

Understanding the Institutions of Eminence  
Scheme of India:  
A Critical Analysis of its Role in Building  
World-Class Universities

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## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to understand the Institutions of Eminence (IoE) scheme, India's only Academic Excellence Initiative, and analyse its role in building world-class universities (WCUs) in India. The study explores the meaning of IoE and its impact through the perspectives of senior leaders at these institutions. Furthermore, the study assesses whether the benefits provided by the scheme are adequate to establish WCUs in India.

The study employed qualitative methods and conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants to understand the complex landscape of transformative potential and persistent challenges. The findings indicate a clear distinction between private and public IoEs in terms of autonomy and funding. While the scheme has catalysed significant changes, including enhanced prestige, increased financial resources, and greater academic freedom, institutions continue to face challenges in governance and internationalisation.

The study highlights a misalignment between promised institutional autonomy and ongoing regulatory constraints. It also emphasises institutional culture, visionary leadership, and human capital as the crucial drivers in the quest for world-class status. There are significant implementation gaps, deriving from hurdles including the absence of sustained support mechanisms, lack of coordination among higher education agencies, and persistence of an audit culture.

While the IoE scheme has initiated important changes in India's higher education landscape, achieving world-class status requires a more holistic approach. The study recommends addressing implementation gaps, providing differentiated support to institutions, fostering internationalisation, and developing contextually relevant measures of excellence.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEIs	Academic Excellence Initiatives
AICTE	All India Council for Technical Education
CUET	Central University Entrance Test
EEC	Empowered Expert Committee
GoI	Government of India
GUR	Global University Rankings
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HEFA	Higher Education Financing Agency
IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
IoE	Institution of Eminence
MoE	Ministry of Education
NAAC	National Assessment and Accreditation Council
NEP	National Education Policy
NTA	National Testing Agency
UGC	University Grants Commission
WCUs	World-Class Universities

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

India has the second-largest higher education system globally, with 1,168 Universities, 45,473 Colleges, and over 12,000 Standalone Institutions (Ministry of Education, 2021). This accounted for an enrolment of 43.3 million students in the year 2021 alone. Still, none of these Indian universities achieved world-class status or ranked in the top 100. Meanwhile, India has ambitions to become a global knowledge superpower. It has several advantages to becoming a superpower, such as a high percentage of young people, the prevalence of the English language in higher education, and a few high-quality institutions. In this regard, in 2017, India launched the Institutions of Eminence Scheme to build world-class institutions by elevating 20 existing institutions that can contribute to the ambition of knowledge power. Thus, this study aims to contribute to understanding the only academic excellence initiative from the viewpoint of institutions' leaders.

The study examines the complexity of the pursuit of excellence, policy implementation, and institutional transformation in the Indian context. While numerous studies have examined Indian higher education, very few have focused on specific policy initiatives. This study, therefore, attempts to understand the journey of the select institutions as they strive for global recognition through the IoE scheme and how they benefit from the scheme in order to become top-ranked institutions.

Previous studies have suggested that excellence initiatives in higher education are deeply rooted in local, national, social, and political dynamics (Deem et al., 2008). These dynamics make the pursuit of world-class status a highly complex endeavour. It requires accommodating diverse institutional forms and approaches. Altbach and Salmi (2011) note that developing WCUs is more complex than increasing research output or climbing global rankings.

The study focuses on addressing the following research questions to better understand these dynamics within the Indian context:

RQ1: What does it mean to be an Institution of Eminence?

RQ2: How does the Institution of Eminence status and scheme contribute to the development of world-class universities in India?

The study delves into the broader discussion on excellence initiatives in higher education to address these research questions. It provides insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with striving for world-class status and relates this to the Indian context. This sheds light on the complex interplay between national policy, institutional autonomy, and aspirations in developing world-class universities in India. Additionally, it contributes to the broader discourse on academic excellence initiatives.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter draws on the literature and studies about world-class universities and global university rankings to develop a contextual understanding of the phenomena. The first section of this chapter considers the academic excellence initiatives across multiple countries, and the subsequent sections two and three focus on global university rankings and WCUs. Section four of the chapter focuses on the literature on the Indian context regarding WCUs and the IoE.

Upon searching within Scopus and JSTOR, only two papers specifically related to the IoE were found. Therefore, I began with search terms like “world-class universities in India”, “Institution of Eminence”, and “global university rankings in India.” Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were accessed for the review, in addition to the Bodleian Library catalogue SOLO online search engine. Since there are limited studies analysing the IoE scheme, I also consulted grey literature, including opinion pieces, newspaper articles, and editorials. These sources were found through Google News or specific news websites.

### 2.1. ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE INITIATIVES

In the last three decades, higher education (HE) has undergone significant disruptions, primarily driven by globalisation (Marginson & Wende, 2007; R. Yang, 2003). Globalisation has altered the relationship between HEIs, the market, and the state. It is further intertwined with the economic evolution from agricultural to industrial and, subsequently, knowledge-based economies. According to UNESCO (2005) knowledge has emerged as a foundation of contemporary economic growth. Thus, the progress of nations is greatly influenced by higher education.

In higher education, research universities are crucial in training professionals, researchers, and scientists and generating and disseminating new knowledge to drive innovation within the country (World Bank, 2002). The two elements are intricately linked—the economy is based on knowledge, and research universities contribute the discoveries and innovations that make the economy flourish (Yudkevich et al., 2023). This

importance places higher education, particularly research universities, in a prominent position on national policy agendas.

With the increased focus on research universities, challenges have also emerged, notably increased competition for talent among faculty and students (Salmi et al., 2023). Talented faculty are crucial as they enhance the capacity of the institution in all spheres: “cooperative projects, competition for grants, raising donations, and drawing foreign students” (Marginson, 2006, p. 5). The increased competition among universities for resources and talent has led to the emergence of global university rankings (GURs) (Altbach et al., 2023). Furthermore, these rankings have impacted HE systems worldwide, prompting many nations and university leaders to join the global prestige race and pressuring policymakers to launch new national programs, such as Academic Excellence Initiatives (AEIs) (Hazelkorn, 2009; Salmi, 2009; Salmi et al., 2023).

The earlier AEIs, like those in China (1995) and South Korea (1999), were driven by internal factors and reflected long-term strategic goals related to economic growth and the necessity to foster human capital. Later, with the emergence of GURs, notably the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003, AEIs became heavily influenced by the better performance of leading American and British universities (Salmi, 2016, 2021). The number of excellence initiatives has significantly increased since the emergence of GURs. Salmi's (2016) comparison of the two periods, 1989 and 2004 to 2005 and 2015, reveals significant growth in AEIs from 13 to 37, respectively.

In 2017, the Government of India launched the Institutes of Eminence (IoE) Scheme with the goal of achieving 20 Indian institutions ranked among the top 500 globally within ten years and eventually reaching the top 100. Similarly, in 2015, China implemented the Double First-Class University Plan with the goal of enhancing its leading universities to achieve global excellence by 2050 (Q. Liu et al., 2019). The Russian government's 2013 Global Competitiveness Enhancement Program sought to include universities among the top 100 globally (Yudkevich et al., 2023).

## Common Characteristics among AEIs

AEIs are government-funded programs that offer institutional support and financial assistance to a select group of universities. While they vary in design, objectives, funding levels, and the number of institutions involved, AEIs share several key characteristics.

First, they involve significant additional investment from national governments (Altbach et al., 2023; Deem et al., 2008; Salmi & Froumin, 2013; Salmi, 2009). Figure 1 presents the additional investment by different countries. The numbers do not strictly compare like with like, considering that the total duration of the AEIs varies.

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The figure was sourced at Yudkevich, M., Altbach, P. G., & Salmi, J. (Eds.). (2023). *Academic Star Wars: Excellence Initiatives in Global Perspective*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14601.001.0001>

The second characteristic is accelerated internationalisation – attracting top talent and fostering international research collaborations (Knight, 2015a). The internationalisation of HEIs is multifaceted, encompassing various dimensions such as student mobility, faculty exchange, research partnerships, and curriculum development (Wit & Hunter, 2015). Internationalisation leads to visibility at the global level.

The third characteristic is the strategies adopted to establish world-class universities. Salmi (2009) describes three strategies: creating new institutions, upgrading existing ones, and merging HEIs. Two major strategies have been adopted by various nations. Countries like Taiwan, Russia, Denmark, and France have implemented merger strategies to varying extents. France, in particular, has seen significant mergers within its AEI framework, resulting in comprehensive universities achieving critical mass for scientific research (Salmi et al., 2023). On the other hand, India, China, and Germany have focused on elevating their existing universities.

## 2.2. GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

AEIs are customarily stipulated as the desire to improve the universities' global rankings, or benchmarking against top global universities (Deem et al., 2008; Marginson, 2007; Yudkevich et al., 2023). The rankings measure a limited aspect of academic institutions—mainly research (Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021; Yudkevich et al., 2016). However, they have significantly reshaped higher education systems worldwide by influencing government policies, institutional behaviour, and strategic priorities (Benner, 2020; Hazelkorn, 2015). Policymakers and the public often view these rankings as crucial indicators of success and justification for allocating resources to AEIs (Esposito & Stark, 2019). For instance, in 2011, the University Grants Commission (UGC) in India announced that universities were allowed to collaborate with foreign universities ranked in the top 500 (Downing & Ganotice, 2016). Later, in 2023, UGC released the regulations for setting up foreign HEIs in India, the only eligibility criteria for these institutions are to be in the top 500 in global rankings. The “league table” format has increased the emphasis on comparison and intensified both international and national competitive pressures (Marginson & Wende, 2007, p.308). However, these rankings, while selling international visibility, often overlook the essential aspects of a university's objectives (Hazelkorn, 2018; Rauhvargers, 2013).

Globally, the most influential rankings include the ARWU by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, first introduced in 2003, and the THE-QS rankings, initially published in 2004. QS and THE later split, and each now has its own rankings. Each ranking has its own distinctive methodology and focuses.

The benefits of these rankings are that they offer information about diverse institutions presented in a simple manner to various stakeholders, including students, educators, policymakers, and others, although validity is contested (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson & Wende, 2007). High rankings also attract top talent, both students and faculty, domestically and internationally, further enhancing the institution's reputation and attracting additional funding (Dill & Soo, 2005). Furthermore, rankings influence governments to prioritise quality and global standards, potentially leading to the establishment or development of WCUs (Cremonini et al., 2013). However, despite the usefulness of these ranking systems, critical concerns such as bias, incompleteness, validity, and authenticity have made many in the academic community sceptical about them.

### ***Bias and Incompleteness in Rankings***

Marginson & Wende (2007) emphasise that all ranking systems are inherently incomplete and biased. According to Marginson (2007a), biases include “favouring of English-language countries and comprehensive universities in all the main ranking systems and the favouring of science-based research-intensive universities” (p. 91). In addition, because as noted they serve varying purposes and notions of quality, this in itself leads to biases and exclusions. The arbitrary weightage of indicators and the simplification of the complexity of higher education in a single league table, leave the readers with a partial and subjective judgement without them being aware of this (Harvey, 2008; Usher & Savino, 2006).

Though these rankings claim to evaluate universities holistically, no ranking can encompass all the objectives of higher education from all stakeholders' perspectives (Marginson, 2007a). They often measure research and reputation (see Table 1) and equate them with the overall quality of the institution. Teaching is also an important aspect of higher education, but the quality of teaching is often equated with research quality through research-dominated measures or with the student-faculty ratio. However, there is no or little relation between teaching and research. Astin's (1996) study identifies a negative correlation between teaching and research. Dill and Soo (2005) suggest that “teaching and research appear to be more or less independent activities” (p. 507).

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

The figure was sourced at THE (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>), QS (<https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings>) and ARWO (<https://www.shanghairanking.com/rankings>) official websites

### *Validity and Authenticity Concerns*

Reputational surveys are a common component of GURs, but their validity is often questioned (Altbach, 2012). These surveys involve peers and experts being asked to rank departments, institutions, or programs based on their perceived excellence. Altbach (2012) argues that there are variations in how respondents are selected, ranging from careful selection from appropriate peers to seemingly arbitrary choices. Furthermore, pre-existing perceptions, name recognition, and marketing efforts also influence these surveys, hindering the objective assessment of institutional quality (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011).

QS and Times Higher Education use ranking to promote their services and cannot be trusted to provide reliable data (Ashwin, 2020). Research by Chirikov (2021) reveals a correlation between universities with frequent contracts with rankers and increases in their rankings, irrespective of institutional changes. The distortions in the rankings are due to the self-serving bias of the rankers, which benefits both the rankers and the universities seeking prestige. Universities, for instance, have employed ranking managers to offer advice on improving the positioning of the institutions (Hazelkorn, 2015), while in India, the government engaged in direct conversations with both THE and QS to enhance its global ranking (Nanda, 2013; Pushkar, 2014). This interaction between universities and rankers raises questions of conflict of interest and may compromise the trustworthiness of rankings.

Despite the fact that numerous universities worldwide have enhanced their research capabilities in the last two decades, there are indications that academic excellence encouraged by these rankings distracts universities from advancing in various vital aspects, including scientific integrity, social equality, the inclusion of minority groups, and environmental sustainability (Salmi, 2021). Therefore, scholars argue that since global university rankings significantly influence the perception of higher education worldwide, engaging in the discourse surrounding them may be more constructive than avoiding it (Marginson & Wende, 2007).

### 2.3. WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

Countries are eager to establish WCUs through AElS to attain global recognition. According to Salmi et al. (2023), the WCUs concept, which has gained traction, has come to signify the aim of building capability to participate in global higher education by generating cutting-edge scientific knowledge, patents, and other “knowledge products” (p. 229).

What is a “world-class university” has been widely debated and remains complex. Altbach (2004) famously remarked concerning WCUs that “no one knows what a world-class university is”; however, everyone “refers to the concept” (p. 21). Over the two decades, “world-class universities” have been primarily used to describe research universities with a global reputation, exceptional talent, extraordinary research performance, abundant resources, and effective governance (Altbach, 2004; Benner, 2020; Salmi, 2009, 2016).

