Inclusive Higher Education in India – An Idea Lost in the Question of Belongingness

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Abstract

Despite the New Education Policy (2020) reiterating the principles of inclusive education as enshrined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, inclusive higher education remains a distant reality for students with disabilities. The paper outlines the issue of 'belongingness' within policy and praxis as a key factor that prevents students with disabilities from realising their rights. It debates the issue of lack of resources, often offered as the key reason for preventing inclusive education practices and discusses its possible solutions. It builds the argument of how frameworks of reporting and accreditation norms impact shaping inclusive education practices in higher education. The paper concludes by discussing simple yet effective ideas to start the journey of inclusive higher education in India by listing immediately implementable ideas both for universities and individual teachers. It concludes by reiterating the need for educators and institutes to come on board to make what is guaranteed in our laws a ground reality.

Key Words

Inclusive Higher Education, accreditation, reasonable accommodations, diverse learners

When would a seed thrive and become a flower? It must first find the right soil to be sown in. Receive the necessary water and nutrients to nourish, and then the right conditions and the open sky above to sprout into a robust plant that would eventually flower. It would then depend on many bees and others in the ecosystem to spread across the forest or city.

Whilst the idea of inclusive education for persons with disabilities was first defined globally through the Salamanca World Conference on Special Need Education in 1994, it is yet to be flowered in India. This is especially true for higher education. The truth remains that when it comes to inclusive higher education, we are perhaps at the stage of searching for the right soil to sow the idea in.

The cacophony of 'belongingness'

The challenge in inclusion making its way to the ground reality of higher education classrooms in India is that of 'belongingness'. This issue exists at both the policy and praxis levels. Unless this fundamental issue is resolved, policies and efforts will only lead to patchwork solutions that might douse a fire but will not allow for inclusion to flourish.

Let us try and understand this story from the perspective of a student with a disability. A student with a disability in India, who is keen to pursue a career of their choice, applies and makes it to the merit list of the university of their preference. However, they get denied admission because the institute is not ready for inclusion. Whom should they turn to? Which government ministry could be approached to address their challenges? At the state level or the central level?

Where does a student with a disability 'belong' within the maze of government machinery and policies?

One would assume that the Ministry of Higher Education within the student's state would be able to address the issue at hand. After all, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) explicitly talks about making education inclusive for all. The question of belongingness is for both, the students with disabilities and the concept of inclusive education.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD), 2016, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) 2009 to which India is a signatory are located within the legislative ambit of the Department of Disability Affairs, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MS&JE), Government of India. The early rules and regulations regarding the fundamental

issue of inclusive examinations are addressed through guidelines by MS&JE. Both the RPWD and the UNCRPD acknowledge the right to education of persons with disabilities. However, the near invisibility of the issue of inclusive higher education is apparent in the third chapter on education in the RPWD. Whilst the chapter is written to promote inclusive education, the language over-relies on the word 'children'. Making the content seem more school-based rather than higher education-based. Further, whilst there is a separate clause 18 on adult education, there is no exclusive mention of addressing the needs of higher education.

The NEP 2020 talks extensively about inclusive higher education. Subsequently, different government bodies overlooking different higher education aspects have issued guidelines related to the same. UGC issued the '*Accessibility Guidelines and Standards for Higher Education Institutions and Universities*' in June 2022. AICTE issued '*Guidelines for inclusive education for all including persons with disabilities*' in August 2022. UGC has further issued '*Guidelines for Credit Based Course on Pedagogical Aspects for Teaching Divyangjans and Persons with Specific Learning Disabilitie*s (SLDs)' in August 2023.

However, the structure of education legislative control within India which would determine the implementation of these guidelines is a concurrent list subject (i.e., the same is within the ambit of central and state governments). Add to this the fact that deemed universities do not always fall under the ambit of common guidelines. Premier institutes in the country like IITs and IIMs are legislatively free to build their own guidelines within the broader frameworks.

Most guidelines on inclusive higher education are prescriptive. The implementation bodies in colleges and universities are governed by different state, central, or autonomous bodies as the case may be. Each governing body is well within its legal right to interpret and implement its ideas of "reasonable accommodations" for building inclusive higher education.

Coming back to the story of our student with a disability. Despite having all the legislative support to have the right to access education, their next step of action to have that right realised would depend on which institute they applied to, which governing body the institute falls under, and whether that governing body has

the required rules and guidelines for implementation of inclusive education. And more importantly, whether that structure has a grievance redressal mechanism for students with disabilities to approach on denial of their rights.

