

Explained: Why Indian HEIs such as IITs fell in QS Asia 2026 despite rise in QS Global

Premium

Explore why Indian HEIs, including IITs, fell in QS Asia 2026 rankings despite global improvements, and discover potential solutions.

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IIT Delhi improved from 150 to 123 in QS Global but dropped from 44 to 59 in Asia rankings. | File photo: Sumit Dayal/Bloomberg

Several top-tier Indian institutions, particularly the premier IITs, experienced substantial rank declines in the QS Asia Rankings 2026. Paradoxically, the ranks of some of the IITs improved in QS global rankings 2026. At the same time, ranks of a number of institutions in China and Hong Kong improved dramatically in QS Asia 2026. This article analyses the reasons for the anomaly and the performance gaps, proposes measures for strengthening India's position in global ranking.

Overview of QS Asia 2026

The 2026 edition of the QS Asia rankings featured 1,526 higher education institutions across Asia, 557 of which are new entries, 260 from China and 137 from India. Mainland China is the most represented country, with 394 ranked institutions, three in the top 10 and 25 in the top 100. Out of 11 universities ranked from Hong Kong, nine have moved up, with five figuring in the top 10. India has 294 universities in this year's Rankings with only seven universities featuring on the top 100. Not just that, as many as 110 institutions have gone down by over 10 ranks whereas 33 moved up by at least 10 ranks.

Performance of Indian universities in QS Asia 2026

Out of the top 10 ranked Indian institutions in QS Asia 2026 rankings, nine premier institutions (7 IITs, IISc and University of Delhi) continued to remain among top 10 in 2026, with one private institution, Chandigarh University entered the top 10, moving up by 11 ranks and displacing Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). However, all the nine public institutions have gone down from last year, though by different magnitude.

An analysis of the top 10 institutions reveals that though their overall average score has gone up from 65.1 in 2025 to 71.7 in 2026, the sliding down was due to relatively lower score in faculty-student ratio, citations per paper and internationalization parameters. Though their average score on number of research papers is higher than that of top 10 in Asia, citations per paper is far less, reflecting on the quality of the papers.

Indicator	QS Asia top 10 average	India Top 10 average
Faculty Student Ratio	95.8	29
Citations/paper	98.6	30.8
Papers/faculty	81.7	94.1

Curiously though, the top 10 Indian private institutions have performed better with regard to internationalization indicators, even surpassing the public institutions, by a wide margin. The private institutions that jumped ranks by over 100 places include Galgotia University, Christ University, Kalasalingam Academy, Satyabama Institute, Graphic Era University and O P Jindal Global University. While the top 10 Indian institutions signed research MOUs with a number of foreign universities, they have been unable to leverage them for enhancing the mobility of students and faculty, as much as the top 10 private institutions.

Indicator	Asia top 10	India Top 10	India pvt top 10	Top scorers from India
International research exchange	97.8	91.7	89.6	Univ of Delhi, Saveetha Inst of Med and Sci Tech-99.4
International faculty	95.7	8.4	38.9	Saveetha Inst of Med and Sci Tech-97.6
International students	93	6.1	30.9	Marwadi Univ-95.4
Inbound students exchange	95.5	8.5	31.3	Yenepoya Univ-100
Outbound students exchange	98.5	13.3	42.6	Amity Noida, Amity Kolkata, Marwadi Univ-100
Overall score	98.7	71.7	56.2	

Fierce regional competition and changing the geography of excellence

In the last few years, Chinese universities have invested heavily in international faculty recruitment, research capacity and industry partnerships; several such institutions made notable gains in 2026, pushing many Asian peers down the list even if those peers have improved the absolute metrics. The increased participation by high performing

institutions in 2026 shifted upward the average scores and even small difference in score, impacts the relative ranking widely.

How China and Hong Kong outperformed India

China's national initiatives, such as the Double First Class University Plan, have led to rapid expansion in high-impact research output. Due to intense internationalization efforts, China has also seen increases in global scholar and faculty mobility.

In order to improve their intake of international students, Mainland China is introducing a new STEM visa to make it easier for students to study science, technology, engineering or medicine subjects to study in their top institutions. They are also making postgraduate work visas more accessible in an effort to retain the most talented students.

Indian institutions in QS Global vs. QS Asia rankings

It may look paradoxical that while some of the IITs have improved their ranks in QS global 2026, their ranks dropped in the QS Asian regional rankings during the same year. For instance, IIT Delhi improved from 150 to 123 in QS global ranking, whereas dropped from 44 to 59 in Asia rankings. Likewise, IIT Madras global rank moved up from 227 to 180, while it moved down steeply from 56 to 70.

QS Asia rankings includes new indicators, compared with those in the World University Rankings such as staff with a Ph.D. and exchange of students (inward and outward). Citations per faculty in the global rankings is replaced by papers per faculty and citations per paper. Employment outcomes and sustainability factors are dropped. Weightages for international research network and employer reputation were increased.

The universities that overtook IITs in QS Asia rankings, also participated in QS World, but they improved significantly in QS Asia-specific metrics faster than the IITs did. The stated objective of the Asia regional rankings is to present a specialised perspective of higher education in the region. However, the changed indicators and weightages do not reflect any region specific aspects, on the other hand, they seem to favour the priorities of the Chinese institutions, in respect of internationalization from a regional perspective.

Is the system being gamed?

Reputation scores depend on the composition of survey database and voluntary submission of responses from academics and employers. Institutions with stronger global networks or branding initiatives may receive disproportionate visibility, creating structural bias. Though QS does validation of the data submitted by the participants to a limited extent, there is scope for the institutions to refine submitted data, such as faculty counts, international staff, and research outputs to optimise perceived performance.

Way forward for Indian HEIs

Irrespective of rankings, there is need to address the faculty shortage issue in premier institutions, as hiring in India is constrained by long recruitment cycles, salary competition with industry and bureaucratic processes. Internationalisation efforts of the institutions need to be stepped up by strengthening international offices and facilitating policies and processes to attract foreign faculty and scholars.

India's growing representation in QS Asia 2026 reflects the widespread growth of its higher education system, both in quantity and quality. However, the decline of premier institutions indicates structural challenges in research impact, internationalisation, and reputation.

In contrast, China and Hong Kong's strong performance highlights the importance of strategic investment, global engagement, and methodological alignment. While all the rankings systems have inherent limitations and potential biases, they may be viewed as indicators of global competitiveness. Strengthening India's performance in global rankings require systemic reforms, sustained funding, and proactive internationalisation strategies.

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