Wang et al. (2013) extend this definition by emphasising the role of WCUs in producing transformational research outputs and enhancing national competitiveness in the knowledge-based economy. Similarly, Alden and Lin (2004) highlight that a world-class university possesses an international reputation for teaching and world leaders and attracts high-calibre international visitors. Salmi (2016) also underscores the importance of international recognition in defining a world-class university.

Despite the diverse interpretations, the most prevalent definition centres on being “commonly regarded as one of the best in the world.” A recurring theme across all the

understandings of WCUs is the emphasis on “international renown,” often assessed through global rankings.

### **Characteristics of World-Class Universities**

The literature on WCUs identifies several key characteristics essential for achieving and maintaining this status. Altbach (2004) suggests that WCUs exhibit research excellence research, stimulating environment, academic freedom, internal self-governance, and adequate funding and facilities. These attributes create an environment conducive to high-quality academic output and innovation.

Alden and Lin (2004) further expand on these characteristics and elaborate on these attributes, highlighting WCUs as leveraging their research capabilities, having a unique standing and specialisation, fostering original concepts, and creating acknowledged basic and applied research by peers. They emphasise the importance of a strong financial foundation from diverse sources of funds to support high-quality research and educational environments. Other scholars, Deem et al. (2008), and Lee (2013) identify additional characteristics such as a positive worldview and vision, emphasis on university autonomy, a stimulating environment, effective governance, organisational cohesion and leadership, recruitment of highly qualified talent, and collaboration opportunities with other organisations both domestically and internationally.

Salmi (2009) provides a comprehensive framework by describing three complementary sets of factors critical for becoming a WCU: high concentration of talent (students and faculty members), abundant resources, and favourable governance without bureaucratic encumbrances. According to him, merely possessing these elements in abundance is insufficient; these factors’ optimal combination and interaction are essential for true world-class status.

## Considerations and Critiques

WCUs bring prestige to nations and significantly contribute to the knowledge economy. However, it is crucial for nations to recognise the associated risks and challenges before pursuing the establishment of such institutions. Scholars often argue that the “world-class university” concept conflicts with the broader goal of expanding higher education access. According to Tilak (2016), prioritising elite institutions could undermine efforts toward equitable higher education expansion, particularly in developing countries. At the same time, Benner (2020) argues that WCUs legitimise competitiveness and perpetuate inequalities within the global higher education system.

Universities, while truly international in their professional nomenclature and disciplinary structure, are closely tied to national conditions and concerns (Benner, 2020; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). The emphasis of WCUs on research and internationalisation may overshadow their contributions within their own countries. This often results in an overemphasis on research output, neglecting other essential aspects, such as quality teaching and inclusivity (Deem et al., 2008). Furthermore, this focus excludes institutions that primarily admit undergraduate students (Altbach & Salmi, 2011) and sends the erroneous message that teaching quality is not as important as research productivity.

The pursuit of world-class status can exacerbate existing inequalities within higher education systems. Highly selective admissions and the concentration of resources in elite institutions can perpetuate elitism and hinder access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). Institutions like the IITs prioritise academic excellence but contribute to the marginalisation of other institutions within India’s higher education landscape due to their extremely low acceptance rates, which enables them to centre on themselves a very high level and partial monopolisation of institutional prestige.

## 2.4. INDIA'S QUEST FOR WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES: THE INSTITUTIONS OF EMINENCE SCHEME

India's higher education system has undergone significant evolution since independence. With 1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges, over 12,000 standalone institutions, and 43.3 million enrolled students, the Indian higher education system is vast and diverse (Ministry of Education, 2021). Before we consider the literature on Institutions of Eminence, this section begins with a brief introduction to India's Higher Education Landscape and Governance to better understand the terrain in which IoEs operate and navigate the complexity of the education landscape.

According to Varghese (2022), after independence in 1947, India initially adopted a strategy to support self-reliant development through the public sector. Through this approach, India established specialised universities/institutions in agriculture, medicine, technology, and management. Later, in 1976, education became part of the concurrent list, allowing both central and state governments to manage it.

After the 1970s, higher education in India witnessed a dynamic and rapid expansion from 2001. The number of universities surged by 660 between 2001 and 2019, primarily through the establishment of private universities (Varghese, 2022). The Amban-Birla Report of 2000 suggested that private universities should be established in India (Government of India [GoI], 2000). While the central Parliament could not enact the "Private Universities Act," several States enacted it, introducing private universities as a new expansion aspect.

The expansion of higher education has resulted in a diverse ecosystem of institutions with their own category of establishment processes and governance structures. Out of 1,168 universities, India has 153 Institutions of National Importance (INIs) and 53 central universities established by "Acts of Parliament" and funded through UGC or central government. There are 423 State Public Universities established by the "Acts of State Legislature", and the state government funds them. While 391 State Private Universities are also established through the Acts of State Legislature, they are mostly sponsored by societies, trusts, or companies. In addition to these categories, there is another category,

“Deemed to be University”, whose performance is considered at par with universities. There are 124 Deemed-to-be Universities established or granted status under Section 3 of the UGC Act, 1956. These three approaches have largely established public and private universities in India.

The primary distinction between public and private universities lies in their sources of funding. Public universities are funded by the government, whereas private universities are sponsored/funded by societies, trusts, or companies. However, private institutions may receive “financial assistance” if they meet the criteria of Section 2(f) and are considered qualified to receive financial support under Section 12(B) of the UGC Act, 1956.

### ***Regulation and Governance***

Indian higher education is primarily regulated by two main agencies: UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), in addition to other professional councils. To evaluate the quality and performance of HEIs, India has the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), along with other agencies such as the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) for technical education.

UGC has two primary functions: providing grants to HEIs and establishing, coordinating, and upholding the standards of university education in India. Meanwhile, the AICTE oversees accrediting technical institutions and determining, creating, and upholding norms and standards for technical education. Various Professional Councils (PCs) regulate specific fields of professional education, such as the Bar Council of India for law and the Medical Council of India for medicine. There are 16 such regulatory bodies. Despite these regulatory bodies, India still faces challenges in maintaining institutional quality. In 1994, the UGC established NAAC to assess and accredit institutions to overcome the challenge of quality. Although NAAC accreditation is voluntary, the government encourages institutions to seek accreditation by making it a mandatory criterion for various schemes and benefits.

The quality and standards of higher education are primarily controlled by the central government through regulatory bodies, even though education is the responsibility of the state and central. According to Tilak (2017), the state governments are only responsible for

implementing policies formulated by the central government and have minimal influence in policy making. There is an overlap in powers between central and state departments and confusion among regulatory agencies that further complicate the functioning of HEIs. In many cases, courts have had to intervene, and their judgments become the guiding factors for regulating Indian higher education. This complex landscape of higher education in India, with its diverse institutions and regulatory challenges, highlights the need for a strategic approach to elevate the quality and global standing of Indian universities.

While the system has expanded significantly, questions remain about its ability to compete globally and produce cutting-edge research and innovation. As India aims to solidify its position as a global economic and knowledge superpower, the necessity for world-class universities becomes increasingly apparent. The following section will explore why India needs world-class universities and how initiatives like the Institutions of Eminence scheme aim to address this critical national objective.

### **Why India Needs World-Class Universities**

India strives to compete in the global economy and aspires to become the third-largest economy with \$5 trillion by 2027 (Ministry of Finance, 2024), which requires a growing number of highly trained professionals. The nation has been able to progress due to a well-educated populace and a substantial pool of reasonably skilled university graduates, but that is no longer enough. Now, India's economic ambitions and the fierce global competition in higher education underscore the necessity for WCUs.

Countries like China, Taiwan, and South Korea have invested heavily in their higher education systems, combining mass access with research-intensive institutions capable of global competition. However, India still struggles to establish its universities' global presence.

Furthermore, 86 per cent of Indian students who graduate with degrees in science and technology in the United States do not immediately return to India after completing their studies (Altbach, 2005). Not only are we losing our talent, this also has a high impact on the

economy. The growing inclination of Indian students to pursue higher education overseas is contributing in part to the country's USD 6 billion deficit (Niazi, 2024).

Therefore, in order to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy, India needs universities that produce talented graduates and also support advanced research across various disciplines. These institutions are crucial for generating the knowledge and technology necessary for economic expansion and retaining skilled individuals within the country.

### **India's Response to WCUs**

India's response to the notion of WCUs and GURs has been characterised by ambiguity and confusion. The Government of India's stance on the concept and feasibility of WCUs and the pursuit of global rankings remains unclear (Tilak, 2016). Although not all nations responded to the AEIs, few of them have made their stance clear towards global rankings and the WCU, such as the Latin America region, has been critical of international rankings and has expressed its opposition to them (Altbach et al., 2023).

The National Knowledge Commission<sup>1</sup> (2009) initially proposed the establishment of "National" universities to offer the highest standards of education. Subsequently, discussions shifted, and the term "national" was replaced with "world-class." The government expressed its intention to establish 14 such institutions in the country. However, lacking clarity and facing resistance, the government opted first to establish 30 "central" universities instead.

Similarly, in 2012, the Planning Commission of India constituted the Narayana Murthy Committee (Planning Commission, 2012) on the participation of corporates in higher education. The committee suggested upgrading 75 universities and HEIs with an average investment of ₹1.7 - 2 billion (approx. USD 32.9 - 37.6 million)<sup>2</sup> per institution. The

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<sup>1</sup> The National Knowledge Commission, formed in 2005, was a top-level advisory group to the Prime Minister of India. Its aim was to develop and lead changes to aid in the conversion of India into a robust and lively knowledge-based economy. The commission concentrated on five primary sectors: education, science and technology, agriculture, industry, and e-governance.

<sup>2</sup> The amount in USD is based on the average conversion rate in 2012 (1 USD = INR 53.19) accessed through [Exchangerates.org.uk](http://Exchangerates.org.uk)

report also suggested the development of 20 new WCUs with an approximate investment of ₹5 billion (USD 94 million) per institution. Subsequently, in May 2012, a bill titled “Universities for Research and Innovation” was presented in the Indian Parliament, aimed at establishing high-quality “research and innovation universities” (Tilak, 2016). However, to date, the bill has not been passed by Parliament. This initiative was noted by Salmi (2016) as the only Indian initiative among the 37 AEIs other nations took up to 2012. In addition, in 2015, the then President of India observed, when addressing the country’s vice-chancellors at a visitor’s conference that “we cannot aspire to be a world power without having a single world-class university” (President of India, 2015).

### **Institutions of Eminence: Genesis and Objectives of the Scheme**

Finally, in 2016, the government, which had been reluctant to acknowledge the rather dismal positions of Indian universities in global rankings, took a significant step by announcing the development of “world-class teaching and research institutions”. This initiative was articulated during the 2016 budget speech by the then Union Finance Minister, who committed to empowering HEIs to help them achieve world-class status (GoI, 2016).

A draft policy for world-class institutions was released for comment (UGC, 2016). In September 2017, the UGC released approved guidelines and regulations for “world-class institutions” but renamed them “Institutions of Eminence.” The approved policy/guidelines with the name change reflect ongoing struggles about nomenclature and highlight a persistent dilemma.

As announced, the objective of this “enabling” regulatory framework is to identify the 10 best public and 10 best private universities and grant them complete autonomy from the UGC and other regulators to become “world-class teaching and research institutions”, aiming to rank in the top 500 within ten years of recognition and eventually in the top 100. In addition to autonomy, each public IoE will be provided with ₹10 billion (approx. USD 154 million)<sup>3</sup> to support their development (UGC, 2017b).

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<sup>3</sup> The amount in USD is based on the average conversion rate in 2017 (1USD = INR 64.9) accessed through [exchangerates.org.uk](http://exchangerates.org.uk)

These regulations provide IoEs with significant autonomy in admissions, fee structure, course offerings, faculty recruitment, and financial management. Further, IoEs are exempted from all UGC regulations, guidelines, notifications, and orders, provided they comply with their respective Professional Councils' rules and regulations (UGC, 2017b). More specifically, the autonomy of IoEs is understood as follows:

**Admission and Fees Structure:** IoEs are permitted to admit foreign students; however, in public IoEs, foreign students can be no more than 30% of the total student body. IoEs have the freedom to set fees for both domestic and foreign students.

**Flexibility in Course Structure:** IoEs have the freedom to offer new courses and degree programs, either online or offline, without obtaining approval from the UGC. Private institutions enjoy additional flexibility in determining credit hours and degree duration, subject to minimum prevailing standards.

**Recruitment of Faculty:** IoEs can hire industry experts as faculty members. Private institutions have complete autonomy in faculty recruitment, including hiring as many foreign faculty members as desired, and have freedom in faculty appointments, promotions, and compensation. Public institutions, however, are restricted to hiring foreign faculty members up to a maximum of 25% of their total faculty strength and must adhere to their category's pay scales.

**Academic Collaborations:** IoEs are exempt from seeking government or UGC approval to collaborate with foreign higher educational institutions ranked in the top 500 globally, except for institutions from countries on a negative list determined by the Ministry of External Affairs or the Ministry of Home Affairs.

**Financial Autonomy:** Public IoEs are eligible for financial assistance of up to ₹10 billion (approx. USD 154 million) or 50-75% of their projected requirements, whichever is less. All Public IoEs have financial autonomy to spend their resources, subject to general

restrictions of the Statutes and General Financial Rules<sup>4</sup>. However, it is important to note that private IoEs do not receive any financial assistance from the government.

### **Selection of Institution of Eminence**

Public institutions can apply for IoE status only if they are ranked within the top fifty in their category in the latest National Institutions Ranking Framework (NIRF)<sup>5</sup> or within the top five hundred globally in internationally recognised rankings such as THE, QS, or ARWU. Conversely, for private institutions, financial soundness takes precedence over rankings. Existing or proposed private institutions need an initial corpus fund of ₹600 million (approx. USD 9.24 million)<sup>6</sup>, with a commitment to increase this to ₹1.5 billion (approx. USD 23.1 million) within ten years and must demonstrate a guaranteed pipeline of ₹5 billion (approx. USD 77 million), presenting a credible plan for an additional ₹5 billion (approx. USD 77 million) for existing institutions or ₹10 billion (USD 154 million) for new ones. Both private and public institutions have to submit a 15-year strategic plan.

