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on

Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education

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Equalising Access to Higher Education in India

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Achieving Academic Integration in
Higher Education in India

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Developing Socially Inclusive
Higher Education Campuses in India

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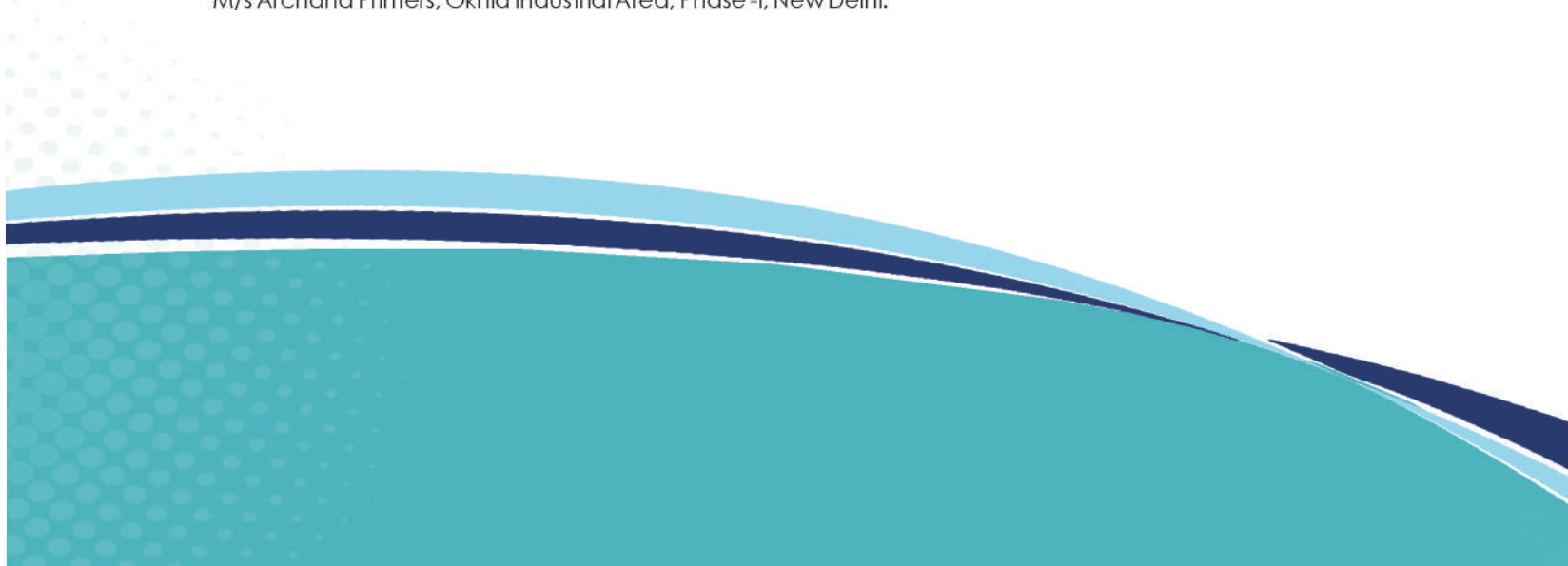
Policy brief are based on the issues emerging from the empirical studies carried out by the Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE), NUEPA, New Delhi. These policy briefs are addressed to the policy makers and higher education managers.

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Achieving Academic Integration in Higher Education in India

Introduction

With around 34.6 million students and a Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 24.5 per cent (MHRD, 2016), India has the second largest higher education sector in the world. The last few decades have seen the transformation of this sector from a purely elite representation in the student body to one that enjoys much wider participation across social groups. As a result of this massification, the sector has experienced a significant increase in student diversity at the institutional level. The student population, which was earlier relatively homogeneous and elite, is now significantly represented by learners from the non-elite and non-traditional social groups, with varying academic grounding.

Accommodating a more diverse student population creates new tensions in higher education institutions (HEIs): while the point of entry has been 'relaxed', indicators of academic success at the point of exit call for significant academic support. The disadvantaged students thus need even greater support during their academic journey to be able to traverse the wide gap between the points of entry and exit. This policy brief discusses the academic challenges faced by disadvantaged student groups who enter HEIs with differentiated academic backgrounds, and the concerted institutional efforts that are required to achieve academic integration in campuses.

Challenge of Academic Integration in Campuses

A particularly pressing issue in the context of widening participation of under-represented student groups is their retention and academic success. The negative outlook of faculty members towards student diversity, the limited

social and cultural capital of students belonging to disadvantaged groups, and lack of preparedness among students at the pre-college level contribute to vulnerabilities in classrooms, thereby negatively affecting both the academic integration and chances of academic success for these students.

