reliability, minimizing bias and encouraging interpretation.

3.3 Scope of the Study

The scope is deliberately regionalized, with Himachal Pradesh serving as the center of analysis. The rationale for this scope is as follows:

1. Himachal Pradesh presents a distinctive higher education landscape, supported by a high literacy rate, relatively robust enrolment, and the presence of both top-notch institutions (IIT, NIT) and regional universities (HPU, private universities).
2. Despite its attainments, the state's HEIs face various challenges such as limited research output, insufficient industry linkages, and infrastructural strain due to its hilly terrain.
3. Existing knowledge hardly addresses how NIRF rankings and NEP 2020 reforms translate into hill states' institutional ground realities, thereby creating an academic gap.

By reducing the focus to Himachal Pradesh, the study expresses localized insights that have widened implications for other hill states in India.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is constructed upon comparative mapping of NIRF parameters with NEP 2020 objectives, which acts as a double-edged sword, supplemented by institutional performance analysis using secondary data. The framework involves four layers of analysis:

Parameter Mapping: Creating a structured matrix to map NEP 2020 goals (equity, multidisciplinary education, research excellence, global competitiveness) with NIRF parameters (Teaching, Learning, and Resources; Research and Professional Practice; Graduation Outcomes; Outreach and Inclusivity; Perception).

Institutional Ranking Trends: Examining year-wise NIRF ranking for Himachal Pradesh institutions between 2020–2025. Assessing consistency in participation and year-wise performances.

Policy-Alignment Assessment: Recognizing the extent to which the institutional ranking aligns with NEP 2020's transformative agenda, particularly in research, inclusivity, and internationalization.

3.5 Data Collection Process

- **Step 1:** Retrieval of official NIRF datasets via NIRF website (Participating institutions and Institutions that availed positions in various NIRF categories) for all HP institutions from the year 2020–2025.
- **Step 2:** NEP 2020 objectives were compiled into measurable indicators for comparison.
- **Step 4:** Cross-validation with academic literature and policy reviews.

This systematic collection ensured the reliability of data and helped triangulate results from multiple sources.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

The following techniques were used to interpret secondary data:

1. **Trend Analysis:** Year-wise changes in NIRF rankings of H.P. institutions and performances.
2. **Comparative Analysis:** Comparison of HEIs in Himachal Pradesh in NIRF rankings.
3. **Mapping Exercise:** NEP 2020 objectives were mapped onto NIRF parameters to assess convergence and divergence.

Although secondary data naturally restricts advanced econometric modeling, these systematic tools provide robust logical power.

3.7 Limitations of the Methodology

Every research design has some limitations. In this study, they include:

- **Dependence on Published Data:** Accuracy depends on the authenticity of institutions' self-reporting and the government publications.
- **Lack of Primary Insights:** involvement of interviews or surveys means stakeholder perspectives (faculty, students) are not directly captured.
- **Comparability Issues:** Variations in how the institutions present their data to NIRF, NAAC, or any other ranking may affect stability.
- **Dynamic Policy Landscape:** Both NIRF and NEP 2020 are evolving frameworks; findings represent a snapshot rather than outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the reliance on official, audited, and widely used data ensures academic carefulness.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis in this study revolves around two major dimensions:

1. Focusing on Himachal Pradesh-based HEIs. Institutional performance under the NIRF framework (2020–2025),
2. Alignment of these outcomes with NEP 2020 objectives, highlighting both collaborations and gaps.

The findings are presented via various tables, trend analysis, and comparative interpretation of the data, to ensure that both performance positions and qualitative policy insights are presented.

Section 1: Institutional Participation and Representation in NIRF

Himachal Pradesh, though a comparatively small hill state, has made its way in higher education with top-notch institutions, including IITs, NITs, central universities, state universities, and private universities.