Selection is based on a competitive, rigorous evaluation process involving multiple stages. An independent committee, the Empowered Expert Committee (EEC), comprising three to five eminent individuals appointed for three-year terms, oversees the selection and evaluation processes, conducts quality reviews, and develops monitoring and review systems to guide IoE growth (UGC, 2017b). The EEC conducted thorough evaluations and made recommendations to the UGC and the Ministry of Education (MoE) for final decision-making.

A total of 114 institutions (74 public and 40 private) applied for the scheme. The EEC's first report in May 2018 recommended eight public and three private institutions for IoE status. Based on the UGC's recommendation, the government approved three public and three private institutions, applying equal weight to both categories (UGC, 2018). In its second report, the EEC additionally recommended two public and seven private institutions.

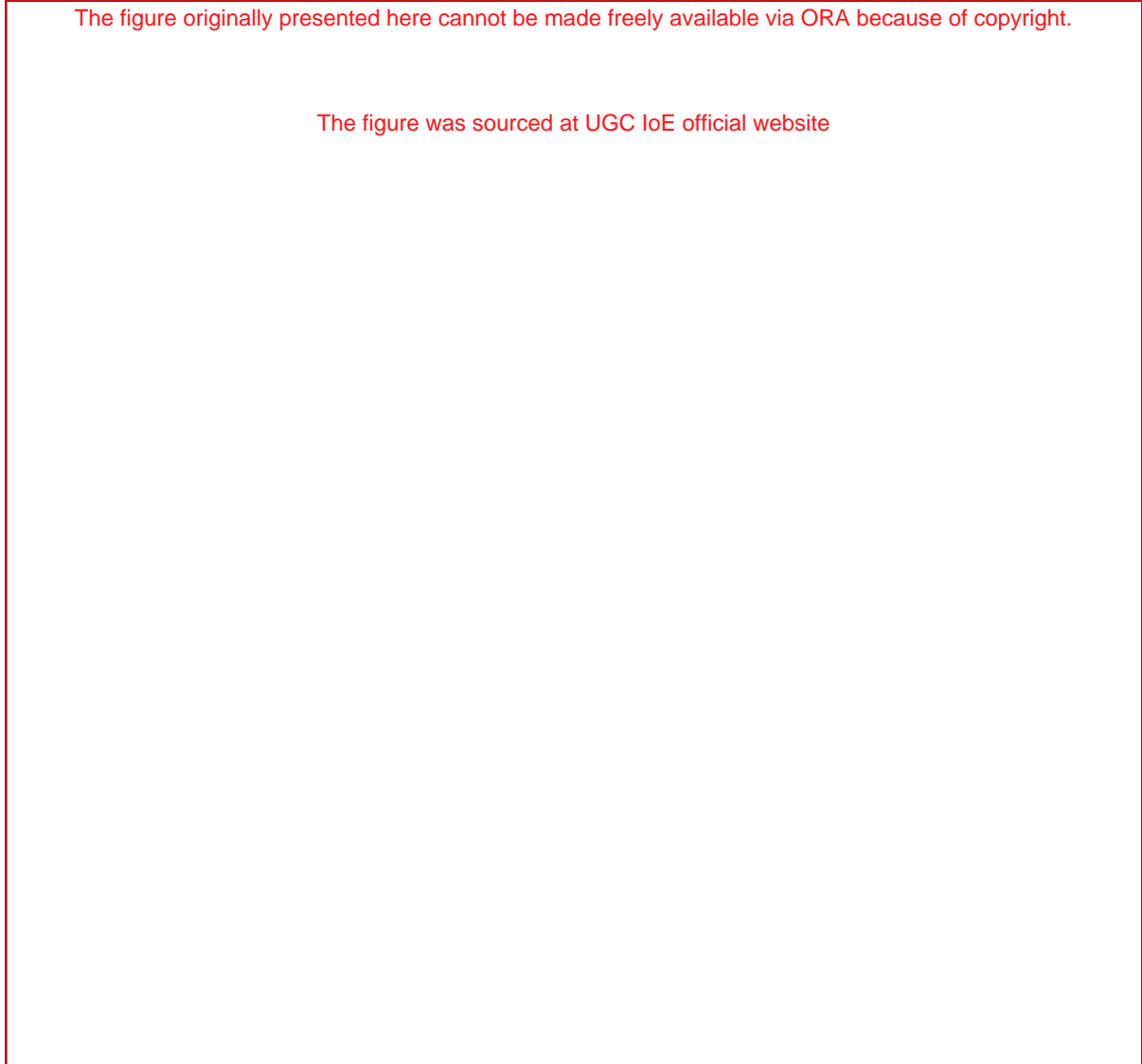
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<sup>4</sup> General Financial Rules are a "compilation of rules and orders of the Government of India that must be followed by all when dealing with matters involving public finances" (Department of Expenditure, 2017, p.3).

<sup>5</sup> NIRF ranks institutions across the country (India).

<sup>6</sup> The amount in USD is based on the average conversion rate in 2017 (1 USD = INR 64.9) accessed through [exchangerates.org.uk](http://exchangerates.org.uk)

Although the EEC recommended 15 institutions in each category for IoE status, only 12 institutions have received this designation to date, eight public and four private (see Figure 2).



Even with the independent committee, the selection criteria attracted significant objections and media attention, particularly regarding two controversial decisions. First, the proposed Jio Institute, backed by Reliance, India's largest company, was selected as an IoE in the first list despite being a yet-to-be-established institution. However, Jio has not been notified as an IoE to date for reasons that are out of the scope of this research. This decision

was questioned considering other institutions that had existed for decades. Second, Manipal University, a private institution, received the eminence tag despite ranking below many publicly-funded universities in India's national rankings, which did not make it onto the first list (Niazi, 2018).

### **Evaluating the Institution of Eminence through Salmi's (2009) Framework**

This section applies Salmi's conceptual framework for establishing WCUs to review the IoE scheme. Given the limited research on IoEs, this review also incorporates broader literature on WCUs in India and related concepts to analyse the scheme's role in developing world-class institutions in India. Salmi's framework identifies three key elements essential for creating WCUs: "high concentration of talent, abundant resources, and favourable governance" (p.7).

#### **Concentration of Talent**

The first characteristic emphasises the importance of top-tier talent, including students, faculty, and researchers. Salmi (2009) argues that WCUs typically boast a critical mass of talented faculty and students who contribute significantly to their institutions' reputation and output.

As noted above, the regulations allow IoEs to recruit students and faculty members. The new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underscores this idea by stating, "the most important factor in the success of higher education institutions is the quality and engagement of its faculty" (GoI, 2020, p. 40). While there is a resemblance between what Salmi (2009) proposed as a highly important factor in building WCUs and the NEP 2020, the current state of faculty in these institutions and the broader higher education sector warrants attention.

There are a large number of teaching positions vacant in public IoEs. According to data submitted by the MoE in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) in March 2023, 46.42%, 29.20%, and 26.88% of teaching positions are vacant in the Delhi University, University of Hyderabad, and Banaras Hindu University, respectively (MoE, 2023). Additionally, the four IITs recognised as IoEs have 921 vacant teaching positions as of August 2022 (MoE, 2022). Strict regulations and political interference often deter

institutions from recruiting the necessary teaching staff. Jayal (2019) argues that the rules for recruitment, pay grades, security of tenure, leave rules, and promotion mechanisms in the academic hierarchy are identical to those for civil servants despite the differing purposes of universities compared to the civil service. These recruitment procedures also apply to foreign faculty.

According to Bhushan (2022), hiring teaching staff and international faculty would lead to an improvement in quality. He also calculated that the ranking of all IoEs would improve if they scored 100 in the faculty-student ratio, with an assumed increase of 10 points in citations per faculty, academic reputation and employer reputation. Under this scenario, five IoEs might occupy rankings in the top 100 and the other six in the top 500. He noted that filling 10,000 faculty positions in these institutions would require an additional annual expenditure of only ₹20 billion (approx. USD 239.52 million), a feasible investment considering the government's commitment of ₹10 billion (approx. USD 154 million) over five years to each IoE, which underscores the potential benefits of such an investment.

### **Abundant resources**

The second characteristic focuses on the availability of substantial financial resources and state-of-the-art infrastructure. Adequate funding is essential to support advanced research, provide high-quality education, and maintain cutting-edge facilities (Salmi, 2009).

As of December 2023, the Ministry of Education had allocated ₹52.55 billion (USD 631 million),<sup>7</sup> of which ₹ 49.33 billion (USD 592 million) has been released to eight public IoEs. The disbursement is a shortfall, being significantly lower than that initially promised (Bhushan, 2022). As of May 2023, only two of the eight public IoEs had reportedly received more than 50 per cent of the ₹ 10 billion (approx. USD 154 million) due to them (Anonymous, 2024). In contrast, China has invested USD 25 billion in AEIs since 1995

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<sup>7</sup> The amount in USD is based on the average conversion rate in December 2023 (1 USD = INR 83.2) accessed through [exchangerates.org.uk](https://www.exchangerates.org.uk)

(Cao & Yang, 2023). This reflects the difference in financial commitment to developing WCUs between China and India.

According to Tilak (2020), HEIs in India face a significant shortfall in funding due to diminishing public budgets. He attributes this scarcity of resources to the government's fiscal constraints and reluctance to invest in HE. Although NEP 2020 identified the budget constraints and recommended increasing the education budget to 6% of the GDP, even in the interim budget 2024-25, 4 years after the launch of NEP 2020, India's budget is approximately 3% of its GDP on education, which is significantly below the recommended 6%.

Building WCUs requires enormous resources. This is possible through public funding, as can be seen from the example of China, France, and South Korea. In India, the question of funding is invariably linked to the role of the government and other regulatory authorities (Sharma & Thakur, 2010). There is an urgent need for substantial reforms to address the prevailing crisis caused by a severe lack of funding and resources (Kumar, 2018).

### **Autonomy: Academic and Financial**

The third element highlights the importance of effective governance, which includes leadership, administrative efficiency, and institutional autonomy. According to Salmi (2009), WCUs benefit from governance structures that support strategic decision-making, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and provide academic freedom.

The IoE regulations and guidelines ostensibly grant institutions academic and financial autonomy. Yet these institutions struggle to exercise genuine independence under the current framework. Bhushan (2022) noted that “there is limited funding and financial autonomy in the fund utilisation, which is constrained by various rules—GFR, taxation laws, visa, and travel of foreigners” (p.16). The pervasive regulations by various regulatory bodies in India extend to micromanaging internal institutional processes.

In the realm of academic freedom, despite the guidelines allowing for the initiation of new courses and the adoption of flexible curricula, the reality is starkly different from

Salmi's model. Professional Councils, such as the AICTE for engineering programs and the Bar Council for law courses, impose approval requirements, effectively limiting autonomy in curriculum development. Multiple committees and commissions have highlighted the over-regulation of these institutions (Tilak, 2020). NEP 2020 discusses the idea of "light but tight" regulations, but the implementation of this concept has yet to be seen.

It is necessary that all such issues be resolved. IoEs should be granted the necessary substantive freedoms and adequate funding so that they can become WCUs (Bhushan, 2022). As Jayal (2019) points out, the government considered autonomy as an incentive to elevate universities to "world-class" status, reflecting the flawed assumption that autonomy is a privilege granted rather than a fundamental necessity for academic institutions.

The majority of studies that have explored the general landscape of higher education in India have identified key challenges such as inadequate funding, governance issues, and quality concerns (Agarwal, 2009; Kumar, 2018; Tilak, 2016, 2020). However, there is a notable absence of literature specifically focusing on the IoE scheme. Thus, there is a gap in understanding how this initiative addresses world-class status for Indian universities or fails to achieve it.

The present study aims to address the gap by critically analysing the IoE scheme. It will analyse the impact of the IoE scheme in relation to the building of the selected institutions as WCUs and consider whether it achieves its aim to secure globally ranked universities. By addressing this gap, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on HE reforms in India and provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educational leaders, particularly in relation to for the world-class institutions scheme.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

The chapter focuses on the research design and the methodology employed. Initially, I will elucidate how the research questions inform the methodology and clarify how the chosen method will contribute to addressing these questions. Following this, I will delve into a discussion about my positionality within the research. Subsequently, I will outline the research process, elucidating the journey from the research site to data analysis. Furthermore, I will explore the concept of validity, followed by a consideration of ethical aspects. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations.

### 3.1. OVERALL APPROACH

The methodology was informed by the Research Questions (RQs):

- What does it mean to be an Institution of Eminence?
- How does the Institution of Eminence (IoE) status and scheme contribute to the development of WCUs in India?

### 3.2. RESEARCH PARADIGM

The study has aimed to understand the underlying principles of the IoE scheme, with a focus on how stakeholders interpret this scheme and assess its utility in establishing WCUs in India. Moving beyond the statistical metrics – rankings, research output, citations, and patents. I have adopted the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises understanding the social world through the meanings and experiences of individuals. Interpretive research aims to grasp the subjective meanings that people attach to their social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and it is suitable for this research, which seeks to understand the complex social phenomena of the IoE scheme. It is also critical to comprehend how the IoE scheme is experienced and enacted within specific cultural and institutional contexts by real people in real-time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

While a quantitative study could evaluate the contribution of the IoE Scheme by comparing pre- and post-IoE status achievements of these institutions through research

parameters and rankings (which could be proxy parameters), it may only address one facet of the study, with insufficient insight into India's diverse education landscape. Further, without a clear understanding of what the IoE scheme entails and given the lack of available information, measuring its impact would lack meaningful context. It would be evaluated against the unknown.

Given the complexity of the institutions, the scheme and the research questions, a qualitative study was deemed more suitable. Such a design (1) allowed contextual elements to come into play in understanding the scheme and (2) facilitated a closer exploration of the factors essential for developing WCUs.

