

Are the Metrics being Gamed? A Closer Look at the Rise and Fall of Universities in NIRF 2024 Rankings

Private universities are doing much better than public universities. We explore the reasons behind it.

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The NIRF 2024 ranking shows some interesting trends in the standings of Indian universities compared to 2023. This article explores the factors contributing to these shifts in the rankings. Figure 1 highlights universities that experienced more than a 20% change in their 2024 rankings compared to 2023. On the left, we see institutions that have dropped significantly, while on the right, we see those that have shown striking improvement. We observe that, in general, private universities dominate when it comes to improvement in ranking, while many prominent public institutions, like IISERs & NITs, have experienced significant setbacks.

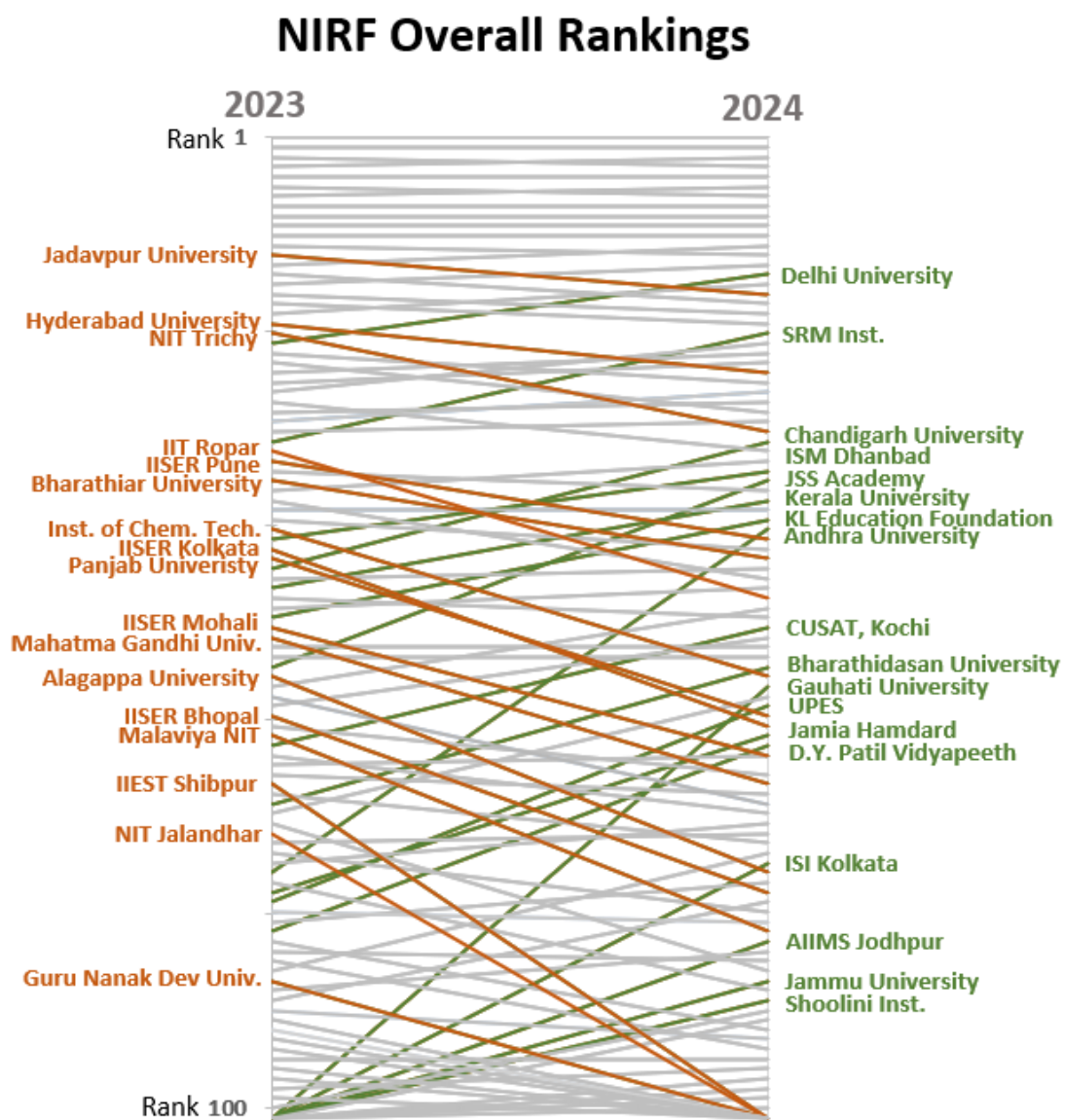


Fig 1: On the left, we see the universities with more than 20% drop in their rankings. On the right are the universities with more than 20% improvement in their rankings.