More often than not, due to the complexity of this maze, complaints regarding denial of admission land up in the offices of the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD). They are responsible for upholding the rights guaranteed in the RPWD and UNCRPD. If the CCPD office is not able to provide a satisfactory resolution, then the student can approach the High Court or, in some cases, even the Supreme Court of India. In either case, they result in individual-based prescriptive orders without any impact on the system that led to the problem in the first place.

The student with a disability today does not 'belong' to the education system. They still belong in the department of disability affairs which cannot deliver education to them. Unless this shift in belongingness to ensure the right to education is steered from within the education machinery, there is not much that can be achieved.

Let us assume, with some luck, that the student was granted admission to the college after the CCPD intervened and the relevant governing body issued the necessary orders to grant the student admission into the course of choice where the student had made the merit list cut off. What would be the possibility of the student receiving inclusive education in an institute that is not ready to admit them but has been forced to give admission?

The story of the permanent scarcity of resources and belongingness of students with disability within educational institutes

The belongingness question takes a new turn when a student with a disability is part of an educational institute. Due to legal compliance, there are many education institutes in India today either being forced to admit students with disabilities by court orders or some that are willingly complying with the legal requirements for admission. However, the responsibility of offering inclusive higher education is far from being met by most.

The battle begins with questions like- *'Whose responsibility is this?' 'There are no resources available to build inclusion for one student, how will we do this?' 'No one gave us training for this, how can we be expected to teach suddenly?'* Whilst these questions may have some validity, they often get posed to the wrong stakeholder. They get asked to the student who has been admitted. The narrative makes it the student's fault for seeking admission and makes it their responsibility to figure out their education without expecting anything from the institute.

It is critical to examine where these questions stem from. As far as the educational rules are concerned, once any student has been admitted to the college or university, and has paid their fees, that student belongs to the college. The college is responsible for delivering education to that student. Why, then, does this premise change when this student happens to have a disability?

Our education system is overstretched. Our teachers for sure are pulled in all directions to attend to various responsibilities. Yet, they meet most of these responsibilities. Why, then, is there a constant questioning on the responsibility for inclusion itself, and its validity or need?

Lack of awareness, lack of disability-linked training and sensitization as a part of teacher training programs are some of the genuine roadblocks on the ground. The fact also is, that there are enough services available through NGOs, private consultancies and others that can fill this knowledge gap. The colleges can also make demands to the government to make resources and training available for making inclusive education possible as against using the lack of resources as an excuse to question whether we need to do it at all. When the education system began to get IT enabled, there were no training and resources available. Institutes invested in building their know-how, and used the services of external parties when needed. How is inclusive education any different?

We have also seen that in colleges with limited or no resources, inclusive education has succeeded. The college management and teachers' attitude towards students with disabilities, acknowledging them as their responsibility, and not relinquishing them to the disability resource centre of the university have been key enablers in delivering inclusive education even in no-resource environments.

Physical accessibility to a classroom on the first floor for a wheelchair user can be a concern at the time of admission and the college may not have the resources to build a lift immediately. However, it does not take resources for re-imagining the possibility of scheduling classes for the student's academic year on the ground floor till such time that the lift or ramp is built.

Access to tactile diagrams to teach economics diagrams may not be feasible for every college immediately. Yet, nothing should stop a teacher from asking a class to take up building a tactile velcro board with simple strips to demonstrate graphs to their classmates with visual impairment.

Building inclusion within higher education demands a more structured, systematic investment from the government to strengthen the effort. But its absence cannot be an excuse not to build the same. A lot is feasible within existing resources as well.

The fundamental basis of learning is the acceptance felt by the student and the eagerness of the teacher to teach. Many doorways could open if we opened up our mind's resources to the idea of inclusion. The scarcity of human or financial resources has many alternative solutions but a closed mindset has no alternative solution. If we can collectively believe students with disabilities 'belong' to the education institutes then the institutes will find the drive, motivation and resources to teach them.

Many institutes have begun this journey already and many might be in the process of starting theirs soon. There is a subsequent challenge for the early starters to continue their work on inclusive education.

The challenge of lack of belongingness for reporting inclusive education work within accreditation norms and frameworks.

The earlier section highlighted the presence of multiple government guidelines that make it mandatory to implement inclusive education. Some institutions are taking steps to implement these as well. When it comes to continuing initiatives,

the accreditation and reporting systems play a significant role within the higher education structures in the country currently.