The study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to understand the perspectives of institutional leaders regarding the scheme. Interviews are considered a prime method for qualitative data collection and are widely used in qualitative research. Given the lack of contextual literature on IoE, in-depth interviews are deemed more effective for understanding the nuances and exploring the complexities of the given topic (Marvasti & Tanner, 2020).

### 3.3. RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY

Maxwell (2013) argues that research relationships involve the researcher acting as the research instrument. These relationships impact the participants and influence the researcher, as termed by Atkinson's (2007) "reflexivity." Reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher is part of the social world being studied, inevitably influencing and being influenced by it. Ensuring scientific rigour in such cases involves the researcher being aware of these subjectivities and making them explicit.

I chose this scheme as a case study to delve into India's stance on WCUs since it is the only policy initiative explicitly addressing the global recognition of Indian universities. My choice is also informed by my personal experience working at the policy level within the Ministry of Education and serving as a Nodal Officer for the scheme within one of the Institutions of Eminence. Having been involved on both sides of the scheme, I possess a multifaceted understanding, allowing me to grasp the nuances of the initiative

comprehensively, but at the same time, it may bring potential biases to the research. However, being aware of my positionality has enabled me to interpret participants' insights regarding their understanding of the scheme and how they perceive its contribution to building WCUs.

My familiarity with the topic allowed me to create a space for in-depth discussions to construct knowledge, moving beyond a surface-level understanding. Shared experiences with participants facilitated understanding of implied content and observing unexpressed aspects during interviews (Berger, 2015; Maxwell, 1992). However, there are risks associated with this positionality, such as the "projection of own bias" and participants withholding information due to the perceived associations of the researcher with the government or institutions (Berger, 2015, p.224).

To address these challenges, I employed reflexivity as a tool. According to Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) reflexivity involves "continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (p.2). I employed the following strategies:

- **Format of Semi-Structured Interviews:** Structured interviews as conversations to reduce the impact of power dynamics and encourage open dialogue beyond scripted answers.
- **Reflexive Writing:** I used field notes, memos, and other reflective documentation to capture interpersonal dynamics, decisions, moments of insight, and potential biases.
- **Sharing Work with Colleagues and Mentors:** I sought external perspectives from colleagues, peers, and mentors to critically examine personal assumptions, challenge interpretations, and consider alternative explanations.

These strategies have helped me to become self-aware, mitigate biases, and ensure a more rigorous and reflexive approach to the research process. Furthermore, the study allowed me to challenge my own thoughts and learn new perspectives.

### 3.4. RESEARCH PROCESS

#### 1. Selection of Institutions and Participants

##### *Institutions:*

As noted, the Government of India has recognised 12 institutions, including 8 public and 4 private institutions. Considering there are only 12 IoEs and hence a small sample size, I reached out to all the IoEs through the e-mail and contact numbers provided on their institution's website. Additionally, I reached out to 2 other institutions that applied to the scheme and were better ranked than recognised institutions but somehow not selected as an IoE. This selection facilitated a comparative understanding of the schemes and provided diverse perspectives due to the varied nature of the institutions.

##### *Participants:*

The selection of participants was guided by “purposive sampling”, also known as “criterion-based sampling” (Merriam, 1988). Participants were selected to capture information relevant to RQs and objectives that cannot be obtained from other choices. For instance, based on their role and responsibility in the governance and management of the institution or IoE scheme. I collected information on participants from their institution's official websites. I contacted them through e-mail and telephone and leveraged my existing network to reach out to some of them.

31 participants meeting the criteria were contacted for the study. Besides non-respondents, one participant mentioned contacting the Ministry of Education and obtaining permission for his/her participation. One potential participant, after initial confirmation, could not make it due to a busy schedule. In total, 11 participants were interviewed. They comprised 10 senior leaders from the IoEs and 1 senior leader from an institution that applied but was not selected for the scheme. Together, they were based at 4 private IoEs, 3 public IoE, and 1 non-IoE public institution. Out of 4 private IoEs, 2 are State Private Universities, and 2 are Deemed-to-be Universities. Among public IoEs, 2 are INIs, and 1 is a Central University. The non-IoE is also a Central University.

**Table 2: Participant Profiles**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Name of the Institution</b>	<b>Institution Type</b>
A	O.P. Jindal Global University	Private
B	O.P. Jindal Global University	Private
C	O.P. Jindal Global University	Private
D	Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani	Private
E	Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani	Private
F	Shiv Nadar University	Private
G	Manipal Academy of Higher Education	Private
H	University of Hyderabad	Public
I	University of Delhi	Public
J	Indian Institute of Technology	Public
K	Jawaharlal Nehru University	Public

Upon establishing initial contact via email and receiving a positive response, I shared detailed information about the interview and research with participants through a Participant Information Sheet<sup>8</sup> and Consent Form. This documentation outlines the research questions, seeks consent for the interview, and requests permission to use anonymised quotes in the research.

## **2. Data Collection**

The study collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior leaders within institutions and by examining policy documents and official records. Additionally, the progress made by institutions after obtaining the IoE status was evaluated using officially available data.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 3

### *Elite Interviews*

The interviews took place between 8 April - 10 May 2024 and were pivotal in understanding participants' perspectives on the IoE scheme and its impact on their institutions.

The participants play key roles in shaping higher education policy at the national level in their capacity. These interviews can be considered "elite interviews" (Richards, 1996). He describes

"the notion of an elite as a group of individuals who hold or have held a privileged position in society, and as such, have likely had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public" (p.199).

The purpose of conducting elite interviews was motivated by several factors: First, interviewing these leaders provided insights that would otherwise not be available in the public domain and could not be interpreted from the data. Second, these individuals possess the specific information relevant to the study.

There was a varied power dynamic during the interviews, but my approach remained consistent. I always introduced myself, shared my professional background, and explained the purpose of the study. My background in university administration and education helped me build rapport with them. When participants appeared hesitant, I offered to share the interview transcript for their review, which helped establish trust and put them at ease (Richards, 1996). Despite efforts to build rapport and assure confidentiality, there was noticeable self-censorship.

In-person interviews were conducted with 5 participants as they were based in Delhi-NCR, and 6 interviews were conducted online through MS Teams due to location constraints. In a few cases, participants boasted about their institution and scheme. At these moments, I strategically disclosed my knowledge of their institution and scheme to steer the conversation back on track. Richard (1996) suggests that having a strong command of your material is crucial.

The Participant Information Sheet shared with participants contained information related to the format and the data collection process. Formal consent was obtained during the interview. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were 60-90 minutes long, with the exception of one interview, which ended after 30 minutes due to a participant's prior commitments.

### *Document analysis*

Document analysis in qualitative studies has elicited diverse perspectives regarding its advantages and limitations. Scholars assert that document analysis can be effectively employed with other qualitative research methods, such as interviews and participant or non-participant observation (Denzin, 2017; Yin, 2009). Documents are consistently recognised as a rich source of empirical data in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009).

In this study, document analysis served to better comprehend the government's positions on WCUs and also the contextualisation of the data obtained from the interviews (Bowen, 2009). Tracking policy developments was essential for accurately assessing changes over time and understanding the current IoE scheme.

Documents were researched using keywords from the research questions, guided by a purposeful selection approach until reaching theoretical saturation or the point of redundancy (Morgan, 2022). This ensured a comprehensive review of relevant documents. The chosen documents complemented the interviews conducted in the study. Documents were used throughout the study, and sources were cited in-text. The list of documents referred to is available in Appendix 1.

### **3. Data Analysis**

I employed thematic analysis for the interview. The analysis focused on interpreting participants' perspectives on how the program benefits and contributes to achieving the overarching goals. Considering the diverse views of the participants, the thematic analysis provided a foundational and flexible method for qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also provided greater flexibility to delve into data at a more nuanced level without compromising the perspectives of the participants. Nowell et al. (2017) describe how a

systematically conducted thematic analysis yields meaningful results. Therefore, I adopted the six-step approach for thematic analysis mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Before generating codes or conducting analysis, I transcribed the interviews using Microsoft Word's transcription services. I cross-checked the transcriptions with the recorded interviews. Following this, the de-identified transcriptions were transferred to NVivo software for analysis, licensed through the University. While verifying and reading the transcripts, I familiarised myself with the interview data. (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

After familiarising myself with the data at the verification stage, I read all interviews again and manually highlighted first-level codes in the MS Word documents using different colours. The codes were generated through a mix of deductive and inductive analyses (Xu & Zammit, 2020). The inductive approach allowed themes and patterns to emerge directly from the data (Thomas, 2006). The deductive approach allowed the development of codes from the theoretical framework(s) such as Salmi's (2009) and the policy documents.

In the first stage of coding, I assigned descriptive codes to "summarise segments of data" (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p.226), which helped me examine the data in detail as well as at a high level. In the second stage, I developed formal codes through interpretation and consolidated the data into meaningful units (Punch & Oancea, 2014). It also included organising the information that indicated various categories, including features, obstacles, and suggestions.

Thereafter, I identified themes in two ways to capture important aspects of the data. First, themes were identified from the formal codes and then from the policy document analysis. There was some overlap in a few themes that emerged through both methods. The themes were then further developed and revised. Transitioning from the data set to conducting analysis involved an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The final themes are discussed and reflected upon in the findings chapter.

#### 4. Validity

In this study, I adopted a rigorous approach to validity, aligning with Maxwell's (2013) model. This approach involved identifying specific threats to validity and developing strategies to mitigate them throughout the research process. I focused on two primary threats common in qualitative studies: researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013).

To address researcher bias, I acknowledged the inevitability of my own beliefs and perspectives influencing the study. As noted in relation to positionality, I took a transparent approach by explicitly explaining how my personal beliefs, values, and understanding might impact the research process and conclusions.

Reactivity acknowledges “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2013, p.124). While completely eliminating this influence is impractical (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), I aimed to understand and productively utilise it in my research. To mitigate potential threats and enhance the validity of findings, I employed strategies Maxwell (2013) recommended, including triangulation, rich data, and respondent validation. Further, I shared my preliminary findings with the supervisor before finalisation to prevent misinterpretation and identify biases and misunderstandings.

### 3.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study proceeded after taking Research Integrity training and approval from the Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)<sup>9</sup> at the University of Oxford to ensure that it met ethical guidelines.

Throughout the research process, I obtained informed consent from participants. Following initial contact with participants, each interviewee was provided with a consent form and a participant information sheet. Participants were requested to provide written or oral consent and were fully informed about the data collection procedures. Additionally, participants were informed about their rights, including the option to not answer any specific

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 2

questions or withdraw from the study before a specified date to ensure their autonomy and comfort throughout the research process. In consideration of confidentiality, participant names have been substituted with pseudonyms, and specific personal details, such as their job titles, have been omitted to prevent potential identification. In some parts, quotes have been additionally anonymised to ensure that participants cannot be identified.

### 3.6. LIMITATIONS

The restricted scope of fieldwork is one of the limitations of this study, which also involved a limited number of participants from diverse groups. More extensive fieldwork involving a more diverse group of participants could have potentially uncovered a wider range of perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). However, this was not feasible due to constraints related to time and funding.

Additionally, another limitation pertains to the potential bias introduced by participants during interviews. There is a risk that participants, particularly senior leaders, might exaggerate their achievements under the IoE scheme or refrain from criticising the policy to avoid offending the current regime. These factors may lead to biased responses that do not fully reflect the realities on the ground. However, pre-existing relationships with a few participants facilitated more open and candid discussions, which could have mitigated this challenge to some extent and enhanced the credibility of the data collected (Kvale, 2007; Maxwell, 2013).

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, the study seeks to understand the IoE scheme and status from the perspective of senior leaders at these institutions. The primary goal of these institutions is to achieve academic excellence and become “world-class teaching and research institutions” within both national and global contexts (UGC, 2017b). Therefore, we will explore how the IoE scheme and its recognition support these institutions in reaching their goals and what additional factors could contribute to their success.

### 4.1. REDEFINING INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY

Operating in the Indian higher education landscape with multiple regulators, IoEs are pioneer institutions with significant autonomy and flexibility from UGC regulations that set them apart from other HEIs. While they still face inherent challenges and constraints of the larger system, they try to take advantage of unique opportunities and identities to innovate and excel in teaching, research, and global engagement.

#### 4.1.1. Prestige and Recognition

Achieving the status of an IoE confers significant prestige and recognition to universities. Many participants expressed that this recognition is particularly valuable in the competitive landscape of higher education, where institutions strive to distinguish themselves. Participant F highlighted the competitive nature of this recognition, noting that 114 institutions applied to join the “elite group of institutions as the number was very few” (F), 10 public and 10 private institutions.

The IoE status provides a crucial differentiator for private institutions from the approximately 500-600 other private universities in India (F). Participant E felt that with IoE status, they have a “level playing field” when compared with IITs, designated as institutions of national importance, and also that IoE status gave “solid bargaining power with any entity anywhere in the world” (E). The status conferred by the government of India “validates the institution’s quality and efforts” (Participant G).

In addition, IoE status helps institutions gain better visibility and credibility in the academic and research community. G elaborated, “IoE status enhances our reputation and standing among peers.” The prestige of the IoE also attracts faculty members and students to these institutions (E).

However, the general perception of IoE status remains unclear to the broader audience. Participant D pointed out, “many people do not have a clue about what an IoE is; only stakeholders who follow higher education have some understanding” (D).

#### **4.1.2. Regulatory Freedom and Innovation**

##### **1. Liberation from Regulatory Constraints**

The participants highlighted the intricate regulatory landscape that governs HEIs in India and how IoE regulations liberated them from these regulations. Participant C noted that “as a private university, we are covered under state, national and subject-based regulatory bodies, pretty much you are under a sort of regulatory control in terms of all aspects of it” (C). Another Participant A mentioned that “you cannot even change the name; you cannot change even a full stop, which is governed by UGC” (A).

The participants’ inputs nevertheless highlighted the freedom enjoyed by the IoEs, which was previously not given to any other type of institution.