Manifestations of Academic Challenges

The lack of academic integration of disadvantaged students in the higher education system is reflected in various forms. It is manifested in through the academic challenges faced by students starting at the very outset of their entry to colleges and continuing until the completion of their courses. Since the pre-college academic credentials of students belonging to different social strata vary from each other, students from the disadvantaged socio-economic groups often fail to meet the demanding academic requirements at the higher education level. This is more so for first-generation learners those graduating from either government schools or schools where the vernacular language is the medium of instruction. Such students initially face difficulties in understanding the core subjects. The difference between what they studied in school and the curriculum of higher education further adds to their difficulties.

The language of instruction especially poses a major hurdle for students trying to cope with the academic demands of higher education. If enrolled in institutions where English is the medium of instruction, students from a vernacular medium find it difficult to understand the lectures or to actively participate in classroom discussions. The unavailability of books in vernacular languages makes their academic integration even more difficult. In fact,

what is really challenging for such students is not merely the lack of language competency, but the ambiguities of the new technical vocabulary of the English language, which prevent an understanding of the basic concepts in an altogether different language even though these students may have studied the same concepts in the vernacular language. This conflict between the vernacular and the English languages signifies one of the main obstacles to academic adjustment.

Classroom lectures are mostly one directional and there is minimal active participation from students. Teachers also make limited attempts to critically assess the competency levels of students and plan their classroom practices accordingly. Although the disadvantaged students require additional learning inputs as compared to their more privileged counterparts in order to be able to bridge the academic gap, prevalent practices are that they get less attention in the classroom from teachers. This negatively impacts their confidence and precludes their active participation in the classroom. Due to lack of confidence, students from the disadvantaged backgrounds ask fewer questions to clarify their doubts, as compared to their peers from the advantaged backgrounds.

The lecture method is a leading method of imparting education in universities and colleges, and limits the opportunities for collective learning. Feedback on individual assignments, which is known to provide opportunity for improvement and further learning, is very minimal. Since students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be reticent and less confident to take part in discussions, group-based learning methods such as group assignments can help students to actively engage in the learning process. Unfortunately, group assignments and opportunities for collective learning and peer learning are also limited.

Since large classroom sizes prevent students from clarifying their doubts during classroom transactions, personal meetings in the staff room and outside the classroom have an important role to play in academic integration. The evidence suggests that out-of-classroom discussions and personal engagement with the faculty is generally not encouraged for students, and even less so for disadvantaged students. Peer support on academic

matters is similarly limited for students from the disadvantaged groups.

Although many campuses offer remedial coaching classes to help bridge the academic gap, there is very little awareness among the target groups about such remedial teaching. Students do not receive adequate information from colleges and universities about the organization of remedial classes. This limits participation from students in bridging their gaps and standing at par with advanced peers.

There is also a caste stigma attached to remedial coaching classes, which are largely perceived to be designed only for students from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This further prevents active participation of students from disadvantaged groups in the learning process.

Furthermore, the lack of awareness about library resources and methods and their usage also impacts opportunities for academic adjustments. Special provisions meant for disadvantaged students, such as book banks, are also not functional in many HEIs. Hence, the lack of opportunities for academic integration in campuses compels disadvantaged students to rely on support from outside the college and university. Consequently, they lose opportunities to learn from their teachers and peers.

The prevalence of negative teaching-learning conditions and processes in HEIs and the lack of institutional support constrain students from the disadvantaged groups from making academic adjustments with the demands of higher education. This leaves them with a sense of loss and deprivation with regard to institutional support, and cognitive and academic engagement with their teachers and peers, which in turn, negatively impacts students' gains in academic competencies.

Effects of Academic Exclusion on Disadvantaged Students

Academic inequalities at the points of entry and limited institutional initiatives for addressing such inequalities are responsible for lack of academic integration, lower levels of academic success, and high attrition rates among students from the disadvantaged groups, including first-



generation learners. The lack of academic integration also has negative implications for students, for institutions, and for society at large.

Lower levels of academic integration and success have immediate and long-term implications for the students. These are manifested in many ways such as failure to pass papers, low academic scores, and high repeat and attrition rates in the form of drop-outs from or delay in the successful completion of programmes.

The consequences of academic under-preparation and institutional apathy towards the disadvantaged students become visible as early as in the first semester of most courses. This severely impacts the gains that students are expected to make in knowledge and cognitive skill development in the first year itself, which has long-term consequences for academic competencies. Since first-year papers constitute the basics on which the subsequent courses are based, under-performance in the first year also impacts their future academic trajectory and adjustments. Difficulty in making academic adjustments during the initial semesters also leaves a feeling of alienation in the classroom among the affected students.

In addition, when students fail in their papers in the first semester, these accumulate as 'back-papers' to be cleared before successful completion of the programme of study. Un-cleared back-papers increase the time taken in completing a degree or course. The accumulation of such 'back-papers' over multiple semesters also keeps demotivating students from the disadvantaged groups, increasing the risk of their dropping out completely from the programme of study.

