2017

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on

Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Policy Brief 1

Equalising Access to Higher Education in India

Policy Brief 2

Achieving Academic Integration in Higher Education in India

Policy Brief 3

Developing Socially Inclusive Higher Education Campuses in India

Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education

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POLICY BRIEF 3
2017

Developing Socially Inclusive Higher Education Campuses in India

Introduction

The massification of the higher education sector has led to a significant increase in student diversity in campuses. The implementation of affirmative action policies has contributed to the growing diversity in campuses. Empirical evidence reveals that students from the socially excluded groups, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) now have a majority representation (63 per cent) in higher education campuses (NSSO, 2014).

While campuses have achieved student diversity, institutions remain exclusionary, rooted in tradition and elitist in approach. This contributes to the development of a new form of tension between massification and student diversity, adversely affecting the campus environment and the teaching–learning process. The non-inclusive nature of campus environments is reflected in discriminatory practices prevailing in higher education institutions (HEIs). This policy brief highlights the various forms of discrimination prevalent in campuses and the concomitant strategies that need to be adopted to promote greater inclusion in campuses across India.

Student Diversity and Discrimination in Campuses

The higher education system in India is increasingly serving a more diverse group of students. However, students from the disadvantaged groups do not feel welcome in campuses: such students are likely to be first-generation learners hailing from the rural areas, and belonging to poor families from 'lower' castes, who have studied in schools where the regional language is the medium of instruction.

The prevalence of prejudice along caste and ethnic lines, and differentiated academic grounding, result in the discrimination and social isolation of students from socially-excluded groups, both within and outside classrooms.

Manifestations of Discrimination

The discrimination faced by students from the socially excluded groups is manifested in the form of low teacher–student interactions, social divisions in friendship, and exclusionary behaviour perpetrated by the administration. Indirect forms of discrimination are more dominant as compared to direct forms.

Teacher–Student Interaction: Teacher–student interactions are considered to be critical for promoting learning processes and the holistic development of students. Unfortunately, prejudices and stereotypes stemming from the class, caste and ethnic backgrounds of the students often influence teacher–student interactions in both the academic and non-academic domains. The discriminatory behaviour of faculty members in this respect is reflected in the lower likelihood of socially excluded students getting sufficient attention and time during the question–answer sessions in the classrooms, or the opportunity for a one-to-one discussion with the teachers on academic matters. And in contrast to their more privileged counterparts, students from the under-privileged groups are also not encouraged to organise academic and non-academic events in the campuses.

Many teachers consider the former 'untouchables' as 'unteachable' in today's classrooms. Further, they believe that the increasing share of students from the disadvantaged groups stemming from their enrolment

based on reservation rather than merit is the reason for deteriorating academic quality and standards. Such beliefs and attitudes prevent the development of positive relationships between teachers and students, thereby constraining the process of engaged and active learning. The absence of a caring attitude on the part of teachers, low level of expectations and absence of responsibility towards the learning outcomes of disadvantaged students has a major negative impact on the progress of the disadvantaged students.

Teachers also fail to recognise the importance of their non-academic engagement with students. And instead advise students to seek the assistance of counselors who are 'trained' in resolving such issues. Hence, the role of teachers as guides and mentors is not valued across most institutions.

Student–Student Interaction: Students from the disadvantaged groups are also mocked, stigmatised, and labelled as members of the 'reserved category' by their more privileged peers. The latter believe in the ideology of merit and are opposed to the idea of reservation, which is often seen to be compelling universities to admit less-deserving students from the SC/ST/OBC categories. Such debates are also carried into the classroom, with students taking positions based on their own castes; the teachers too usually allow such polarised discussions, without highlighting the concepts of social justice, equity or diversity. The mannerisms, accents and dressing patterns of the disadvantaged students are also denigrated and ridiculed in campuses.

Hence, there is visible segregation that exist for the disadvantaged groups in terms of their access to extra-curricular activities and common spaces like mess halls. They are also separate hostels on the basis of their caste and ethnicity. It has also been observed that wherever, the disadvantaged students actively participate in extra-curricular activities, such activities and student participation is stigmatized, such as, in the National Service Scheme (NSS).

