

## Review Article

# Challenges encountered by persons with disabilities in accessing higher education in India

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### Abstract

In the context of Education, Equity is a commitment of the public education system in the direction of social justice to persons with disabilities. Education became the hope for liberation and enlightenment of the persons with disabilities. Higher education enhances employment prospects and thus creates a dignified and productive life for persons with disabilities. The inclusion of students with disabilities is very less seen in higher education. Students with disabilities have to triumph over the dual obstacle of academic expectations combined with the disability in higher education. After reviewing the existing policies and programmes in India, meager work found that in the higher education of disabilities. Different types of students with disabilities experience a number of problems in higher education, due to this neither enrolling in higher education nor finishing their studies. In this article an overview of disabilities, problems and barriers such as Infrastructural facilities within institutions, attitudes towards disabilities, transportation facilities, lack of assistive devices, support services and awareness about financial assistance are few areas, that students with different disabilities encounter in their higher education is specified, which hinders the entry of students with disabilities into higher education in India. The recent amendment in policies put up pressure on Higher Education system of India to restructure the approaches to address the issues in higher education for the benefit of students with disabilities.

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## Introduction

Education is very important aspect for every person despite of gender, race, economic and social status, and disability. In the context of Education, Equity is a commitment of the public education system in the direction of social justice to persons with disabilities. Equity deliberations in higher education assume a variety of dimensions including that of gender, socio-economic status and disability. Education gives the trust for liberation, upliftment and enlightenment of the persons with disabilities. In higher education Disability has different consequences from that of school education. The world is still struggling for free, equitable and quality education for everybody, from basic elementary education, secondary and finally higher education based on Education for All (EFA) goals. These goals have been adopted in many countries including India. As reported in the Education For All Global Monitoring Report (2010) reaching the marginalized children with disabilities remains one of the main problems leading to wide exclusion of the group from quality education (Macleod, 2014).

The human rights movement has thrown importance to the idea of beneficial action based on justice, accessibility, fairness, equity, gender impartiality towards physical or mental disabilities, justice and other liberal egalitarian ideals. Social justice can be designed in terms of the distribution of benefits such as

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education, therefore concerns for the participation of students with disabilities in higher education and their social profiles in terms of gender, social class and ethnicity (Riddell et al. 2005).

The context of disability becomes diverse in the higher education system. The inclusion of students with disabilities in primary, upper primary and secondary education is being not automatically transferred to higher education. Transition to post secondary level of education insists the formation of an self-sufficient personal and social identity. Various types of students with disabilities experience several hindrances and troubles in everyday life in fulfilling their needs. Most similar problems also can be found in their academic activities in higher education. Although these students encounters various issues in higher education, in spite of that they desire to enroll, continue and completer their higher education, this is what something should be taken into consideration and that requires more attention. A number of problems that affect higher education of students with disabilities in a number of cases results in prolonged studies or in students not finishing their studies. This consequently results in discouraging of potential and needy students with disabilities for higher education, which leads to lower enrolment rate. If enrolment rates of students with disabilities and students without disabilities are compared, then it can be shown that only 40% students with disabilities entering higher education as students without disabilities (Reber, 2017).

In spite of the support for students with disabilities provided as a part of higher education institutions' practice, there are still many problems exist and can be linked to the potential lack of knowledge about the help required exactly to students with disabilities. Various types of disabilities can affect students and each of these disabilities requires appropriate support in their higher education to be successful.

**Table 1.**

*The Overview of Various Disabilities as per RPwD Act (2016)*

1	Blindness	12	Chronic Neurological conditions
2	Low-vision	13	Specific Learning Disabilities
3	Leprosy Cured persons	14	Multiple Sclerosis
4	Hearing Impairment (deaf and hard of hearing)	15	Speech and Language disability
5	Locomotor Disability	16	Thalassemia
6	Dwarfism	17	Hemophilia
7	Intellectual Disability	18	Sickle Cell disease
8	Mental Illness	19	Multiple Disabilities including deaf-blindness
9	Autism Spectrum Disorder	20	Acid Attack victim
10	Cerebral Palsy	21	Parkinson's disease
11	Muscular Dystrophy		

Out of the 21 types of disabilities almost 9-10 types of the students with disabilities can be commonly found in the focus of a number of higher education institutions/universities. It is important to note that there are disabilities that are not visually evident and they can affect students in later stages in the course of their studies. In order to properly deal with this kind of disabilities the teachers are required to possess a appropriate knowledge and skills. Various laws which protect individuals with disabilities against discrimination on the basis of disability. Based on this, a number of laws that promote equal opportunities on national levels have been established and India has put an emphasis on creating jobs for people with various disabilities in several strategic documents. Article 24 of UNCRPD (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), 2008 has also emphasized the principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunities in education at all levels (Ebersold, 2011).

Nevertheless, statistical data still points out to the difference between employment rates of people with and without disabilities. In India there are 36.3% of people with disabilities who are employed compared to 78% of employed people who have no disabilities and only 8.5% persons with disabilities in India acquire a graduate degree (Kumar, 2017).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “People with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, poorer education achievements, less economic contribution and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities” (WHO, 2011a). The major challenge among students with disabilities to access higher education in India is lack of accessible infrastructure, unsupportive classrooms, laboratories, libraries, toilets, dining halls and space for sports and games. Another major barrier is lack of physical and social access for young persons with disabilities in the higher education level.