Meanwhile, those who continue in the programme find it difficult to simultaneously cope with both the back-papers and papers of the current semester. This process of a lower education performance trap negatively impacts academic motivation and becomes a source of disinterest in studies. This, in turn, leads students to engage in academically non-supportive campus activities, thus taking even longer to complete their programme or alternatively dropping out.

The stress of the pending back-papers also has a psychological impact on the students. Psychiatrists refer to

this as the 'back-paper syndrome', which, according to them, adds to mental stress, lowers confidence levels and triggers undesirable social outcomes (like suicidal tendencies) among the students concerned.

Low academic scores not only cause loss of confidence among students both as learners and as individuals, but also affect the access to opportunities for higher studies and to lucrative jobs, in the course of their transition to the labour market. This also has larger implications on access to different types of jobs and levels of earnings. Access to lucrative jobs gets restricted due to lower grades for the students from disadvantaged groups. So, their job opportunities are limited. The consequence is the perpetuation of inter-generational inequities and social inequalities based on academic differences between the privileged and under-privileged students.

Low levels of academic success and non-completion (of the programme) by the enrolled students also has financial implications not only for the students and their families, but also for the HEIs. High attrition rates have negative consequences for the performance and reputation of HEIs, which, in turn, get reflected in the squeeze in funding and loss of funding resources for these institutions.

Apart from fostering loss of life-chances for students, academic failure also has harmful implications for society and the knowledge economy in terms of the loss of potential skills and knowledge required to meet the challenges of the global economy. In the context of these perspectives on higher education as a means of increasing the chances of inter-generational social mobility, augmenting the skills in the workforce required for the growth of the knowledge economy and ensuring overall social equality in the society, it is imperative for managers in HEIs to focus on improving student retention and successful completion, through academic integration in all forms.

Areas of Intervention

Providing academic support to students for facilitating their academic integration requires a multi-pronged approach since individual, peers and institutional factors collectively shape students' learning and development of academic competence. Higher education leaders,

administrators and faculty members can achieve academic integration among diverse learners in their campuses by:

- Providing focused academic support programmes, particularly in the first year, to protect vulnerable students from academic failure;
- Making digital contents on subjects available to students to enable them to prepare for classroom discussions in advance;
- Establishing language laboratories to improve the language proficiencies of students;
- Setting up 'learning laboratories' and tutorial services as these can directly address the academic vulnerabilities of students;
- Effectively implementing of the existing remediation programmes in colleges and universities for the benefit of disadvantaged students;
- Strengthening the existing teaching-learning process in remediation programmes;
- Disseminating information related to remedial programmes widely among the student population;
- Ensuring that there is no stigma attached to remedial and other support programmes;
- Training teachers to engage with academically diverse student groups;
- Arranging faculty mentoring, peer and alumni mentoring mechanisms to provide regular support for deserving students;
- Promoting collective and peer learning opportunities for students in the form of group assignments and study groups;
- Assessing the language proficiency of students and providing support for language competency in the medium of instruction followed in institutions; and
- Organising special classes for improving the general competency levels of students; this could include various academic skills such as comprehension, presentation and writing.

Example of a Good Practice: Academic Enrichment Programme for Students

Remediation is one of the major institutional strategies for ensuring academic success for under-prepared students. However, in most of the campuses, participation in a remedial programme has a stigma attached to it.

One of the case study institutions made a conscious effort to remove this stigma by implementing the following measures:

- Changing the name of the programme from 'remedial coaching' to 'academic enrichment programme';
- Widening its reach to encompass all students irrespective of their social backgrounds; and
- Focusing on classes for teaching the English language while simultaneously providing special subject-wise coaching; also imparting teaching of grammar and employing group discussions to help improve the communication skills of students.

Conclusion

The perception that diversity is a liability obscures and nullifies the larger goals of equity and national development. Institutions of higher learning must, therefore, recognise and adapt to the academic demands of the respective diverse student bodies that exist in a massified system. This includes first-generation learners, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and rural areas, and students who have studied in government schools with the local regional language as the medium of instruction, many of whom are at times academically under-prepared for higher education. Thus, providing thoughtful and systematic



academic support is crucial for ensuring the academic success of students who are at risk of exhibiting academic under-performance. Higher education institutions can

play a direct role in fostering the learning and development of academic competencies among diverse learners in the higher education space.

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Policy briefs 1, 2 and 3 are primarily based on a large-scale CPRHE research study employing a questionnaire-based survey of 3,200 students, interviews with 200 faculty members, 70 focus group discussions with students and 50 diaries of students in higher education institutions across six states, namely, Bihar, Delhi, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.