Figure 2 highlights the proportion of private & public universities that moved in the 2024 ranking. It's worth noting that private universities have seen significant improvement in the NIRF 2024 rankings. Of the 29 private universities that experienced changes in their rankings, 22 (76%) saw an improvement, while only 7 (24%) experienced a decline. In contrast, among the 70 public universities with ranking changes, 43 (61%) saw a decline, and only 27 (39%) showed improvement. This observation further solidifies that, at least on paper, private universities seem to be outperforming their public counterparts.

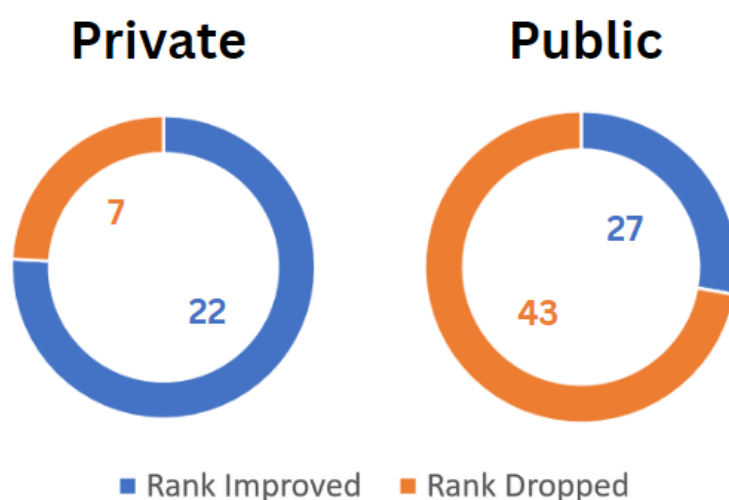
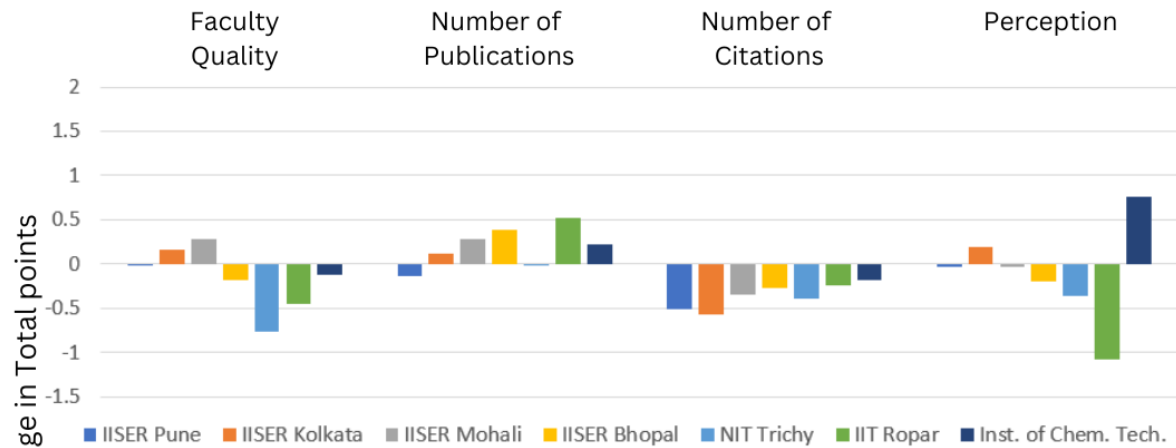


Fig 2: Proportion of private universities doing well is much higher than the ones doing badly. Is it a case of them performing well or gaming the research metrics?

But this also raises questions about the underlying factors driving these changes. Are private institutions genuinely improving, or some have found a way of gaming the research metrics? While we delve deeper into this question, one clear trend is the considerable drop in rankings for IISERs, which are public institutions. On the other hand, the universities that improved include a mix of private and public institutions. To understand these shifts, we examined parameter-wise data to identify which factors contributed most to the changes.

Figure 3 provides insights into the factors driving changes in the NIRF 2024 rankings and unveils a clear divide between private and public universities. Private universities that improved their rankings have excelled in research metrics, particularly in the number of publications and citations. However, this success possibly comes at the expense of reputation, with several institutions accused of gaming citations—a concern highlighted by reports published in international journals like *Nature* and *Science*. Public institutions like IISERs, NIT Trichy, and IIT Ropar have seen their rankings decline, primarily due to poor performance in these same research metrics. Despite their status as Institutes of National Importance, these universities have struggled to compete, possibly because they prioritize research quality over quantity. This focus on quality, while commendable, may be costing them in the rankings. The decline in citation counts and modest gains in publications have significantly impacted their positions, highlighting a broader issue in how research output is evaluated.