Table 4.1 provides an overview of institutional participation in NIRF (2020–2025):

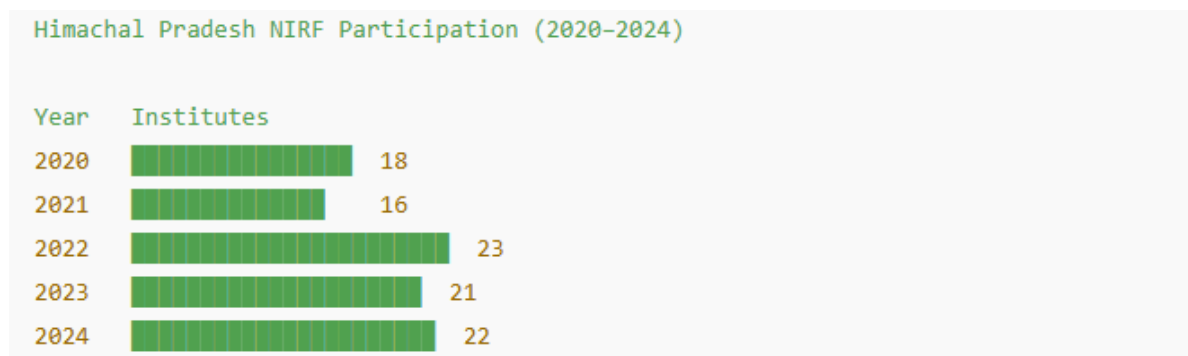
Year	Institutions from HP Featured in NIRF	Categories Represented	Notable Institutions
2020	18	Overall, Engineering, University, Management, Pharmacy	IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, Shoolini University
2021	16	Overall, Engineering, University, Pharmacy, Management	IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, Shoolini University, HPU
2022	23	Overall, Engineering, University, Pharmacy, Management, Law	IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, Shoolini University, HPU
2023	21	Expansion into Law & Medical categories	IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, Shoolini University, HPU, JP University
2024	22	More institutions participated, though mostly private	IIT Mandi retained lead
2025	31	More institutions participated, though mostly private	IIT Mandi retained lead and Shoolini University took lead for private institutions

Table 4.1

4.1 Himachal Pradesh Institutional Performance

In Himachal Pradesh, only a handful of institutions, primarily IIT Mandi, NIT Hamirpur, Shoolini University, Himachal Pradesh University, and Central University, Dharamshala, Kangra, feature consistently in the NIRF ranking. These institutions benefit from better research facilities, stronger faculty profiles, and established academic networks (Kumar & Sharma, 2022). By contrast, many state and private institutions do not participate in NIRF due to resource constraints, lack of robust data systems, or inadequate research output (Mathew, 2021).

The state's mountainous terrain and limited industrial base also restrict opportunities for research collaborations and professional practice linkages, both of which significantly influence NIRF scores (Thakur, 2021). These structural limitations make it challenging for smaller colleges to compete nationally (Hazelkorn, 2015).



4.2 Section 1: Comparative Analysis

• NIRF 2020:

Name of Institute	Category			
	Overall	Engineering	Pharmacy	Architecture
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184	67	31		
NIT Hamirpur IR-E-U-0189		98		19

Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management IR-E-U-0190		112	39	
Jaypee University of Information Technology IR-E-U-0186		115		

Number of Participating Institutes in India: **1667**

Number of Participating Institutes of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2020: **18**

NIRF 2021:

Name of Institute	Category				
	Overall	University	Engineering	Pharmacy	Architecture
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184	82		41		
NIT Hamirpur IR-E-U-0189			99		23
Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management IR-E-U-0190		89	103	36	
Jaypee University of Information Technology IR-E-U-0186			129		

Number of Participating Institutes in India: **1657**

Number of Participating Institutes of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2021: **16**

NIRF 2022:

Name of Institute	Category						Research
	Overall	University	Engineering	Management	Pharmacy	Architecture	
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184	43		20				39
NIT Hamirpur IR-E-U-0189			128			26	
Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management IR-E-U-0190		96	125		36		

Jaypee University of Information Technology IR-E-U-0186			138				
Indian Institute of Management Sirmaur IR-M-S-15911				69			

Number of Participating Institutes in India: **1875**

Number of Participating Institutes of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2022: **23**

NIRF 2023:

Name of Institute	Category						
	Overall	University	Engineering	Management	Pharmacy	Architecture	Agriculture and Allied Sectors
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184	73		33				
NIT Hamirpur IR-E-U-0189						28	
Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management IR-E-U-0190		73			41		
Jaypee University of Information Technology IR-E-U-0186							
Indian Institute of Management Sirmaur IR-M-S-15911				98			
Chaudhary Sarwan Kumar							14

Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishvavidyalaya IR-G-U-0179							
Dr. Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Solan IR-G-U-0181							17

Number of Participating Institutes in India: **2478**

Number of Participating Institutes of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2023: **21**

NIRF 2024:

Name of Institute	Category							
	Overall	University	Engineering	Management	Pharmacy	Architecture	Agriculture and Allied Sectors	Innovation
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184	72		31					8
NIT Hamirpur IR-E-U-0189						32		
Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management IR-E-U-0190	89	70	92		30			
Indian Institute of Management Sirmaur IR-M-S-15911				57				

Chaudhary Sarwan Kumar Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishvavidyalaya IR-G-U-0179							19	
Dr. Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Solan IR-G-U-0181							18	

Number of Participating Institutes in India: **2781**

Number of Participating Institutes of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2024: **22**

NIRF 2025:

Name of Institute	Category							
	Overall	Universities	Engineering	Management	Pharmacy	Law	Agriculture and allied sectors	Innovation
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184	58							
Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management Sciences IR-O-U-0190		69						
IIT Mandi IR-O-U-0184			26					
NIT Hamirpur			97					

IR-E-U-0189								
Indian Institute of Management Sirmaur IR-M-S-15911				51				
Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management Sciences IR-O-U-0190					44			
Himachal Pradesh National Law University, Shimla IR-L-U-1035						34		
National Institute of Technology Hamirpur IR-A-U-0189								
Dr. Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry IR-G-U-0181							20	
Chaudhary Sarwan Kumar Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishvavidyalaya IR-G-U-0179							29	

Indian Institute of Technology Mandi IR-I-U-0184								10
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Number of Participating Institutes in India: **4045**

Number of Participating Institutes of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2023: **31**

4.3 Section 2: Alignment with NEP 2020 Goals

The thematic analysis reveals that NIRF and NEP 2020 share certain collective priorities, such as improving institutional quality on various parameters like research outcomes, teaching effectiveness, students' choice, placements, and increasing inclusivity (Government of India, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2023). For example, NIRF's Outreach and Inclusivity parameter resonates with NEP's call for equitable access to higher education for underrepresented groups (Government of India, 2020). Similarly, Research and Professional Practice in NIRF parallels NEP's emphasis on innovation and research excellence (Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

However, there are also differences that are noticeable. NEP offers multidisciplinary and holistic education (Government of India, 2020), but the NIRF evaluation framework is still largely discipline-specific and research-focused (Mathew, 2021). NEP focuses on a multilingual system to promote the power of the language system in teaching and learning. NEP also focuses on life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience, and education in public services, which are not a part of the NIRF ranking yet. NIRF metrics give limited direct weight to these factors (Chattopadhyay, 2019).

Sr.No.	NEP 2020 Goals	NIRF Parameters	Alignment Level	Remarks / Gaps
1	Access & Equity (expanding HEI access, inclusivity, regional balance, disadvantaged groups)	Outreach & Inclusivity (OI) – weightage 10%	High	Direct overlap; both stress diversity, gender balance, and representation.
2	Quality Teaching & Learning (curriculum innovation, pedagogy, holistic & multidisciplinary education)	Teaching, Learning & Resources (TLR) – 30%	Partial	NIRF focuses on faculty ratio, student strength, facilities, but not pedagogy innovation or multidisciplinary approaches.
3	Research, Innovation & Knowledge Creation (increasing research output, innovation hubs, patents, PhD enrolment)	Research & Professional Practice (RP) – 30%	High	Strong overlap; both emphasize publications, projects, patents. NEP broader (research culture & innovation ecosystem).
4	Graduation Outcomes (employability, higher studies, skill-based learning)	Graduation Outcomes (GO) – 20%	Moderate	NIRF measures placements, exam results, higher studies; NEP also stresses vocational education and entrepreneurship which NIRF ignores.
5	Internationalization & Global Recognition (global collaborations, foreign students, academic reputation)	Perception (PR) – 10%	Partial	NIRF uses perception surveys (peers, employers), but NEP stresses global tie-ups, student/faculty mobility, international campuses.
6	Governance & Autonomy (institutional flexibility, decentralization, transparency, academic freedom)	Not measured	Low	Major NEP priority, but absent in NIRF parameters.
7	Holistic & Multidisciplinary Education (liberal arts, vocational integration, value-based education)	Not measured	Low	Big NEP goal; NIRF does not capture curricular reforms or multidisciplinary integration.
8	Regional & National Development (local engagement, vocational focus, rural outreach)	Outreach & Inclusivity (OI) – partly	Partial	NEP expects HEIs to contribute to local development; NIRF's OI is limited to demographics, not societal impact.

