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Inclusiveness of differently abled persons in higher education

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Abstract---The Higher Education in India has witnessed many fold increase in its institutional capacity since independence. During 1950 and 2008, the number of universities has increased from 20 to about 431, colleges from 500 to 20,677 and the teachers from 15,000 to nearly 5.05 lakhs. Consequently, the enrolment of students has increased from a mere 1.00 lakh in 1950 to over 116.12 lakhs. Inclusiveness, in this context, refers to application of the principles and instruments of equity, which could benefit groups that have so far either remained untouched or excluded from the processes of socio-economic and political development. The institutions obviously did not understand the issue of access and were under the impression that all the places were accessible for all present and future disabled students. Currently, Indian Higher Education system is in a very poor state in inclusiveness of Differently Abled persons. It has become the last priority and this can be changed only by changing the mindset of the people holding decision making positions. We need to revolutionize the enrollment criteria, curriculum, teaching methodologies and research approaches presently being employed in the Higher Education system.

Keywords---inclusiveness, differently abled persons (DAP), higher education (HE).

Introduction

The Higher Education in India has witnessed many fold increase in its institutional capacity since independence. During 1950 and 2008, the number of universities has increased from 20 to about 431, colleges from 500 to 20,677 and the teachers from 15,000 to nearly 5.05 lakhs. Consequently, the enrolment of students has increased from a mere 1.00 lakh in 1950 to over 116.12 lakhs. Inclusiveness, in this context, refers to application of the principles and instruments of equity, which could benefit groups that have so far either remained untouched or excluded from the processes of socio-economic and

political development. With regard to definitions adopted by PWD Act Census of India stated 'the concepts and definitions of disabilities coupled with measuring its extent and its types contained in the PWD Act, 1995 were found to be extremely difficult to canvass even in normal circumstances assuming people had time, were willing and forthcoming to share this information and there was an expert investigator to elicit this information.'

Census therefore used its own version of definitions of disabilities. Census of India defines five types of disabilities viz. seeing, speech, hearing, movement, and mental. Seeing disability includes a person who cannot see at all (has no perception of light) or has blurred vision even with the help of spectacles will be treated as visually disabled. Where a person may have blurred vision and had no occasion to test whether her/his eyesight would improve by using spectacles. Such persons would be treated as visually disabled. Speech disabled means a person will be recorded as having speech disability, if she/he is dumb. Similarly persons whose speech is not understood by a listener of normal comprehension and hearing, she/he will be considered to having speech disability. Persons who stammer but whose speech is comprehensible will not be classified as disabled by speech. Hearing disability includes a person who cannot hear at all (deaf), or can hear only loud sounds will be considered as having hearing disability. A person who is able to hear, using hearing aid will not be considered as disabled under this category. If a person cannot hear through one ear but her/his other ear is functioning normally, Should be considered having hearing disability. A person, who lacks limbs or is unable to use the limbs normally, will be considered having movement disability. Absence of a part of a limb like a finger or a toe will not be considered as disability. However, absence of all the fingers or toes or a thumb will make a person disabled by movement. If any part of the body is deformed, the person will also be treated as disabled and covered under this category. A person, who cannot move herself/himself without the aid of another person or without the aid of stick, etc., will be treated as disabled. Similarly, a person would be treated as disabled in movement if she/he is unable to move normally because of problems of joints like arthritis and has to invariable limp while moving, will also be considered to have movement disability. A person who lacks comprehension appropriate to her/his age will be considered as mentally disabled, This would not mean that if a person is not able to comprehend her/his studies appropriate to her/his age and is failing to qualify her/his examination is mentally disabled. Mentally retarded and insane persons would be treated as mentally disabled. A mentally disabled person may generally depend on her/his family members for performing daily routine.

Higher Education system in India has the responsibility to provide equalization of opportunities to all including disability. The reservation must be filled in with respect to inclusiveness and it is also mandatory to provide inclusiveness of differently abled persons in Higher Education. The University Grants Commission initiated two schemes in 1998: one of the preparations of teachers for special education at the B.Ed and M.Ed levels and the other for the provision of facilities for promoting higher education for disabled students. About 80% of the respondent institutions reported that disabled students were easily able to reach the classrooms, offices, toilets, auditorium, sports area, library, canteen, Laboratories and the hostels! The institutions obviously did not understand the

issue of access and were under the impression that all the places were accessible for all present and future disabled students.

