

# Why BITS Pilani withdrew from THE Rankings

THIS FOLLOWS SIMILAR MOVES BY SORBONNE, UTRECHT, ZURICH, AND SIX TOP IITs

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IN A MOVE that signals a growing rift between India's elite technical institutions and global ranking bodies, BITS Pilani has withdrawn from the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings for 2026. Speaking on the decision, Prof V Ramgopal Rao, group vice-chancellor of BITS Pilani, characterised the ranking methodology as a "black box" that failed to align with verifiable academic and research capacity of Indian institutions.

The decision marks a milestone in a journey that began in 2020, when Prof Rao led a high-profile boycott of THE Rankings alongside several IITs. While those initial concerns centred on the opacity of reputation surveys, Prof Rao said that the problem had become structural.

## Research metrics

At the heart of the withdrawal was THE's 'Research Quality' pillar, which accounts for 30% of an institution's overall score. This pillar, along with its sub-indicators — citation impact, research strength, excellence, and influence — is derived from citation behaviour.

"When such outcomes are difficult to reconcile with accepted academic realities, it raises questions about how research scores are being constructed," Prof Rao said. He pointed to a glaring anomaly: the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), regarded as India's premier research



institute, appears lower on global research quality indicators than much younger Indian institutions.

Another grievance is self-citations, which are included in the data used for the World University Rankings. While this doesn't imply academic impropriety, Prof Rao said it makes citation-heavy composites sensitive to publication volume and citation networks, rather than actual research like funding strength or translational impact.

## Perception is vague

The issue of 'perception' remains a point of contention. In a hyper-connected world, Prof Rao said visibility can be manufactured quickly through amplified networks without reflecting academic depth. When perception is weighted heav-

ily, it allows reputation to outpace substance, rewarding institutions that prioritise immediate exposure over long-term outcomes.

Prof Rao highlighted CSRankings as a model of transparency. Unlike THE, CSRankings doesn't use citation-derived indicators; instead, it ranks institutions based on publications in highly regarded venues. "The data is transparent," Prof Rao said, noting that BITS Pilani "performed very well in CSRankings."

## National frameworks

Prof Rao praised the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) as a credible alternative. "Institutions know exactly what is being measured and why," he said, citing NIRF's transparency and public disclosure of data sources.



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## Potential domino effect?

As BITS Pilani joins the ranks of non-participating IITs — as well as European universities like Zurich, Sorbonne, Utrecht — the question is: would more universities follow? Prof Rao believes that more institutions would ask whether rankings align with how they manage academic performance. Where that alignment is missing, universities might choose selective engagement.

When asked what BITS Pilani lost by withdrawing, Prof Rao was blunt: "Primarily, visibility within that ranking system." But he added that academic standards, research capability, student quality remain untouched. "Institutions are ultimately judged by their academic culture and outcomes," he said. "Not by inclusion in any single table."