“I was quite amazed by the fact that the scheme and the policy for the first time not only recognised the challenge of but also was very conscious of the fact that how regulations can affect and impinge and even adversely impact institutions, but more importantly. How we can achieve excellence through removing regulations and empower them” (Participant C).

While liberated from regulatory constraints, participant B expressed that they still face challenges in exercising full freedom due to a “deficit in intra-agency harmonisation” (B). This is due to the fact that the IoE framework “has not captured the wider imagination of the regulatory architecture of India” (C). Institutions “still receive letters” from the UGC and State Government for which they have already received the exemption as an IoE (C).

## 2. Academic Freedom and Flexibility

IoEs enjoy significant flexibility in designing course structures, curricula, and program durations, freeing them from many traditional regulatory constraints. UGC mandated curriculum structures do not bind them, and they have the freedom to offer online courses (UGC, 2017b). However, professional programs like law, medicine, and engineering still require approvals from their respective regulatory bodies. The IoE status fosters creativity and innovation, while resistance from regulatory bodies and market confusion pose challenges.

### *a. Curriculum Development*

The flexibility to design programs has enabled these institutions to be creative and innovative and stay abreast of the latest knowledge within their domains. Participant H expressed that “there is a fair amount of academic freedom.” They only need to “send information to the UGC, saying that we are going to start this program from this academic year” (H). Participant C highlighted the significant shift in operational freedom in curriculum design after achieving IoE status. Previously, the institution had to seek approvals for everything, which stifled creativity and innovation.

“Our ability to be creative, innovative, and even pushing the boundaries of knowledge, even promote a great degree of interdisciplinarity, all those things where we were operating in a very, I would say, tightrope. But then suddenly we feel we are free from such shackles. We feel liberated, and ...we have been able to do many things which we probably were reluctant to do before” (C).

Other participants also expressed relief at being free from certain regulatory bodies, such as the State Education Department. They described having to follow the “state dictum” as a “big headache” due to frequent interference in the approval process (Participant F). The ability to design and start new programs “without seeking authorisation from external agencies or bodies saves a significant amount of time and effort,” allowing institutions to focus on enhancing academic programs and administrative matters at the university (Participant B).

*b. Flexible degree duration and online courses*

With the IoE initiative, the government and the UGC have challenged their pre-existing thinking about program duration. Participants explained that they can now start new programs with their structure and duration. Participant F said, “we can have one-year programs, we can have certificate programs.” While all master’s programs traditionally require two years, IoE regulation “has not only envisaged and empowered the IoEs to start one-year master’s program, but also given a clear you know regulatory framework to kind of initiate that process” (Participant C). Moreover, participant B stated that they could “transition from a two-year MA program to a one-year MA program, with the permission or approval of the apex Governing Council of the university” (B).

In addition to program duration, IoEs can start online programs without approval from regulatory bodies. Participant B mentioned that previously:

“any institution wanting to start an online program had to obtain numerous permissions and approvals, in addition to meeting other qualifying parameters like a certain grade under the aegis of the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC). But now, as an IoE, and with their revised IoE Regulations 2021, IoEs can also start online programs” (B).

*c. Deal with Professional Regulatory Bodies*

Despite these greater freedoms, institutions face obstacles in professional programs governed by professional regulatory bodies in India, such as law, medical, nursing, and technology programs, where approval is still required, limiting the whole exercise of their academic freedom. AICTE has relaxed the regulations for IoEs, while other regulatory agencies still subject institutions to rigorous processes during each cycle.

AICTE made an exception for IoEs and added clause 4.22 to exempt them from the annual approval process (AICTE, 2023). Participant E welcomed this move by AICTE:

“We were also taking the AICTE approvals, and AICTE has made a clause applicable only to institutions of eminence. They have told us that because we are an institution of eminence, they will not ask us any questions” (E).

However, other regulatory bodies are in a “sorry state” and “stuck in history”. These bodies continue to enforce outdated requirements, such as requiring a “girls’ common room to be screened from the boys’ common room” and keeping exam halls under lock and key (E). Contrary to this view, participants A and F believed that these bodies are necessary to maintain quality and will remain there as they were established through the Parliament Act.

#### **4.1.3. Differentiated Process in Student and Faculty Recruitment**

While both private and public institutions have been granted the freedom to decide the admission process and set student fees, only private institutions can fully benefit from this autonomy, as public institutions still have to follow other government regulations they are bound by.

##### **Student Recruitment**

Participants from private IoEs stated that they “can decide our own criteria to admit students” (Participant A). Participant B shared that they are using third-party-based tests for the recruitment of their students, which is transparent. According to Participant G, due to this flexibility, their student applications have been increased and they are able to admit good students.

Conversely, Participant H from public IoE shared an example regarding PhD admissions, stating that “UGC does not allow it... PhD admission should be through a national exam” (H). As a result, public institutions cannot admit professionals with extensive work experience (H). In undergraduate or postgraduate admission, public institutions have to consider the competitive exams as per subject or CUET<sup>10</sup> conducted by NTA<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, public IoEs “cannot change the fees of existing programs; only have the freedom to decide the fees for new courses” (Participant H). Whereas private IoEs have the freedom to fix their fees (UGC, 2017b).

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<sup>10</sup> Central University Entrance Test (CUET) provides a single window opportunity for students to seek admission in participating Central Universities across the country.

<sup>11</sup> National Testing Agency (NTA) was established by the Ministry of Education, “to conduct entrance examinations for admission or fellowship in higher educational institutions” (NTA, n.d).

## **Faculty Recruitment**

Similarly to student recruitment, private IoEs have more freedom in faculty recruitment when compared to the public IoEs. Participants from private IoEs felt that “hiring of industrial professionals as faculty members without the restriction of requisite higher academic qualifications is the biggest advantage” (Participant A). It enriches the academic environment by integrating real-world knowledge and perspectives into the curriculum. Further, A mentioned, “we can decide the recruitment criteria, which allows us to bring in industry experts who can offer valuable insights and practical knowledge to our students” (A). With respect to foreign faculty participant B noted that “reporting mechanisms were cut down for IoE,” which streamlines the hiring process. Participant D remarked, “there is a tremendous amount of flexibility in recruiting foreign faculty, which is crucial for enhancing our academic standards and global engagement” (D).

Public IoEs still face challenges and need to follow the rules of their categories. Participant H from public IoE emphasised the need for more flexibility within public institutions:

“The first thing that needs to happen is more flexibility in faculty recruitment within the constitutional requirements. If you see a good candidate, you should be able to bring that person within the university system as quickly as possible” (H).

He further added that public institutions are subject to extensive scrutiny and suffer from much litigation as they fall under public scrutiny.

## **4.2. DISPARITIES IN FINANCIAL RESOURCES**

Financial resources are critical to the IoE scheme. These resources enable institutions to undertake ambitious initiatives and build infrastructure that supports their quest for academic excellence and global competitiveness. Financial assistance under the scheme is available only to public institutions. Participants from private institutions raised concerns about the funding, though they are not overly bothered by it. Participant D mentioned that with funding often comes additional restrictions or requirements from the government. Participant B argued that if one says that private IoE gets financial support so that their

rankings would improve, then the “pattern of accountability also changes, and that pattern of accountability might also impinge on the freedom of the institution in terms of administrative and operational freedom of the Institution.”

For public institutions, this financial support has been a game-changer in the context of the government reducing public funding and asking them to take loans through the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA)<sup>12</sup>, as expressed by participants. Participant J mentioned, “IITs already enjoyed academic autonomy, but recent financial support through the IoE scheme has provided even greater flexibility”, reducing the need of extensive resource planning for HEFA loans (J). The financial support enabled IITs to initiate new programs, departments, and laboratories more quickly, accelerating the pace of academic and research development (J).

Similarly, Participant H noted, “What has changed is what we can do because earlier funds were restricted, so the IoE has been a big boon for us.” The availability of funds has facilitated the establishment of new research grants, infrastructure improvements, and international collaborations (H).

One significant area of investment has been in developing infrastructure. For instance, the University of Delhi (DU) has prioritised building facilities that benefit students and faculty. It includes new student housing, particularly for female students, and enhanced central instrumentation facilities. Moreover, funding has enhanced health facilities and the development of new laboratories and institutions (Participant I).

However, public institutions face challenges generating matching funds, as the government provides only 70% of the projected funds. Participant H highlighted, “The university system has no way of generating 300 crores in 10 years,” emphasising the difficulty in raising the remaining 30% of the funds. Additionally, public institutions often

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<sup>12</sup> HEFA is a joint venture between the Ministry of Education and Canara Bank. “It provides financial assistance for the creation of infrastructure and R&D in India’s premier educational institutions. HEFA leverages funds from the market and supplements them with donations and CSR funds” (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

cannot raise tuition fees due to constitutional obligations to provide subsidised education, limiting the ability to generate additional revenue (Participant H).

Another challenge is the delay in the disbursement of funds. The government provides funds “come on a quarterly basis and rarely on time,” causing operational difficulties and potentially delaying planned initiatives. Moreover, only 75% of the allocated funds have been utilised by the MoE, GoI for the financial year 2022-23 (Rajya Sabha, 2023). Despite these limitations, the financial support from the IoE scheme remains a crucial enabler for public institutions to pursue their ambitious goals (Participant H).

Participants from private institutions expressed the need to reconsider the funding divide, suggesting that IoEs should receive preference in research funding due to their rigorous selection process and commitment to excellence (Participants D and E). Additionally, the IoE status does not automatically translate into tangible benefits such as increased research funding. D noted that despite the recognition, IoEs do not receive significant advantages in securing research funding from government sources, suggesting that the status is more symbolic than practical in certain respects. Participant C further added that “if you are looking at building Institutions of Eminence and excellence, this artificial divide between the public and the private when it comes to funding can be also reconsidered.”

### 4.3. CATALYSTS FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH INITIATIVES

The findings explain the impact of the IoE scheme in propelling Indian institutions towards achieving the status of WCUs by providing support across domains, including the establishment of interdisciplinary programs and enhancement of research excellence

#### 4.3.1. Pioneering Multidisciplinary Programs

As discussed above, the IoE provides institutions with the autonomy to design their programs. One of the significant impacts is the promotion of multi and interdisciplinary activities, leading to the development of comprehensive and cutting-edge programs. As

expressed by participant I, they were able to start six new interdisciplinary schools since achieving IoE status. These schools offer programs integrating disciplines such as environmental science, public health, and social sciences, providing students with a broader and more interconnected understanding of complex issues. He further highlighted the importance of dismantling barriers between departments:

“We need to dismantle this barrier between faculty, between departments because we must respond. As a premier University in India, we must respond in a robust manner in terms of ideas” (Participant I).

IIT Delhi started new interdisciplinary schools and programs. Similarly, OP Jindal Global University established four new schools within two years of being recognised as an IoE. These schools focus on areas such as Environment and Sustainability, Counselling, and Public Health and Human Development, offering interdisciplinary degree programs that attract a diverse student body and address contemporary global challenges. Participant A stated that they are offering a one-year MBA program and online programs. The number of courses has increased manifold after recognition.

Despite their exemption in specific categories, these innovative steps often face challenges from regulatory bodies. There is a “need for support from the wider ecosystem” to reach the objectives of the IoE initiative, as “universities are part of a larger society” (Participant B). Therefore, “when regulatory bodies say you cannot do it, they should also mention that IoEs can do” (C).

#### **4.3.2. Supporting Research Excellence**

The IoE scheme has enhanced the research capabilities of participating institutions. The scheme has helped institutions increase their research output and academic prestige by providing funding for high-quality research.

##### *1. Fostering Scholarly Talent*

Institutions have introduced fellowships and support programs through IoE funding to nurture scholarly talent. These initiatives aim to attract and retain top researchers, support

faculty members and post-doctoral studies, and enhance the research capabilities of PhD students.

The grants cover various needs, including equipment, consumables, and travel, enabling faculty to pursue innovative research projects. Participant H underlined, “about 200 out of 400 faculty members have been now funded, and 40% of them are from non-science and 60% are from science which cut across all areas of study and research”, and this support has been particularly transformative for non-science faculty who previously had limited funding opportunities (H).

DU established the Maharishi Kannad Fellowships for post-doctoral researchers across different schools, providing substantial support for advanced research. Participant I mentioned that each school received 5 to 6 Maharishi Kannad fellowships.

IIT Delhi initiated new schemes to support PhD students and international collaborations, expediting program approvals and ensuring robust funding for activities that previously faced financial constraints. Participant J pointed out, “New programs were fast-tracked because the funding is a good resource. When you have funding available, you need not spend your time looking for funding for certain activities.”

Further, institutions have focused on supporting new faculty in establishing laboratories and conducting innovative research. Participant J highlighted, “new departments were initiated, schools were opened, centres were opened. Seed grants to new faculty when they join so they can set up new labs and infrastructure, Young Faculty fellowships to attract new faculty” (J). According to participant H, PhD scholars have also been included in the research projects and facilities in term of “one-time travel grant to travel anywhere in the world for a conference.” This support has been provided to give them international exposure: over 250 PhD scholars have benefitted in the last two years. The exposure broadens the students’ perspectives and elevates the university’s global presence (H).

None of the private institutions mentioned any specific research initiatives undertaken after being recognised as IoE. A few participants noted a focus on research or an increase in their research output. Participant D highlighted that a single private university

might not have the capacity to develop the extensive research facilities required to achieve WCU status. He further suggested that collaboration among universities makes it possible to build such research facilities, which could potentially have a higher impact.

## 2. *Enhancing Research Ecosystem*

Institutions have organised research conferences, upgraded their existing facilities, purchased advanced equipment, and built new research centres.

Participant H said “we have organised almost 100 conferences in the last one year alone... We are able to invite people from across the world to the university” (H). Research Travel grants have been introduced to support the PhD students, providing them with means to explore and engage with global academic communities and resources (Participant J).

Moreover, participant I mentioned that under the scheme, they have enhanced central instrumentation facilities, addressing common property resource issues that individual departments could not solve independently. This included funding for advanced equipment and hiring specialised staff to maintain these resources.