Unfortunately, the current accreditation systems view inclusive higher education from a rather narrow scope. The NAAC framework's AQAR format has placed the 7.1.3 criteria of *Different Abled (Divyangjan) friendliness* under the broader criterion seven of *Institutional Values and Best Practices*. The 7.1.3 criteria restrict itself to physical facilities, ramps/rails, braille software/facilities, restrooms, scribes for examinations, special skill facilities and any other similar facilities.

Placement of this within institutional best practices and values sets the tone of this being an *extra* or a *good* thing for the institute to do rather than a mandatory and integrated aspect of education. Further restricting the criteria to only physical, technology and special skills needed ignores the crux of inclusive education for the classroom pedagogy and the institute's culture to be made inclusive.

When accreditation values only limited implementation, and the institute has a feeling of scarcity of resources and unclear thoughts on students with disabilities' belongingness, then institutes end up limiting their implementation to only accreditation criteria.

This has resulted in university and college campuses with assistive technology rooms either lying vacant or with dysfunctional technologies. Ramps that are good for submission to accreditation teams but impossible for students with wheelchairs to use due to their unrealistic slope gradient and students in classrooms continue to struggle to learn.

There is an urgent need to review NAAC accreditation criteria for inclusive education. Inclusion has to be embedded within all NAAC criteria with a sub-point under each criterion. Inclusive education practices for students with disabilities being followed for each section need to be highlighted rather than kept as a separate criterion. This will not only enable education institutes to understand the true meaning of inclusion but also enable the early adopters to rightfully have the space to report the depth and quality of their work for inclusive education.

This will also align the NAAC criteria to the UGC guidelines of August 2022 listed earlier and the NEP, 2020.

One might then wonder, given the ground realities currently, is there no way forward?

Change is both constant and slow. One must derive parallels from other journeys of deprivation and access. Right of education for girl children, widow remarriage rights, civil rights movements and many more. Change is inevitable as it is trying to undo the wrongs of the past. Since humanity collectively has been part of the wrong of the past, it takes time for it to collectively undo and move forward.

Some will lead this change; others will follow the change and some will oppose it. **As education institutes and educators, each institute and educator has the golden opportunity to be part of leading this change and scripting this movement in India.**

What can colleges and universities begin with?

Begin with a simple inclusive education policy statement in all communication material – *'Our institute is committed to inclusive education and welcomes students with disabilities to apply*.'

Look at inclusion as a holistic activity and not just building ramps, investing in a few assistive technologies or providing extra time for examinations. Look at the journey of building reasonable accommodation policies and frameworks and building individualised need assessment and support facilities to provide reasonable accommodations. Build inclusive education services that range from – volunteer support, access content, accessible admissions, accessible entrance examinations, assistive technology centres and training. Invest time in ensuring an inclusive ecosystem by working on – teacher training, student awareness, accessible infrastructure, accessible digital ecosystem, curriculum adaptations and inclusive extracurricular and placement services. Review and build inclusive education initiatives through periodical monitoring. Publish and share experiences with other universities, that will enable more institutes to engage in this journey. Whilst this is done, ensure the principle of 'nothing for us, without us' is embedded in all work. Systems on inclusion cannot be built by persons without disabilities alone. Inclusion begins when students and persons

with disabilities are part of discussion rooms and decision-making tables. Build processes that can have all stakeholders engaged to build inclusive education that is sustainable and not lopsided to either the charity model or unreasonable to inclusion.

What can teachers start doing in their classes immediately to make them more inclusive?

As an educator, you already know how to teach. Classes are already filled with diverse learners. Students with a disability just bring one more form of diversity to your classroom. Be open to addressing their need rather than being scared by them. The most effective start to this journey is by asking the students directly how the classroom can be made inclusive for them. Simple strategies of reading aloud content on the blackboard, speaking whilst facing the student, enabling a buddy system in class for students with disabilities, permission to record classroom lectures, and encouraging the use of assistive technologies in classrooms are some ideas that can start the journey of making classes inclusive.

Inclusive higher education is not only about ensuring access, it is also about making education more holistic and universal. Inclusive education strategies have been known to improve the quality of education for all.

Inclusive higher education can become a reality with one educator and one institute at a time. The laws have become inclusive, it is time that we as a society are ready to become inclusive as well. You can start that journey today!

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