4.3 NEP GOALS

4.4 Section 3: Emerging Patterns

1. Dual-track growth: Institutions like IIT Mandi and Shoolini University showcased high-performance, research orientation, while HPU and NIT struggle.

2. Single-track gap: Few private institutions perform well in research but underperform in inclusivity.
3. Perception shortfall: Across all institutions in the state, perception scores remain low, limiting scores in peer perception.
4. Mismatch with policy: NEP objectives of equity and comprehensive learning are not correctly represented in NIRF parameters, which can be incorporated by NIRF to meet both ranking as well as NEP 2020 objectives.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the discussion is to shed light on and understand the findings of the study within a wide theoretical, policy, and institutional context in terms of ranking and policy. As mentioned in Table 4.1 presents the performance trends of key Himachal Pradesh institutions, comparative analysis 4.2, and alignment of NEP 2020 with NIRF parameters, this section will explore their deeper significance. It attempts to answer three questions:

1. How do the performances of Himachal Pradesh's institutions align with national patterns?
2. What is the policy-level significance of these outcomes under the NEP 2020 goals?
3. What strengths and weaknesses appear for higher education in Himachal Pradesh?

5.1 Separation in the Institutional track

The data shows a dual-track growth in the higher education sector in Himachal Pradesh:

- High-performance by the research-focused institutions like IIT Mandi, Shoolini University, showed a rapid growth in rankings, widely due to robust research outputs (RP) and employability outcomes (GO).
- Struggling institutions like HPU availed a position in the bandwidth of 51-100 under the state public universities category, but remain in lower tiers in other categories, restricted by weak research growth, limited scores in peer perception, and other limitations.

This divergence represents national trends, where top-notch institutions (IITs, IISc, IIMs) and robust private universities (e.g., Amity University, Shoolini University) dominate in rankings, while state universities languish (Chattopadhyay, 2019).

Interpretation: HEIs in Himachal Pradesh showed a mixed picture in the educational sector; a few top-quality institutions exist, a few are emerging in rankings, and most of the HEIs lack resources and support

5.2 The Research–Equity Trade-off

One of the evident findings was the reverse relationship between research productivity (RP) and inclusivity (OI):

- IIT Mandi and Shoolini University perform well in research but lag in outreach and inclusivity.
- HPU and other public universities were not able to perform well in research, but do well in inclusivity, serving students from rural and isolated backgrounds.

This shows a structural exchange in Indian higher education: Research-oriented institutions often stress global competitiveness over equity, whereas the state universities remain socially all-in but academically weaker.

From the perspective of NEP 2020, this is troublesome. The policy visualizes simultaneous quality and equity, but not one at the cost of the other.

Interpretation: For Himachal Pradesh, stabilizing research excellence with social inclusion is the major challenge.

5.3 The Perception Deficit

A reappearing weakness across all HEIs in Himachal Pradesh was the low Peer Perception (PR) scores. This aligns with literature suggesting that NIRF's perception parameter unequally favors top-notch and reputed institutions (e.g., IIT Bombay, DU, IISc), while hill-state institutions struggle to gain visibility (Agarwal, 2021).

Even IIT Mandi, in spite of rising performance in research, continues to lag in peer perception compared to older IITs. Shoolini University, in spite of innovative research, lacks the national brand recognition in comparison to larger private universities like Amity or Manipal.

Interpretation: A geographic disadvantage is faced by Himachal Pradesh institutions in establishing national visibility. Policy involvement is needed to enhance parameters like outreach, collaborations, and branding.