As a result of these initiatives and support structure the University of Delhi (DU) started Minor and Major Research Grants under the IoE scheme, significantly increasing research publications. Participant I emphasised the impact: “We had added almost 500 plus publications... As a result, the first impact came on QS ranking last year, and this year, so we had jumped up many” (I).

Similarly, participant J witnessed a notable rise in the research output “publications have increased significantly from 3000 to about 3500, citations have increased, the number of research projects has increased.”

## 4.4. NAVIGATING GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS AND LOCAL IMPACT

Global engagement and internationalisation are critical components of the IoE scheme. These institutions face many challenges in internationalisation, yet the government has provided no specific support.

### 4.4.1. Attracting Global Talent – A Challenge

#### *1. Faculty*

IoE regulations provide greater flexibility in hiring faculty members, which helps in attracting international scholars. However, attracting international faculty requires a supportive ecosystem with adequate housing, research facilities, and a welcoming community. Participant H emphasised that Indian universities lag because they do not provide the right kind of ecosystem, including suitable hostels and competitive salaries. We cannot compete with other universities unless we become international in character. Moreover, the selection procedure for these public institutions is stringent, so even though they can attract international faculty, the selection process hampers their onboarding.

In this aspect, private institutions are exempted from these stringent recruitment rules and salary restrictions to hire international faculty. However, they are also not able to compete with global standards of salaries. As participant D described, “there should be clear motivation from them to join us; we cannot compete on the salary part, ...but will attract them through research facility” (D)

Participant B emphasised that “if the government is committed to its vision, then they have to take up a few other substantive and procedural measures, one in terms of enabled visa regime for researchers, scholars, and teachers to travel across borders” (B).

Even with constraints in financial resources and ecosystems, private institutions have made efforts to recruit foreign faculty to fulfil the mandate. Participant E noted that they did not have foreign faculty earlier but now have a few foreign nationals.

## *2. Student: Structural Barriers*

The Indian higher education structure presents barriers to internationalisation, particularly in the admission of international students. Participant J felt that “by design, they are not made that way” to recruit international students. For instance, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, “we cannot take international students directly. In case we want to do that, they have to clear JEE<sup>13</sup>” (J), which is already a very competitive exam; only 1 out of 1000 students gain admission to the Indian Institutes of Technology through this examination.

Participant K mentioned that while they receive applications from international students, particularly from Africa and Southeast Asia, there are concerns about their understanding of the subject matter and their proficiency in English, as instruction is conducted entirely in English. These concerns further complicate the admission process and limit the ability of Indian institutions to attract and integrate international students effectively.

### **4.4.2. Charting Internationalisation Paths Amid Constraints**

Despite the limitations highlighted above, the institutions understand the challenges and context in which they operate. In addition to constant liaising with the government, they have adopted various mechanisms to facilitate internationalisation efforts.

#### *1. Short and Joint programs for international students*

Institutions recognised the challenges of recruiting international students for full programs due to the selective nature of their institutions. In response, they have initiated alternatives such as Joint PhD programs, Summer Schools, Semester Exchange programs, and Dual Degree programs, where students study at their home and partner institutions.

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<sup>13</sup> The Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) is a competitive examination conducted by NTA. It is required to enter some of India’s top engineering universities, colleges, and institutions.

Participant J outlined that they have started “two joint PhD programs, one with Queensland and the other with National Tsing Hua University. As a result, we have about 40 international PhD students enrolled.” Additionally, IIT Delhi has announced the International PhD Fellowship Program (IPFP) to attract more international PhD students. Shiv Nadar University “will have a joint one-year masters with the School of Oriental and African Studies, London and one dual degree program with Arizona State University” (Participant F).

## 2. *Visiting Faculty*

Private institutions focusing on hiring foreign faculty full-time have increased their numbers since recognition, either on their own initiative or in compliance with the regulations. Public institutions, facing many restrictions, have identified alternative routes to engage with foreign faculty. Some have started international fellowship programs to attract talent, while others are inviting foreign scholars to be visiting professors.

Participant H shared that they have started an “IoE International Fellow” program. This aims to attract scholars from around the world to spend a semester teaching at the university. Manipal University has been trying to attract international faculty interested in short-term visits. Participant G highlighted the advantages, stating, “We get a lot of faculty from specialised domains willing to come to Manipal for 90 odd days to conduct research.”

BITS Pilani has also recognised that while matching international salaries may be challenging, providing ample research opportunities and resources can be a significant draw for foreign faculty. Participant D explained,

“what will attract them is giving that kind of space for them to do what they want to do. For example, we provide the space, labs, and whatever they need for research. This attracts them because data collection is relatively easier in India” (D).

### **4.4.3. Rankings as a Global Excellence Indicator**

As per the IoE regulations and guidelines, the select institutions aim to be ranked among the top 500 globally in 10 years, with a long-term goal of breaking into the top 100.

Various participants extensively discussed rankings' importance and implications for IoEs, revealing diverse perspectives on their role, effectiveness, and impact.

According to Participant K, rankings are a critical tool for conveying the quality and status of universities to a global audience. He stated, "rankings are the only way to tell people at the global level that we have got world-class universities." Similarly, participant I, while pointing out the inherent problems with ranking criteria, also defended the necessity of such systems. He explained, "there are several problems with ranking criteria, but denying the rankings or saying it is bad does not absolve the ranking systems." He further argued that while rankings have flaws, they are similar to academic merit systems used for student admissions, which also have problems but are still widely accepted. This highlights the complexity and double standards often associated with the criticism of university rankings.

In a comprehensive defence of rankings, especially from the perspective of institutions in developing countries, participant C argued that rankings provide necessary benchmarks and evaluation criteria that help these institutions measure their progress against global standards. He stated,

"all methodologies of assessment might have its own problems and its limitations, but I am convinced that the leading rankings organisation be the QS, the Times Higher Education, the Academic Ranking for World Universities, all three of them have a very robust criteria in assessing institutions and putting them and giving them a ranking figure" (C).

He emphasised that while top universities like Harvard might question the utility of rankings, for many others, they serve as essential tools for benchmarking and improving quality. He also pointed out that universities should not base all their decisions on improving their ranking positions. The primary focus should be on building a good university through comprehensive measures.

In contrast, Participant A highlighted rankings as a marketing tool to attract students and a dangerous game as it is not being used for self-reflection. Participant F expressed a

similar view to A and added that the government should remove the global rankings target for IoE, as achieving high scores on certain parameters, such as reputation, requires significant financial resources. Therefore, maintaining the NIRF ranking system would help them focus on quality benchmarks. Participant D felt you could expect institutions to be top-ranked, but if you define world-class universities on the basis of rankings, then “probably we have lost something.”

Participant H pointed out an important point relevant to the Indian context, where most public institutions, including public IoEs, have a societal impact by providing equitable access to education. All these institutions were strongly committed to inclusivity, with various programs and nominal fee structures to support students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. He pointed out that rankings “do not adequately reflect the sociocultural context and societal impact of universities.” He suggested that metrics such as the representation of marginalised communities and social impact should be considered in rankings to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of an institution’s contributions.

#### **4.4.4. Societal Contribution and Relevance**

While navigating through the global landscape, the scheme also focuses on these institutions’ contributions to society. Two monitoring parameters focus specifically on the impact on society (see Appendix 5). One focuses on interdisciplinary courses in emerging technology and relevance to the nation’s development concerns, and the other refers to socially relevant technologies developed at World-Class Institutions. Participant I emphasised that the vision for IoE at their public university, which he had worked on, was “driven by the university’s response to the society”. He added that “universities cannot live or exist in a vacuum. They must respond to the societal needs” (I).

Similarly, participants H and K argued that the societal contribution of Indian universities is much higher than that of any other university. “We need institutions that are competitive internationally” and also focus on societal impact (K). Although the sociocultural context of the universities is missing from evaluating criteria for world-class institutions, “our societal impact is much greater” (H). Thus, we need to participate in a

larger national debate of public good character, inclusivity, and self-formation within these institutions (Participant K).

#### **4.4.5. Need for a supportive ecosystem**

While the IoE status provides autonomy and flexibility academically, institutions still face substantial administrative and bureaucratic challenges that impede their progress towards internationalisation and global engagement. Participant A highlighted these practical difficulties, stating that “we are free to appoint any faculty from any part of the globe. Good to hear that. When it comes to visas, we are standing in the same queue as any other institution. There are no exemptions” (A).

Reflecting on building a state-of-the-art infrastructure, A elaborated on the bureaucratic obstacles and the non-supportive ecosystem for institutions like theirs, noting that authorities “treat us like a factory or establishment that is making money, which we are not” (A). He further cited an example: despite being recognised by the Government of India, they faced significant delays and requirements from local authorities, as the local authorities “are asking us about a genuineness certificate.” These examples underscore the disconnect between national IoE recognition and the local administrative processes that IoEs must navigate to fulfil their ambition to become world-class institutions.

Participant B explained, “If a student goes to the United States or the UK for higher education, they are not just choosing an institution; they are also looking at the country’s quality of life, safety, and infrastructure.” B further pointed out that IoEs are “part of a social system; they are part of an administrative system, they are part of a financial system” and suggested that “the government should be more forward-looking in terms of ensuring that such an ecosystem comes into place to get into rankings.”

## 4.5. THE EXCELLENCE EQUATION: HUMAN CAPITAL AND INSTITUTIONAL MINDSET

### 1. *A Function of Faculty and Students*

Participants shared that resources and autonomy alone would not lead us to world-class institutions; we need faculty and students to perform. As Participant K articulated:

“University output is primarily a function of the teacher and the student assisted by infrastructure, dollar, and whatever. So if you pump in dollars and fantastic infrastructure, they need not get translated to higher output because the higher output is achieved by the student and the teacher” (K).

Participant B stated that “we should only look for good faculty, students will follow. Faculty have a maximum role in building or breaking up any institution” (B).

K also mentioned that achieving academic excellence and transitioning to world-class status necessitates recognising the distance required to reach this status. Performance is relative; other universities also research and publish papers. Thus, the key lies in how swiftly an institution can cover this distance to be made up. Faculty recruited through a merit-based process are the ones who can secure publications in prestigious journals and drive significant research and innovation.

### 2. *Cultivating a Mindset for Excellence*

Participant H emphasised the critical role of mindset in becoming a world-class institution:

“Institutions are made by people, not by money. So funding by itself cannot change the attitude of the people. If I want to become world-class, my mindset with or without IoE should be that I want to be world-class” (H).

Participant D highlighted another perspective, asserting that institutions do not achieve world-class status simply by aspiring to it. Instead, they achieve this status through their actions:

“People do things in such a fashion where they become a world-class institution. It is not about wanting to become a world-class institution and then doing whatever it takes. It might still work, but would take decades. What matters is doing things in a way that sets benchmarks and achieves excellence.”

### 3. *Leadership*

Participant I emphasised a dual-faceted strategy for achieving institutional eminence, which hinges on the alignment of one’s leadership intentions and mindset. The first facet involves identifying “brilliant, promising, and visionary second-run leaders” (I). These leaders play a pivotal role in recognising real workers and academics who are central to the institution’s success. According to participant I, this layer of leadership constitutes the foundational “brick and mortar” of eminence, essential for securing publications in prestigious journals and driving significant research and innovation. Participant K also highlighted that

“there is a very important role that the leader should play to enthuse us... and it is the responsibility of the leader to lead us well, to give us the confidence” (K).

Other participants also emphasised the importance of leaders within these institutions and reflected that institutional leaders should be appointed based on merit and vision rather than political affiliation and ideology alignment with political parties.

## 4.6. GOVERNANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

### 4.6.1. Institutional Governance Issues

#### *Absence of Empowered Expert Committee (EEC)<sup>14</sup>*

The lack of a reconstituted EEC has emerged as a significant challenge in the governance of the IoE scheme. Participants highlighted that the EEC, responsible for guiding, monitoring, and reviewing IoEs, has been inactive for an extended period. One

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<sup>14</sup> Empowered Expert Committee (EEC) oversees the selection and evaluation processes of IoEs, conducts quality reviews, and develops monitoring and review systems to guide IoE growth (UGC, 2017b). In short, it is a very important committee for the functioning of IoEs.

participant<sup>15</sup> noted, “Many decisions are pending, and the scheme has become somewhat static due to the EEC not being reconstituted for a long time, approximately two years.” This absence has led to speculation about the government’s commitment to the scheme, with another participant suggesting, “The government may have consciously decided not to support this scheme anymore.”

#### *Perceived Government Disinterest*

There is a growing perception among participants that the Ministry of Education has lost interest in the IoE scheme. The perceived lack of engagement at the ministerial level has implications for institutional leadership and motivation. As one participant<sup>16</sup> articulated, “leadership feel that the Ministry of Education is little or not interested in this scheme then how would you expect a university leader to sort of push it?”

#### **4.6.2. Policy Implementation Gaps**

##### *Inadequate Implementation Strategies*

Participants emphasised the critical role of the government in policy implementation. One participant observed, “there will be a lot of aspects which comes to groundwork and implementation, as far as IoE is concerned, it stops with policy announcement” and requested to “focus more on the implementation part.”

##### *Misalignment between Vision and Execution*

Participants highlighted the discrepancy between the ambitious goals set by leadership and their practical execution. As one participant<sup>17</sup> stated, “we are not on the right path to become a world-class institution.” The misalignment highlights the need for more effective strategies to bridge the gap between aspirational targets and on-ground realities.

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<sup>15</sup> Quote has been anonymised.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

### **4.6.3. Monitoring and Evaluation Concerns**

#### *Ineffective Data Collection and Reporting Mechanisms*

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current data collection and reporting procedures. The quarterly report submission was cited as a major challenge, with one participant noting, “we submit this quarterly report, but what the government is doing to improve functioning based on this data is not visible.” Another participant highlighted issues such as “unrealistic timelines” and the absence of a “summary report” to understand “what is happening in totality.”