Universities whose Ranks dropped



Universities whose Ranks improved

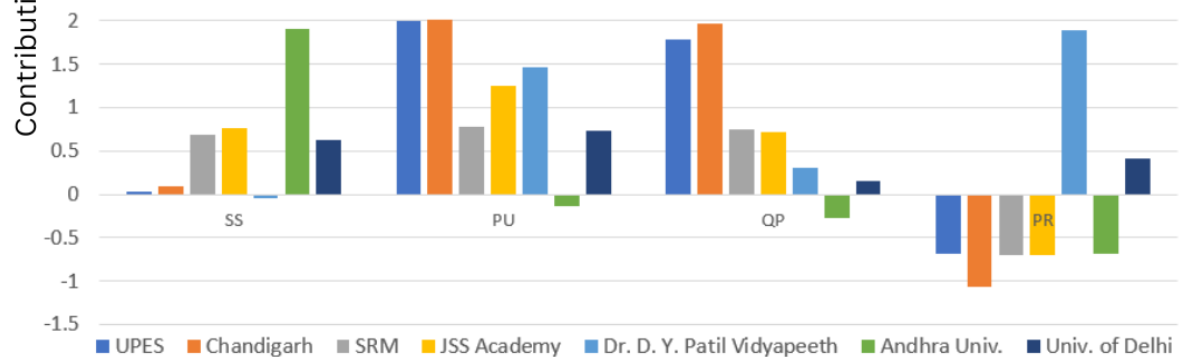


Fig 3: Parameter-wise analysis of colleges to ascertain what contributed to their rise and fall.

Figure 4 highlights the phenomenal growth in the number of publications by private universities. Compared to the modest increase seen at premier institutions like the IIT Bombay or IISc, this type of expansion by private universities seems quite perplexing. With repeated reports of research misconduct emerging from these institutions as mentioned earlier, one can't help but question whether this growth is organic or manufactured.

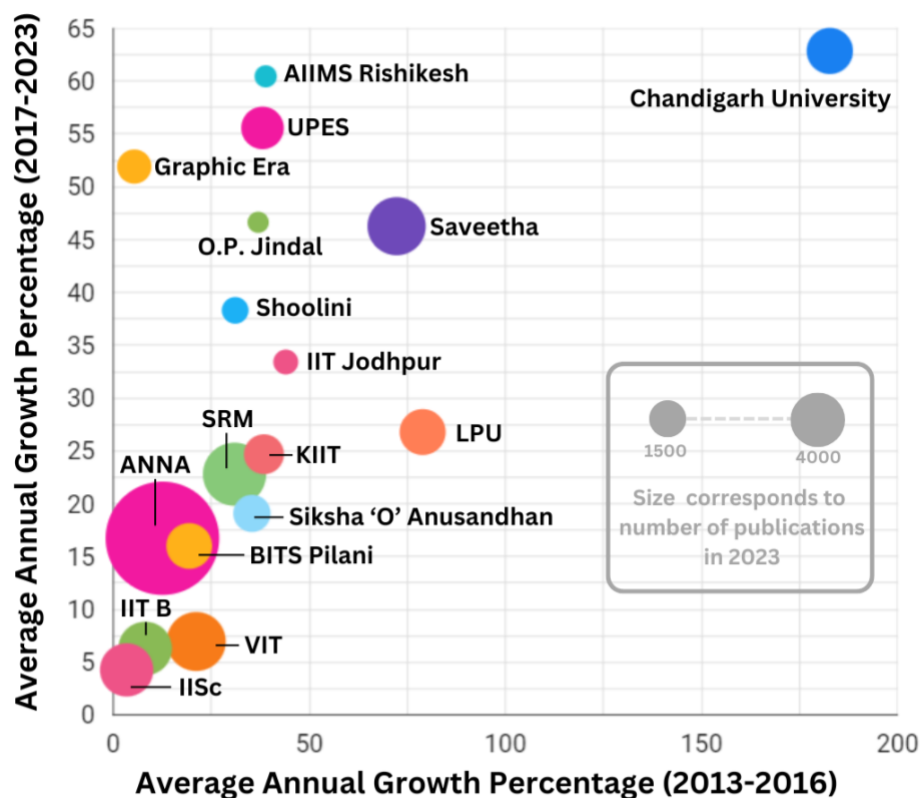


Fig 4: Proportion of private universities doing well is much higher than the ones doing badly. Is it a case of them performing well or gaming the research metrics?

Overall, the NIRF 2024 rankings point to a troubling trend: some universities are possibly gaming the NIRF rankings by manipulating the research metrics, which potentially have long-term harmful effects on India's scientific research landscape. As research misconduct becomes increasingly rampant in India, the emphasis on ranking parameters may be driving institutions to prioritize quantity and manipulation of metrics over quality, leading to a waste of the country's research potential and an influx of bogus papers in predatory journals.

In any case, there is little doubt that some universities have cracked the code to better rankings. Publish *en masse*, by hook or by crook.

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