5.4 Gaps in Capturing NEP 2020 Goals

The analysis also disclosed misalignments between NIRF parameters and NEP 2020 goals:

- **Multidisciplinary:** NEP highlights integrated and holistic learning, whereas NIRF does not record this satisfactorily. Himachal Pradesh's institutions (especially IIT Mandi with its offering in liberal sciences initiatives) are pioneering this, but rankings do not reflect it, and it also has no special parameter for such offerings by institutions.
- **Digital Learning:** NEP 2020 highlights technology and ICT-enabled education; NIRF lacks parameters to assess online learning. Institutions like Shoolini University, which invested considerably in digital platforms such as 'Coursera', gained no ranking advantage.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** While Outreach Inclusivity exists as a parameter in NIRF ranking, it does not fully reflect gender parity, socio-economic mix, or regional drawback, all of which are critical for Himachal Pradesh.

Interpretation: The current NIRF framework stresses research and employability but underrepresents the NEP 2020 vision of inclusive, technology-driven, holistic education.

5.5 Structural Barriers for Himachal Institutions

Several structural drawbacks appear from the data:

1. **Geographical Constraints:** Remote locations reduce exposure, industry reach, and international collaborations.
2. **Funding Gaps:** State universities like HPU work under critical budgetary limitations with comparison to centrally funded IITs.
3. **Brain Drain:** Many top-performing students and a considerable number of youths from Himachal Pradesh prefer metropolitan institutions for exposure, which leads to a weak student quality at local universities.
4. **Dependence on Government Support:** NIT Hamirpur's stagnancy highlights dependence on government funding without internal innovation.

Interpretation: Without the structural mend and state-specific policies, Himachal Pradesh's higher education system will remain merged between top-notch performers and underfunded institutions.

5.6 Comparative Insights with National and Global Trends

When compared nationally:

- Himachal's trajectory reflects other hill states (Uttarakhand, Northeast), where one or two good-performing institutions glow but the majority of institutions struggle.

- Globally, small countries like Switzerland show that size is not a restriction if the policies unite research, equity, and internationalization effectively.

Interpretation: It is a learning for Himachal Pradesh from small but high-performing global players by considering and bringing light to international collaborations, digital learning, and inclusivity frameworks.

5.7 Policy-Level Suggestions

The findings have several policy suggestions:

1. **NIRF Reform:** More parameters are needed to gather data from institutions that can reflect NEP's goals, like multidisciplinary, digital learning, and equity.
2. **Targeted State Support:** State universities in Himachal Pradesh need greater investment for research infrastructure and faculty development.
3. **Balanced Incentives:** Policies must encourage both research excellence, such as seen in IIT Mandi/Shoolini University, and social inclusion, as visible in HPU.
4. **Brand Building:** Himachal's Higher Education System must work on its outreach, visibility, and perception.

6 Conclusion of Discussion

The discussion shows a contrary yet promising landscape:

- Institutions like IIT Mandi, Shoolini University in Himachal Pradesh, demonstrate research excellence and global competitiveness.
- At the same time, Institutions like HPU, NIT Hamirpur, that are state and centrally funded, reveal systemic frailty of underfunding, not good research, and a huge lack of peer perception.
- The NEP Goals, such as research, employability, are captured by the NIRF ranking framework, but certain NEP goals are neglected, such as digital and ICT-enabled learning, equity.

To truly align with NEP 2020, the gaps discussed in the paper must be bridged, NIRF must add certain parameters that reflect policy priorities, and Himachal Pradesh Higher Educational Institutions must invest in both inclusivity and excellence for better performances in ranking in the future.

7 . Recommendations

1. **Broaden NIRF Criteria** – Introduce parameters that measure community engagement, skill development, and societal impact, in line with NEP 2020's vision for holistic education (Government of India, 2020).
2. **Capacity Building for Institutions** – Provide training and resources to help smaller and rural institutions improve their data collection, research output, and participation in rankings (Kumar & Sharma, 2022).
3. **Policy-Driven Support** – The Himachal Pradesh government could establish state-level ranking or evaluation systems that align with NIRF but also consider regional challenges and priorities (Thakur, 2021).
4. **Encourage Collaborative Research** – Promote partnerships between top-ranked institutions and smaller colleges to enhance research capacity, faculty development, and infrastructure sharing (Hazelkorn, 2015).
5. **Integration of NEP Goals into Rankings** – Ensure that NIRF incorporates NEP's emphasis on multidisciplinary learning, technology integration, and equitable access as part of its evaluation criteria (Mathew, 2021).

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