#### *Lack of Mentoring and Guidance*

While monitoring processes are in place, participants noted a significant lack of mentoring and guidance. One participant observed that everything is “left to the institutions,” indicating a need for more supportive mechanisms beyond mere data collection.

### **4.6.4. Temporal Constraints**

#### *Limited Scheme Duration*

The relatively short duration of the IoE scheme was identified as a significant challenge. Participants noted that initial years are often spent in planning, with early results only beginning to manifest by the fifth year. For public universities, funding is limited to the first year, further compounding the challenge. As one participant explained, “The period for the scheme is also small... By the fifth year, we start getting early results, and in the case of public universities, funding is for the first 5 years only.”

#### *Operational Challenges due to Time Constraints*

The limited timeframe of the scheme has led to various operational challenges, including difficulties in hiring resources, initiating new programs, and establishing departments. One participant shared an instance where objections were raised to starting a PhD program under the scheme due to the uncertainty surrounding the number of guaranteed years.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter examines the findings presented in the previous section and engages with relevant academic literature to interpret the results in relation to the research questions. The primary objective of this research was to analyse the role of the IoE scheme in building WCUs in India. In order to analyse that role, it was crucial to first understand the nature of these institutions and how they benefit from the scheme in their journey towards world-class status. The study focused on two research questions:

1. What does it mean to be an Institution of Eminence?
2. How does the Institution of Eminence (IoE) status and scheme contribute to the development of world-class universities in India?

The discussion addresses these questions based on the findings and contextualises them within the broader academic discourse on WCUs and higher education policy.

### 5.1. THE MEANING OF BEING AN INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE

The IoE scheme has reshaped the identity and autonomy of recognised institutions by marking a paradigm shift in the Indian higher education landscape. Through its regulations, the scheme has differentiated between private and public institutions, with the major difference being that it provides financial support to public institutions rather than private institutions. Thus, being an IoE also varies.

#### **Prestige and Autonomy**

The findings reveal that IoE status confers substantial prestige and recognition upon institutions in private IoEs. The status serves as a differentiator in the crowded higher education market. Participant G noted that the IoE status provided a “stamp of approval from the Government of India,” validating the institution’s quality. AEs in other countries conferred “social prestige”, such as in South Korea (Rhee & Yin, 2023, p.81). Similarly, (Salmi et al., 2023) noted that

“the beneficiary universities have enjoyed enhanced status in terms of national public recognition and accrued international prestige, translating into greater attractiveness to star researchers and top graduate students, as well as better opportunities to form new partnerships with leading universities in other parts of the world” (p.243).

Many participants said that the status has attracted faculty and students. However, none of the participants from public IoEs mentioned the recognition or prestige received from the status. This could be because they already have a reputation within the country due to their quality and inclusive policies.

The key highlight of this scheme is the unprecedented regulatory freedom available to IoEs, particularly in developing programs, courses, curricula and duration of degree programs, which has unleashed a wave of innovation in these institutions. Participant C’s statement about feeling “liberated” from regulatory shackles underscores the transformative impact of this freedom. The ability to design interdisciplinary programs and modify course durations without seeking external approvals aligns with the flexibility often seen in globally recognised universities (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

However, the persistence of regulatory interference and institutions still receiving letters from UGC and state governments indicates a misalignment between policy and practice. Bhushan (2022) noted the limited financial autonomy in fund utilisation. The bureaucratic involvement hinders the full realisation of the autonomy the IoE scheme promises are similar to challenges observed in other countries’ efforts to develop WCUs (Deem et al., 2008).

### **Resourcing talent**

While both public and private IoEs can recruit foreign students as well as faculty members, they are facing diverse challenges. On the one hand, private institutions have the freedom to hire faculty. They face challenges with funding and other regulatory compliances in recruiting students and faculty. Participant A mentioned that it is good that we can hire foreign faculty, but where is the support to hire them? On the other hand, public institutions

have to follow the government pay scales and rules when recruiting foreign faculty. They can incentivise those faculty by providing other benefits from their own resources. The written policy aligns with the characteristics of WCUs in concentrating talent (Salmi, 2009); however, at ground level, both private and public institutions have challenges. As noted earlier, many positions are vacant in these IoEs, and filling them would improve their outcome (Bhushan, 2022).

### **Financial Resources and Infrastructure Development**

There is a stark contrast in the financial support received by public and private IoEs. While public institutions benefit from government funding, private IoEs are expected to generate their own resources. The dichotomy reflects a global trend in higher education funding, where governments increasingly differentiate support based on institutional type (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010). However, it raises questions about the potential for creating a two-tiered system within the IoE framework.

The financial boost for public IoEs, as noted by Participant H, has been “a big boon,” enabling investments in research grants, infrastructure, and international collaborations. It aligns with Salmi's (2009) assertion that concentrated funding is crucial for developing WCUs. The financial resources provided through the IoE scheme have notably boosted research capabilities, particularly in public institutions. Participant H highlighted the establishment of new research grants and international collaborations, which aligns with the emphasis on research productivity in definitions of WCUs (Hazelkorn, 2015). The existing funding to these institutions for infrastructure and research has been steadily declining (Jayal, 2023; Tilak, 2016).

The sustainability of funding is crucial, and the scheme's five-year support period presents a challenge. Participants reflected that this period is too short. They noted that the funding will end by the fifth year at the time they start seeing results. Altbach and Salmi (2011) underscore the importance of long-term financial commitment, arguing that developing world-class institutions is a marathon, not a sprint, often requiring decades of consistent support.

Another challenge is the fund utilisation and generation of funds. Participant H's observation that about generating 300 crores in 10 years highlights a significant hurdle. The requirement for matching funds, while intended to ensure institutional commitment, may inadvertently disadvantage some public institutions.

The disparity in funding between public and private IoEs raises questions about the scheme's overall strategy for developing WCUs. While concentrated funding for select institutions aligns with strategies employed in countries like China and Germany (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Salmi, 2016), the exclusion of private institutions from this funding may limit the diversity and breadth of India's WCU aspirations.

In short, the IoE scheme establishes a clear dichotomy between public and private IoEs, each receiving distinct support and recognition (see Figure 3). Private IoEs benefit from increased autonomy and enhanced prestige. Public IoEs, which have traditionally enjoyed substantial academic autonomy due to their Act of establishment/statutes, see this autonomy further enhanced under the IoE scheme. Importantly, they are also supported by significant government funding, which improves their infrastructure, research capabilities, and overall growth. This two-tiered approach highlights the pronounced disparities in how autonomy and resources are distributed within the IoE framework, emphasising the uneven nature of support provided to different institutions.

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## 5.2. IMPACT OF IOE SCHEME

### 1. Shift towards multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary

The findings reveal a significant shift towards multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs in IoEs that align with global perspectives on the characteristics of WCUs, which emphasise the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing complex global challenges (Aula & Tienari, 2011; Liu & Cheng, 2011; Yang et al., 2021). Participant I reported establishing new interdisciplinary schools at the University of Delhi, and Participant A mentioned establishing four new schools at OP Jindal Global University.

As Altbach and Salmi (2011) argue, WCUs are characterised by their ability to produce graduates capable of working across traditional disciplinary boundaries. The IoE scheme's facilitation of such programs suggests a strategic alignment with international best practices in higher education; however, measuring their impact in relation to new interdisciplinary programs or schools is difficult. Further, these programs require increased coordination with regulatory bodies and within institutions. There are challenges in implementing interdisciplinary programs in traditional university structures (Lyall et al., 2015).

### 2. Improvement in Research Output

It is pertinent to note that the participants from public IoEs shared their research initiatives, whereas none of the private institutions mentioned such initiatives. Participants shared multiple initiatives and support structures to improve the research, such as supporting faculty by offering grants, organising conferences, and providing travel support to PhD scholars. They have also noted the increase in research publications. Participant J stated financial support contributed significantly to the improvement in research output at public IoEs. However, it was observed that funding was not the sole factor driving this progress. Visionary leadership and talented faculty played equally crucial roles. For instance, with a clear vision for enhancing research, the University of Delhi and Hyderabad initiated multiple strategic programs and, as a result, have made substantial advancements. Participant I mentioned the increase of up to 500 research publications annually. Due to the increase in

research output, Delhi University has seen a jump of 79 ranks in the QS 2025 world university rankings compared to 2024 (QS, 2024). Research output in all IoEs varied. This variability in research output highlights the complex nature of and lack of support towards research excellence, a challenge noted in studies of other excellence initiatives globally (Salmi et al., 2023).

India's overall research output constitutes only 4.8 per cent of the world's total, while China and the United States contribute around 18 per cent each (Kapur, 2020, p. 83, as cited in Jayal, 2023). However, since 2017, IoEs have demonstrated significant growth in research productivity and impact. IoEs have collectively published over 150,000 academic papers, garnering approximately 1.4 million citations. Moreover, IoEs have maintained an impressive average annual growth rate of 35% in their research output during this period (Chhopia, 2023).

### **3. Internationalisation: A far-fetched dream**

While the IoE scheme has spurred significant internationalisation efforts, the path to becoming truly global institutions remains challenging for Indian universities. Attracting international faculty and students to build “critical mass” is a crucial aspect of what Altbach and Salmi (2011) define as characteristics of WCUs. The difficulty in attracting international faculty by these IoEs reflects a common challenge faced by universities in developing countries (Altbach & Knight, 2010). There is a need for competitive salaries and a supportive ecosystem, including suitable housing for faculty mobility in higher education (Musselin, 2004). However, Participant D reflects that, in the absence of the things specified by Musselin (2004), we can attract foreign faculty by providing research opportunities and facilities.

The structural barriers to admitting international students, particularly the requirement that they pass highly competitive national entrance exams like JEE, as mentioned by Participant J, present a significant obstacle to internationalisation. These institutions have to deal with the tension between national systems and global aspirations in higher education (Marginson, 2017).

IoEs are facing a struggle to navigate between local constraints and global aspirations. The experiences of IoEs suggest that achieving world-class status through internationalisation requires not just institutional efforts but also supportive national policies and a conducive global engagement ecosystem. The experiences of IoEs in this domain highlight the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to internationalisation to pursue world-class status, one that addresses institutional capabilities and broader policy frameworks (Knight, 2015b; Wit, 2020).

#### **4. The Rankings Conundrum**

The role of global rankings in the IoE scheme emerges as a contentious issue in the findings. Some participants view rankings as the only way to demonstrate at the global level that India has WCUs. (Hazelkorn, 2015) also notes that rankings have become a proxy for quality in higher education, influencing institutional strategies and national policies. While some participants cautioned against overemphasis on rankings, others argued that rankings have become a marketing tool and that the IoE scheme should be detached from rankings. The view aligns with concerns that focusing on rankings could lead to misalignment between ranking criteria and institutional missions (Kehm, 2014). Another group of participants recognised the problems with ranking criteria but maintained that these rankings provide necessary benchmarks and evaluation criteria that help institutions measure their progress against global standards.

Participant H raised an important point about the limitations of current ranking systems in capturing the societal impact of universities, particularly in the Indian context, where institutions have a strong commitment to inclusivity and social justice. Pusser and Marginson (2013) argue that the “convergence of rankings metrics makes little sense unless contextualised within broader structures of power” (p.560). Further, Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) argue that dominant global ranking systems tend to favour Anglo-Saxon models of higher education, potentially undermining the diverse missions of universities in different cultural contexts.

Moreover, while the scheme explicitly aims for IoEs to be ranked among the top 500 globally in 10 years and eventually in the top 100, their overall performance hasn't improved much in the QS rankings<sup>18</sup>. Since 2017, only 6 out of 12 institutions have improved their rankings. Four IoEs have seen their rankings decline, while the remaining two, Banaras Hindu University and Shiv Nadar University, did not participate at the time of recognition or afterwards.

## **5. The Intangible Pillars of Eminence: Culture, Leadership, and Human Capital**

While the IoE scheme provides tangible resources and regulatory freedoms, the findings of this study highlight the critical role of intangible factors in the pursuit of world-class status. Participants emphasised that human capital and mindset are fundamental to building exceptional universities. As one participant noted, "University output is primarily a function of the teacher and the student assisted by infrastructure, dollar, and whatever." Similarly, participant H commented, "Institutions are made by people, not by money". This stresses the importance of organisational culture and its influence on institutional performance (Clark, 1998; Tierney, 1988).

Leadership emerged as a crucial factor in translating IoE opportunities into tangible outcomes. Participant I highlighted the importance of identifying "brilliant, promising, and visionary second-run leaders" who recognise and nurture talent. Participant K underscored the role of inspirational leadership, stating, "There is a very important role that the leader should play to enthuse us... and it is the responsibility of the leader to lead us well." Altbach et al. (2018) pointed out that leadership is the most crucial factor driving progress at the institutional level across various governance dimensions.

## **6. Governance and Implementation Challenges**

The IoE scheme has broader implementation challenges, which, if not addressed within time, will make it just another scheme in the Indian higher education landscape.

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 6

First, Salmi (2021) identifies the robust governance and oversight mechanism as the critical factor in the success of excellence initiatives. The absence of the Empowered Expert Committee (EEC) since 2021 reflects the broader issues in policy implementation in higher education, where the gap between policy formulation and execution can significantly impact outcomes. Second, the audit culture without meaningful guidance or mentoring again moves the scheme towards more regulations (Shore & Wright, 2024). Developing WCUs requires resources, expertise, and guidance, especially in systems without a long tradition of institutional autonomy (Salmi & Froumin, 2013). The absence of this support mechanism may hinder the scheme's effectiveness in fostering true transformation.

Third, the lack of government support beyond the initial policy announcement, as mentioned by Participant D, reflects a common challenge in higher education reform initiatives. Further, perceived disinterest at the ministerial level has implications for the implementation of the scheme and also has an impact on institutional leadership and motivation. With the disinterest, the original intentions of a policy could be lost due to a lack of ongoing engagement and support (Cerych & Sabatier, 1986).

Fourth, there is the varied structure of institutions declared as an IoE. The Acts/Statutes of their establishment provide different autonomy and flexibility, but the one-size-fits-all approach of the policy is unable to address the needs of different institutions (Cremonini et al., 2014).

