

Why 'world-ranked' private varsities are failing the salary test

ACCORDING TO TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION RANKINGS, SAVEETHA AND LOVELY ARE BETTER THAN IITs AND BITS, BUT SALARY OUTCOMES ARE FAR LOWER

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IN OUR LAST report ('Are India's private universities hacking global rankings?' tinyurl.com/2p9zkr94), we exposed the '75-point anomaly' — the large gap where private Indian universities have 'Research Quality' scores rivalling Oxford, but their 'Research Environment' remains in the basement.

Comparing their Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings (tinyurl.com/y3s8zrzm) with salary data from India's NIRF 2025 (National Institutional Ranking Framework) reveals another shocker: UG 4-year student salaries at some of these 'top private universities in THE' are five times lower than THE's 'lower-ranked' IITs.

Shoolini vs IIT Guwahati

Shoolini University of Biotechnology and Management Sciences of Himachal was ranked in the 401-500 band by THE, far higher than IIT Guwahati's 801-1000 (2025), and yet median salary at IIT Guwahati was ₹19.48 lakh (2023-24 AY), as compared to Shoolini's ₹3.84 lakh.

Saveetha vs BITS Pilani

Similarly, BITS Pilani, ranked in 801-1000 band by THE, offered a median salary of ₹18 lakh (2023-24 AY), but the 'far superior' Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences (351-400 band) could manage just ₹4.72 lakh.

Lovely vs IIT Gandhinagar

IIT Gandhinagar (1001-1200

band) offered a median salary of ₹14 lakh (2023-24 AY) to its students, but the 'better' Lovely Professional University (501-600) could manage just ₹8 lakh.

"Salary data often acts as a market-driven lie detector," an education analyst told FE. "If these private universities were truly world-class and superior to the IITs — as shown in THE — industry would be paying a premium for their graduates."

What about older IITs?

Although 'older IITs' such as Delhi, Bombay, Madras continue their boycott of THE rankings, second-generation IIT Guwahati (it boycotted initially, but rejoined) and IIT Indore now find themselves trailing behind private institutes that barely crack domestic top 50.

"Shoolini is ranked nearly 400 spots higher than IIT Guwahati globally, yet its average graduate earns nearly five times less," the analyst said. "This discrepancy exists because global bodies like THE heavily weight 'citations', a metric being gamed through citation cartels, while ignoring job outcomes."

BITS Pilani withdrawal

In January, BITS Pilani joined the older IITs in withdrawing from THE Rankings. Prof V Ramgopal Rao, former director of IIT Delhi (2016-21) and current group vice-chancellor of BITS Pilani, described the system as an opaque "black box."

"The concern has evolved," Prof Rao noted. While the 2020 IIT boycott focused on opaque reputation



While certain global rankings favour citation volume, the Indian job market prioritises actual talent

RANK VERSUS REALITY

Institution	THE rank (2026)	NIRF rank (2025)	UG 4-year median salary (NIRF)
IIT Guwahati	801-1000*	8	₹19.48 lakh (2023-24 AY)
IIT Indore	501-600	12	₹18 lakh (2023-24 AY)
BITS Pilani	801-1000	11	₹14 lakh (2023-24 AY)
IIT Gandhinagar	1001-1200	25	₹8 lakh (2023-24 AY)
Lovely (LPU)	501-600	48	₹4.72 lakh (2023-24 AY)
Saveetha (SIMATS)	351-400	45	₹4.72 lakh (2023-24 AY)
Shoolini	401-500	69	₹3.84 lakh (2023-24 AY)

*IIT Guwahati's THE rank is from 2025 edition, THE is Times Higher Education ranking (The UK), NIRF is from India, AY is Academic Year

surveys — or perception — the issue is now embedded in the 'Research Quality' pillar, which accounts for 30% of the overall score. All four of its sub-indicators (citation impact,

research strength, research excellence, and research influence) are derived from citation behaviour.

This leads to absurdities.

"The Indian Institute of Science

(IISc), widely regarded as India's premier research institution, appears low on global research quality indicators compared to much younger institutions in India," Prof Rao said.

He pointed to a critical loophole: THE's documentation confirms that self-citations are included in their data. Without excluding these, citation-heavy composites become sensitive to citation networks and mandatory undergraduate publishing practices that do not align with actual research maturity.

Prof Rao said that BITS Pilani's decision to withdraw followed a multi-year internal assessment that found THE outcomes impossible to reconcile with independently verifiable indicators, such as research funding, consultancy income, and industry engagement — all of which are captured transparently by NIRF, but possibly ignored by THE's "Research Quality" algorithm.

THE admits 'gaming'

Following our initial report, Phil Barty, chief global affairs officer at THE, acknowledged the problem on LinkedIn. While defending the use of 17 performance metrics, Barty admitted: "There are clearly some outliers among the research quality metrics, and we're looking very closely at potential gaming and research integrity challenges."

Is NIRF immune?

While Prof Rao described NIRF as a "sound foundational architecture" because of its transparent methodology and public disclosure of data, he warned that institutions may choose "selective, principled engagement" with rankings, rather than automatic participation.

In fact, Prof Rao co-authored a

paper — *Unpacking Inconsistencies in the NIRF rankings* — published in the journal *Current Science* in 2024. It raised concerns around reliability of rankings, flagging issues like the 'subjective' nature of the 'perception' parameter that is included in NIRF, inadequate transparency in methodology, and reliance on data that is self-reported by institutions.

Confirming this fact, the education analyst we talked to added that even in NIRF, private players are accused of 'data inflation'. Unlike public IITs subject to CAG audits, private universities rely on self-reporting. Allegations of 'phantom faculty' — listing the same professors across multiple departments — and the rigging of 'perception' scores through massive marketing budgets remain big concerns.

The final verdict

Unfortunately, the tragedy of the 'citation cartel' is the misinformation sold to students and parents. When a private university uses its 'top-500 global status' to justify premium tuition, it is selling a narrative that neither the Indian government (via NIRF) nor the job market (via salaries) supports.

As India's education sector matures, the gap between 'ranked quality' and 'actual quality' is becoming a chasm. Until global ranking bodies address citation manipulation and perception inflation, these leaderboards will remain a scoreboard for those who know how to play the system, rather than those who excel in the classroom.