Statistics related to disabled people in higher education

According to National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (N.C.P.E.D.P.) recently conducted a survey on the education scenario for students with disabilities. All the 322 universities in India were sent the research questionnaire. A total of 119 (36.9%) universities responded.

- In the total of 119 respondent universities, only 1,635 students with disabilities are enrolled. Therefore, only about 0.1% of the students were found to be those with disabilities. While 3% seats in educational institutions are to be reserved for disabled students, the figure of 0.1 % is nowhere close to this figure!
- About 24 universities (20%) clearly reported that they did not follow the 3% reservation for disabled students as mandated by the law of the nation! While the Persons with Disabilities (Equal opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 mandates a wide variety of efforts to ensure equal opportunities to disabled students for getting quality education, it also clearly states that 'all government educational institutions and other educational institutions receiving aid from the government, shall reserve not less than three per cent seats for persons with disabilities.
- In all the 119 respondent universities, only 1,203 students with orthopaedic impairments, only 311 students with visual impairments were enrolled. While only 16 universities had special computer software, only 10 (8.4%) universities provided access to books in Braille! Only 38 students with hearing impairments while 10 (8.4%) of them provided sign language interpreters. Only 22 students with mental disability and It was very clear that awareness about the abilities of persons with intellectual impairment and mental illness was lacking.
- Seven Universities (5.8) categorically mentioned that they do not admit students with disability, conveniently ignoring the law.
- Some of the notable Universities which did not reply to the questionnaire in spite of reminders, were Delhi University, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (New Delhi), Indira Gandhi National Open University (New Delhi), Jamia Millia Islamia University (New Delhi), Bangalore University (Karnataka), University of Calcutta (West Bengal), University of Calicut (Kerala) and Indian Agricultural Research institute (New Delhi), amongst many others.
- About 76.3% of the disabled students were males, while 23.7% were females. The government focus on educating girls did not seem to have much impact on the education level of girls with disabilities.
- 38 Universities (31%) had no disabled students. Only 50% of the 119 Universities reported being aware of the UGC schemes and only 11(9%) Universities had received UGC grant under the schemes.

The Philosophy of Inclusive Higher Education System

Universities and colleges would adopt an ethos that actively encourages anyone regardless of age, gender, class, ethnicity, impairment, sexual preference and previous educational experience to study at their optimum level. Higher education therefore would not mean HE at a general level but at an individual level. Individuals who wanted it would have the opportunity to study at a higher level than previous experience allowed. Consequently access to HE would be a human right and therefore would not be available only to those with the ability to pay or with previous academic qualifications.

Teaching and Learning

Universities and colleges would give equal weight to both teaching and research. Teaching and research are integrated activities. Teaching and learning within universities. Would be structured around a stated commitment to maximise the learning experience of all students. This would involve the use of much more flexible and individualised teaching methods and assessment procedures, and the recruitment of staff from all sections of the community.

Support Services

Appropriate support systems would be in place to overcome any physical, cultural and social barriers that might be encountered by individual students and staff within an HE environment. Despite the promise of future technological development universal access for all is unlikely if not impossible simply because of the heterogeneity of the student and staff population in terms of socio/cultural differences and physical, sensory and cognitive impairments. However, optimum access might only be achieved with the employment of well trained and committed support staff.

Curriculum, Knowledge Production and Dissemination

The HE curriculum in all disciplines and subject areas, whether in the physical or social sciences, would generate knowledge and developments that acknowledges the importance of policies and practices that accommodate human diversity - both cultural and biological. Universities and colleges of HE would be local, national and international resources that produce and disseminate knowledge that would be accessible and available to all.

The Socio / Cultural Environment

The socio / cultural environment within universities and colleges and all the activities therein would seek to accommodate and endorse an overt commitment to and celebration of human diversity and difference in all its forms.

Political Will

All of which would be supported by a primary and secondary inclusive education system and politicians and policy makers committed to the development of a truly inclusive society.

Conclusion

Currently, Indian Higher Education system is in a very poor state in inclusiveness of Differently Abled persons. It has become the last priority and this can be changed only by changing the mindset of the people holding decision making positions. We need to revolutionize the enrollment criteria, curriculum, teaching methodologies and research approaches presently being employed in the Higher Education system.

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