Student–Administration Interaction: Various institutional mechanisms such as 'special cells' have been set up to promote social inclusion and protect students from discrimination. It has, however, been found that despite the existence of such cells, many of these administrative arrangements do not function effectively. Most of the cells function in isolation and without adequate support from the administration. The institutional administrators often exhibit insensitive behaviour towards the needs of disadvantaged students. In addition, these students are subjected to indignity and humiliation while interacting with the administration, which are reflected in the form of derogatory remarks in response to the students' queries such as on the status of their stipends/fellowships, and these fellowships are also often not released on time.

Gender Bias in Campus Interactions: Women students face gender bias both inside and outside classrooms. They are usually either singled out or ignored because of their sex. Further, gender biases are manifested in other ways such as the non-availability of leadership opportunities for women in curricular and extra-curricular activities; gendered assignment of tasks; women not being encouraged to participate in public programmes on the campus; implicit permission to the male students to 'talk over' and overpower their female counterparts in classroom discussions; and attributing women's achievements to other reasons rather than their competence and abilities. The perpetration of gender stereotypes such as differing perceptions of marriage and parental status for men and women also negatively affect the women students' morale and aspiration levels and ambitions. Such regressive experiences lead to self-censorship by women, who refrain from participation in discussions, retreat from the public sphere, and silently suffer the marginalisation they are subjected to in the campuses.

Women also face the issues of safety, sexual violence, and restriction on their freedom of movement and their liberty to wear clothes of their choice, with the male students in some colleges going so far as to impose 'dress codes' for women. Due to the lack of safety in the campuses, women often do not stay back after mid-afternoon hours, which adversely affect their participation in campus activities. Women in hostels face another challenge, that of patriarchal moral surveillance and intense scrutiny of their activities and movements both within and outside the campus. Women's hostels impose strict timings of entry in contrast to men's hostels that have no such policies. Restrictions in the timings of going out of hostels also negatively affect the women students' access to the library in the evenings, especially during exam time.

Women belonging to the SC and ST social groups are particularly vulnerable to both caste and gender based discrimination and derogatory over-tones. Derogatory comments, particularly towards SC and ST women, are used to embarrass and harass them in public. Derogatory remarks take the form of "*quote se ai ho ya khote se ai ho*" (are you from quota or from "*kotha*" – brothel).

The students are very often scared to lodge complaints against such harassment; while active engagement of individuals from women cells is devalued, made fun of by their peers and are derogatorily labelled as 'women activists'. Gender stereotypes and undemocratic behaviours that disadvantage women reflect socially accepted norms existing in the society are also institutionally accepted, thus making them appear 'normal'.

It has been seen that institutional mechanisms created to protect students against discrimination are ineffective. In fact, apathy towards the effective implementation of schemes and programmes targeted at students from the disadvantaged groups is a reflection of institutional discrimination. However, unlike other forms of discrimination, institutional discrimination is difficult to identify as it is deeply ingrained in the way in which institutions function.

Effects of Discrimination

Discrimination and exclusionary behaviours lead to alienation, social isolation, ghettoisation and the limiting of learning opportunities for students from the disadvantaged groups. This negative perspective towards student diversity reduces teacher–student engagement, which, in turn, affects the teaching–learning process, pushes the disadvantaged students into a low educational performance trap and widens the social distance between teachers and students from the socially excluded groups. Students finding it hard to adjust academically and socially, uncleared back papers, drop-out or other undesirable social effects are some of the consequences of discrimination in teaching-learning process.

The cumulative effects of the inequitable interactions faced by women include the lack of confidence among women about their abilities, their diminished self-esteem, and stifled career aspirations. Campus experiences that impose disadvantages on women students preserve rather than weaken the stereotyped differences between men and women in terms of the aspirations and achievements of both.

Discriminatory student–student interaction also leads to identity-based peer group formation in the campus. In the case of higher caste students, the identity-based peer group formation emerges from same group preference. Among the SCs and STs, on the other hand, identity-based peer group formation is a consequence of alienation and the fear of discrimination by others. It also serves as a support mechanism against the non-inclusive institutional environment.

