

Why IISc is India's best, but lags among global peers

Teachers at the institute feel huge domestic demand puts Indian universities at a disadvantage

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On Wednesday, Indian Institute of Science (IISc) was placed at 13th position among the top universities in 42 emerging economies by UK-based Times Higher Education. Last month, IISc was also ranked the best among India universities for the third time by the government of India. But educationists are ambivalent about this feat as IISc doesn't figure in the Times' list of top 250 world universities. It stands at 190 in the 2018 QS World University Rankings.

The main reason behind its lower world ranking is believed to be its failure to produce Nobel laureates, which weigh high on institute's public perception among world's noted scientists and academicians. Incidentally Nobel Laureate CV Raman was the first director of IISc when it was set up in 1909 with the help of Jamsetji Tata and the then Maharaja of Mysore in Bengaluru.

The institute reputation has only grown in the past one century and besides the long traffic jams, the start-up capital of the country, Bengaluru, is also known for one more thing -- the IISc. When the serpentine queue of cars and honks are replaced by bicycles, lush trees and cricket chirps, it is a signal that you have arrived at the sprawling campus of IISc.

The university follows a typical American University model of tenure track, keeping faculty on its toes. Initially when a faculty joins, he or she is put on a tenure track, which means the appointment is contractu-



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al and it remains so until a person is fully assessed for a cycle of six years. When a person reaches a term of six years, the university sets up the process of evaluation of work both for confirming tenure and promotion which happens through a peer review process and not through interviews, usually carried out at the elite Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institute of Management (IIMs).

"This injects robustness in the system which makes the faculty productive," says an IISc professor. The university also has a teacher-student ratio of one is to eight, one of the finest in the world.

According to Times Rankings, IISc student teacher ratio was 8.4 and for the world's number one University of Oxford it was 11.2. For University

of Cambridge, the second best institution, it was 10.9

Then why is an institution of excellence like IISc, which was founded to create world-class scientists and engineers to help build Indian economy, not being ranked as a world-class college?

"The kind of matrix for ranking that global frameworks follow has an inherent bias towards Ivy League colleges," reasons another professor at IISc, requesting anonymity.

Faculty at IISc was of the view that there is a club culture when it comes to university rankings. They say the work done in the Indian context is under-reported by foreign journals, which counts in during ranking. "It's often the case that our work is not understood by the editors, who

mostly belong to developed nations," the person adds.

The difficulty that IISc researchers face is that their work is often in the context of a developing nation. "There is always a challenge to get our work published in the best of the journals as there is a contextual difference. What is publishable for them may not have any usefulness for us, and what is useful in our context may not find space in the foreign journals," says a faculty member at IISc.

The researcher points fingers at the government saying if it wants institutions to excel, they need to be given full freedom and paid respectfully like the top colleges in the US, UK or Singapore are. "This way you can attract the brightest of talent," says the researcher.

The parameters of rankings

also give a lot of weightage to the percentage of international students but Indian universities have a different opinion.

IISc teachers feel there's not enough market for foreign institutions in their own countries to run their programs. Having international students is important for them to thrive. However, for country like India or China, there's a huge domestic demand which needs to be fulfilled and that puts Indian universities at a disadvantage.

IISc alumni association head M P Ravindra explains that since IISc has started benchmarking itself internationally and nationally on such parameters only recently, it is also a reason for its low global ranking.

Surendera Prasad former director of IIT-Delhi and the man behind India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) says a culture of organising data among Indian universities has set in since they started ranking them three years ago. "Besides other criteria, public perception plays an important role when institutes are ranked world over," he says.

Brand experts says Indian institutes such as IISc and IITs need to market their brands to break into top 100.

"IISc has emerged to be the novel brand in India but the global environment is a highly competitive. There are overseas organisations which are very aggressive and have 24x7 public relations programmes which talk about every small thing that they do, including publishing journals, and showcasing their works," says brand consultant Harish Bijoor.