Fifth, as noted above, participants underscore challenges related to the limited duration of the scheme. One participant highlighted this issue, stating, "The period for the scheme is also small... By the fifth year, we start getting early results, and in the case of public universities, funding is for the first 5 years only." Altbach and Salmi (2011) emphasise that creating WCUs requires continuous investment over an extended period to build infrastructure, attract top faculty, and support cutting-edge research. As observed in the IoE scheme, short-term funding cycles can undermine these efforts by creating uncertainty and hindering the ability to commit to long-term projects.

## 7. Practical implications

While sharing the challenges, participants also shared suggestions about ways to enhance the scheme's effectiveness that could better support the development of WCUs in India. This section translates those insights into actionable recommendations that may address the challenges identified in the study.

**Holistic Approach:** Participants recommended developing a more robust and fully empowered IoE Policy to enable selected institutions to achieve their goals effectively. AEs have focused on empowering institutions and governance to provide the required autonomy to achieve world-class status. For instance, Malaysia's AEI has the prominence of "empowered governance" (Da Wan & Lim, 2023, p.63).

Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on the need for government support to promote internationalisation for IoEs. Participants indicated that attracting foreign faculty and students is challenging due to systemic issues and bureaucratic hurdles beyond the capacity of individual institutions. Addressing these systemic barriers is crucial for enhancing the global appeal of IoEs.

Participants highlighted fragmentation of efforts, with multiple agencies coordinating similar activities in different formats. They recommended establishing a single nodal agency for IoE-related matters to streamline processes, reduce bureaucratic delays, and eliminate repetitive data requests (Participants E, F, and B). Salmi (2021) argues that a key factor in the success of WCUs is favourable governance.

**Supportive Ecosystem:** Participants, while agreeing that freedom provided to the IoEs is in itself a big step by the government, emphasised that they face challenges while implementing the program. Building world-class institutions requires more than academic freedom, it also needs a supportive environment from the government. Altbach and Salmi's (2011) research identifies multiple factors within the ecosystem that influence the performance of individual institutions. These factors include the "macro environment, national leadership, governance and regulatory frameworks, quality assurance systems, financial resources and incentives, information and communication mechanisms, location,

and digital and telecommunications infrastructure” (p.336). The lack or misalignment of these elements can hinder research universities’ ability to succeed and sustain themselves over time. It also resonates with Salmi et al.'s (2023) observation that one of the limiting factors in AEIs has been the stern control exercised by governments and the lack of genuine autonomy.

These practical implications suggest that while the IoE scheme has set ambitious goals, realising the vision of WCUs in India requires sustained effort, adaptive strategies, and a supportive ecosystem beyond individual institutional initiatives. The success of the scheme will likely depend on how effectively these implications are addressed by all stakeholders in the higher education landscape.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study of the IoE scheme reveals a complex landscape of transformative potential and persistent challenges in India's pursuit of world-class institutions. The scheme has initiated significant changes, yet its implementation and outcomes present a nuanced picture that merits careful consideration. Creating world-class universities in India requires a mindset to become world-class, leadership, sustained commitment to excellence, adaptive policies, and a supportive national ecosystem. As this ambitious endeavour continues, stakeholders must collaborate to refine the IoE scheme, ensuring it can truly catalyse the transformation of Indian higher education on the global stage.

### **Limitations**

This study is based on interviews with a limited number of participants from IoE institutions, potentially not capturing the full range of experiences across all designated institutions. Given the recent implementation of the scheme, this study primarily captures initial impacts and challenges, with long-term effects yet to be fully realised. The study could be complemented by views from other stakeholders such as policymakers, faculty members, students, and industry partners. However, the study could not engage with these stakeholders due to time constraints.

### **Future Research**

While this study focused on participants' perspectives, longitudinal studies tracking the progress of IoEs over 5-10 years could provide valuable insights into the scheme's sustained impact. Furthermore, the study identified an implementation gap that warrants in-depth investigation into the challenges of policy implementation and regulatory harmonisation, which could inform future policy refinements. Another area participants highlighted is the impact of intangible factors like institutional culture and leadership in the context of excellence initiatives, which could be a valuable avenue for future research.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: DOCUMENTS USED FOR ANALYSIS

S.no	Documents
1	UGC (World Class Institutions Deemed to be Universities) Regulations, 2016
2	UGC (Declaration of Government Educational Institutions as World Class Institutions) Guidelines, 2016
3	Policy on the Establishment of World-Class Institutions
4	Press Release by UGC
5	Press Release by PIB
6	UGC (Institutions of Eminence Deemed to be Universities) (Amendments) Regulations 2021
7	UGC (Institutions of Eminence Deemed to be Universities) Regulations 2017
8	UGC (Declaration of Government Educational Institutions as Institutions of Eminence) Guidelines, 2017
9	Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha Starred and Unstarred Questions (Focusing on IoE and World-class Institutions)
10	Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha Starred and Unstarred Questions (Focusing on faculty position, quality in Institution selected as IoE)
11	National Education Policy 2020
12	UGC [Categorisation of Universities (Only) for Grant of Graded Autonomy] Regulations, 2018
13	The Indian Economy - A Review, January 2024
14	Three Hundred and Forty Eighth Report of Parliamentary Standing Committee On Education, Women, Children, Youth And Sports, Parliament of India.

## APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

**SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES  
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

Department of Education  
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Lavish Dudeja  
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division  
University of Oxford

7 February 2024

Dear Lavish,

### **Research ethics approval**

**Research title:** Understanding the Institutions of Eminence Scheme of India: A Critical Analysis of its Role in Building World-Class Universities

**Research ethics reference:** EDUC\_C1A\_24\_017

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:


**Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

**In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

**Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

Lulu Shi 

DREC member

cc: Simon Marginson, [simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk);  
[student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk)

## APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

### **Understanding the Institutions of Eminence Scheme of India: A Critical Analysis of its Role in Building World-Class Universities**

#### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: **EDUC\_CIA\_24\_017**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### *About Study*

The study aims to understand India's World Class Institution (WCI) scheme, which was announced in 2016 and later renamed the Institution of Eminence (IoE). Despite India's vast and diverse higher education system, it faces significant challenges, including low levels of quality, limited research output, and a lack of global recognition. With this latest scheme, the Government of India aims to improve the quality and rankings of recognised institutions, placing them in the top 500 in the world university rankings within 10 years.

Almost six years have passed since the launch of this scheme, making it a crucial time to understand its impact and predict future improvements. Therefore, this study has two key objectives. First, it seeks to define the IoE scheme by understanding how stakeholders interpret it, considering the position pre- and post-recognition by the scheme. Second, it aims to explore whether this scheme contributes to developing world-class universities and, if so, how. The study will primarily constitute a literature review, document analysis of policies, and semi-structured interviews with senior leaders of the institutions and government officials to achieve its objective.

#### *Invitation*

We plan to have 18 participants for this study with knowledge/experience of the Institution of Eminence Scheme, whether they are directly involved in implementing the scheme as a nodal officer or hold senior positions within the institution. In addition to participants from Institutions of Eminence (IoEs), we are also interested in including individuals from non-IoEs but with a high rank according to QS and THE in India, as well as government officials responsible for managing the scheme. This broader inclusion aims to comprehensively

understand how various stakeholders perceive the scheme and its impact on developing world-class institutions.

We extend the invitation to you based on your experience with the scheme, and your insights would significantly contribute to the depth and richness of our research. While your participation would be highly valuable, please note that you are not obligated to participate in the study. Furthermore, you have the option to withdraw from the study before July 1, 2024, without providing any specific reason or facing any disadvantage. In the event of your withdrawal, we will destroy any data collected from you and not be used in the study.

#### *Participation*

The study is expected to span 3 - 5 months, beginning in March 2024. Interviews are anticipated to last approximately 60 minutes each and can be scheduled at your convenience between March and May 2024, either in person or online, as per your preference. In-person interviews can take place at your office or any location preferable to you, while online interviews will be conducted on MS Teams.

Your consent for participation in the study is crucial. Therefore, we will send you the consent form along with this information sheet before the study commences. We kindly request you to sign the consent form and return it via email or during the interview. We will be required to do an audio recording during the interview for transcription and subsequent analysis. However, if you are uncomfortable with audio recording, I can take notes for reference. Please be assured that once the transcription is complete, we will delete the recordings and anonymise the data. Your comfort and privacy are of utmost importance to us. If there is any need for clarification post-interview, we will contact you via email to coordinate a suitable date and time for a follow-up discussion.

#### *Possible disadvantages and risks*

This study aims to achieve its objectives by examining educational policies, government initiatives, and the perspectives of leaders from higher education institutions. The study does not delve into sensitive topics such as issues related to personal privacy or highly controversial subjects.

While the proposed research does not inherently involve sensitive topics, it acknowledges potential considerations for burden, risks to participants, and indirect negative consequences stemming from individual perspectives and policy implications. The study is committed to upholding ethical standards and minimising any potential adverse effects of the research by presenting findings objectively, ensuring that the evaluation is fair, balanced, and supported by evidence, handling perspectives with care, and ensuring the confidentiality and integrity of participants' responses through anonymisation.

#### *Possible benefits*

Participating in this study offers you a significant opportunity for valuable reflection and self-reflection, which may benefit you and your institution(s). By sharing your experiences, you contribute to a deeper understanding of the Institution of Eminence (IoE) scheme, providing critical insights that can shape its implementation. These inputs may be instrumental in informing future policymaking aimed at fostering the development of world-class universities in India. Your active involvement can play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of

institutional excellence in the country, making the study an impactful platform for collective contributions to the higher education landscape.

#### *Data Collection and Protection*

Your valuable perspective, insight, and knowledge are crucial for addressing the research questions of the study. With your consent, we will record your audio during the interview for transcription and research analysis, ensuring strict confidentiality. Following transcription, the audio files will be deleted. Contact information will be retained until the study's completion, while other data will be stored for three years. The data will be de-identified and securely stored on the University of Oxford's server in encrypted, password-protected folders with restricted access to maintain security and confidentiality. The research findings will be presented in a master's dissertation and potentially shared at conferences or published in a reputable journal. Therefore, I would seek your consent to use direct quotations, possibly with your institution's name, but without personal identification.

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

#### *Contacts*

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact: Lavish Dudeja, Department of Education, University of Oxford, Email: [lavish.dudeja@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lavish.dudeja@education.ox.ac.uk)

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact researcher Lavish Dudeja at [lavish.dudeja@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lavish.dudeja@education.ox.ac.uk) or supervisor Professor Simon Marginson at [simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk); Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

## APPENDIX 4: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Could you share about your role and responsibilities at the institution?
2. In your views, what do you think an Institution of Eminence is?
3. What motivated your institution to apply for the IoE status? What benefits does this status provide?
4. What specific resources and support has the IoE scheme provided to your institution to help achieve the goal of being ranked among the top 500 universities globally within 10 years? Are these resources adequate to reach the top 500 and then the top 100?
5. UGC and policy refer to IoE's regulations and guidelines as "enabling regulations," and a lot of stress is put on financial and academic autonomy and freedom.
  - a. What difference have you observed with being an IoE in terms of autonomy and decision-making processes within your institution? Has it changed after getting the status, or has it remained the same as before? How do you see the difference between the two?
  - b. In your view, how impactful are these autonomies?
  - c. In terms of financial autonomy, what specific changes or flexibilities has your institution experienced after obtaining the IoE status, particularly concerning adherence to government rules OR GFR?
  - d. On what aspects have the funds provided by the scheme been utilised?
  - e. Do you think the autonomy granted as part of the IoE is enough to become a world-class institution or be ranked among the top 500 or 100?
6. What additional changes or resources do you think institutions may require achieving the goal of improving their global rankings or attaining world-class status?
7. How does the IoE Scheme support your institution in terms of faculty members and students? Is there any change in the recruitment process for national and international faculty members? If yes, what are the changes?
8. What significant impacts have you observed or experienced as a result of the IoE designation, either at your institution or others?

9. Can you share examples of how the IoE status has contributed to enhancing academic excellence at your institution?
10. What challenges does your institution face with the implementation of the IoE scheme?
11. What's your view on global university rankings and the concept of world-class universities from the Indian context?

## APPENDIX 5: MONITORING PARAMETERS

Sr. No.	Indicator Name
1	No. of domestic students getting higher education in World Class Institutions
2	No. of foreign students getting higher education in World Class Institutions
3	No. of patents filed
4	No. of Institutions accredited by NAAC or other reputed international accreditation agencies
5	No. of inter-disciplinary courses in areas of emerging technology and of relevance to the nation's development concerns
6	Average faculty student ratio at world class institutions
7	No of socially relevant technologies developed at World Class Institutions
8	Average No. of research papers published <b>per faculty member</b> in peer reviewed foreign journals/ patents
9	No. of foreign faculty in Indian World Class Institutions

Source: IOE Output Outcome Monitoring Framework

## APPENDIX 6: RANKINGS OF IoEs FROM 2017 – 2024

Institution Name	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
IISc	190	170	184	185	186	155	225	211
IITD	172	172	182	193	185	174	197	150
IIT B	179	162	152	172	177	172	149	118
IIT M	264	264	271	275	255	250	285	227
IIT Khrg	208	295	281	314	280	270	271	222
DU	481-490	487	474	501-510	501-510	521-530	407	328
UoH	601-650	591-600	601-650	651-700	651-700	751-800	801-850	801-850
BHU	NP	NP	NP	NP	1001-1200	1001-1200	1001-1200	1001-1200
JGU	NP	NP	751-800	651-700	701-750	651-700	951-1000	1001-1200
BITS	801-1000	801-1000	801-1000	1001+	1001-1200	1001-1200	951-1000	801-850
MAHE	701-750	751-800	701-750	751-800	751-800	751-800	951-1000	901-950
SNU	Not Participating (NP)							

\*QS World University Ranking Year: Year + 1

Year of Recognition
  Ranking decline
  Ranking improved