Another discriminatory practice is the lack of sharing of information by the administration on various student support programmes and cells. This is manifested in the lack of awareness among students about the existence of the special cells and the nodal persons to be contacted for registering complaints in case of discrimination or harassment. Students from the disadvantaged groups are less likely to attend orientation programmes or welcome parties or to participate in extra-curricular activities as compared to their peers from the non-SC/ST/OBC groups. The ultimate result is that students from socially-excluded groups are left with a feeling of not being welcomed in the institution; it is hard for them to adjust and unable to form peer groups.

The discriminatory practices that prevent the disadvantaged students from optimising their potential have several implications including the systemic denial of equal learning opportunities; lack of chances for improving their abilities; and restrictions on the democratic participation of disadvantaged groups in campus life, in both the academic and social contexts, all contributing to the possibilities of dropping-out or failing in examinations for the disadvantaged students. In this scenario of discrimination against certain members of the learning community, the broader goals of social transformation through higher education become unattainable. Socially non-inclusive campuses thus impact both inter-generational and intra-generational equity.

Areas of Intervention

- In order to realise the goals of social inclusion, there is a need for institutions to uphold the spirit of equity. Institutional leaders can significantly impact the culture prevalent in their campuses, by purposefully becoming agents of change. They can begin by:

- Constituting a statutory diversity committee with the power to coordinate, monitor and supervise various institutional mechanisms such as the cells and committees designated to ensure the welfare of the diverse student body;

- Making special cells more functional and effective in addressing the concerns and needs of target groups;

- Revitalising women's cells with a yearly calendar of planned activities on gender sensitisation, providing information and professional counselling on career opportunities, and organising study circles around gender issues;

- Organising well-designed orientation programmes for first-year students during the early days of the academic year as this is when students are most likely to encounter difficulties, specifically, in their struggle to catch up academically and adjust socially to the higher education culture;

- Ensuring equal participation of students from diverse backgrounds in extra-curricular activities in order to make the social and cultural life of campus inclusive;

- Assuring transparency, efficiency in the flow of information and wider dissemination of information about entitlements and opportunities for students from the disadvantaged groups;

- Coupling of the academic and social programmes which bring together students academic and social experience for social learning and a more positive campus experience;

- Monitoring and evaluation of student social support programmes targeting the disadvantaged groups;

- Promoting mixed social group hostels and cross-identity peer groups as this would advance social inclusion in campuses;

- Undertaking periodic campus climate surveys that capture the lived experiences of diverse student bodies;

- Ensuring the creation of mixed stakeholder groups such as student and faculty associations, that encourage participation across diverse backgrounds to reduce identity-based fissures on campuses;

Example of a Good Practice: Coupling Academic and Social Programmes

The National Service Schemes (NSS) is one of the avenues for the students to engage with and learn from their diverse peer groups. However, in most of the campuses, participation in NSS is attached with a stigma as the disadvantaged students constitute the majority of the participants in this programme.

One of the case study institutions made conscious efforts to make NSS more attractive to diverse student groups. Its objective of coupling participation in NSS with representation in the student academic council helped in removing the social stigma attached to the NSS. This move helped in making the clientele of the NSS more broad-based, cutting across social groups and disciplines, as a result of which social separation and 'ghetto-isation' no longer exists in NSS activities.

- Organising training for sensitising educational administrators and faculty members on various aspects of diversity;

- Ensuring strict implementation of the guidelines in the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2012.

- Initiating programmes to cultivate civic learning that enables students to identify and eliminate biased and discriminatory thoughts and behaviour; and

- Developing a diversity action plan which specify areas where interventions are required and what strategy have to be adopted.

Conclusion

The massification of higher education, accompanied with changing demographics ushers in new challenges for higher education institutions, and of social reproduction of inequalities. The prevalence of discrimination is a manifestation of the non-inclusive nature of higher education campuses. There is thus a need for institution leaders to be aware of various forms of discrimination on their campuses and to develop strategies for cultivating an inclusive campus culture in HEIs across India.

This policy brief is prepared by ***Nidhi S. Sabharwal*** *and* ***C.M. Malish****,* Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE), National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), New Delhi.

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