Higher Education has its own importance in connective with employability, political power and national development. Being the apex educational system, higher education is an important input in meeting the human resource necessities of the considerable competence in the critical areas of national development. It is also a significant causative factor for guaranteeing social justice by providing appropriate mobility to disadvantaged groups of society by building advanced levels of knowledge to develop good quality of life of everyone citizen of the nation (Azad, 2008).

The students with disabilities were also facing various problems of overcrowded classrooms with appropriate seating facility, movement space and poor acoustics. Filmer (2005) study shows that more than sixty percent (60%) of students with disabilities studying under un-conducive learning environment performed poorly in their studies due to the difficulties they faced. The difficulty they encountered included, limited access to learning materials and climbing building stairs. Lack of information about support services to students with disabilities in higher education has been a constant theme in many studies in developing countries (Jameel, 2011; Tinklin & Hall, 1999).

As clearly stated in UNCRPD (2008) and having 145 signatories including India, students with disabilities were given wider chances for accessing education at all levels which will be friendly to the persons with disabilities. This includes making available all necessary environments that are supportive to the students with disabilities including those in higher education level.

Different support refers to things such as good and supportive classrooms with suitable furniture, laboratories, libraries, dormitories, toilets, dining hall, as well as spaces for recreation, sports and games too. However, implementation of the recommendations given by various laws differs from one country to another and from one institution to another. The situation is bad in many developing countries. This can be a result of flawed priorities and considerations or may be poverty among countries in providing quality education among disabled students.

## **Various Issues in Accessing Higher Education by Students Persons with Disabilities**

### **Attitudinal Differences**

Persons with disabilities come across many barriers in their life in different occasions, because they have to manage in an environment where it was not suitable for their requirements, and if they desires to enjoy equality of access obviously they needs to overcome such difficult environment with appropriate modifications (Tinklin & Hall, 1999). Attitudinal barriers are creating the major complications to students with disabilities at higher education in the process of inclusion higher in educational institutions/universities. Some colleges/institutes/universities have enrolled students with disabilities by using different terminology to address them as Physically disabled, physically handicapped students, handicap students, Physically Challenged and very few addresses them as Persons with Disability (Rao & Gartin, 2003).

### **Admission Procedures**

Generally students with disabilities apply directly to the Institutes/Universities in response to the respective institute admission notification. Many of the Institutes/Universities follows central admission process. After thorough verification of all types of testimonials the admission will be given to the concerned students with disabilities. The disability certificate provided by concerned authority decides authorization for the admission under the stipulated reservation quota meant for students with disabilities in various educational institutions at different levels. Suitable candidates then get admission into different

institutes/colleges/universities according to their major subject and preferences opted and availability. The seats will be allotted in various colleges/institutes by considering eligibility norms, availability of the seats.

### **Barrier Free Environment**

Physical access in the environment where they are being educated is considered as one of the major barrier for persons with disabilities. Access issues are reported more frequently in various places into institutional campus area. Many of the times they find difficulties in laboratories, library, canteen, toilets etc., for their barrier free movement. Sometimes they also finds problem in accessing transportation services too.

### **Financial Assistance**

Financial related resources become important for the persons with disabilities to enter into higher education and to maintain proper functioning and continuation of the existing higher education programmes, hence identification and disbursement of financing related policies, schemes and agencies should receive appropriate momentum. There were mainly two types of financial assistance/resources in the form of scholarships available for the students with disabilities; one comes from the Ministry of Human Resource Development/UGC/Social Justice and Empowerment and the some other by the Institute/University fund. For both types of financial assistance students persons with disabilities receive needs to apply for it to obtain scholarship. Apart from these different scholarships are provided by some institutes.

### **Technology**

Using a range of technology in higher education was the momentum and has been increasing from last two decades but students with disabilities are still finding difficult to utilize such technology due to various reasons. To include some technological solution in the higher educational process especially for students with disabilities requires in many cases an appropriate financial budget but also appropriate manpower with skills needed for the effective use of the newly adopted technology such as assistive technology. The very question about effective usage of technology has been pointed out in various contexts, although there has been an increase in adoption of various technological solutions in higher education like assistive technology, still there is a question about the effective usage of this assistive technology regarding making students with disabilities' learning experience better. Students with different types of disabilities need special methods of teaching which can in some cases also help the students without disabilities to better understand some particular topics. The main problem that can be point out when talking about usage of different technological solutions is the very application of this technology (Guri, 2011).

Due to non-availability of accessible content in regional languages, lack of trained, skilled and sensitive teachers, and the lack of awareness about developments in enabling technologies like assistive technology has hitherto rendered the educational environment itself rather difficult to access for students with disabilities in the institutes. Lack of sign language interpreters has become a major issue for students with hearing impairment in higher education.

### **Support Services**

Various kinds of students with disabilities requires to have support services in pursuance of their higher education like reader service, interpretation service, scribe service, physiotherapy service etc., Such types of services are meagerly available in the higher education for the benefit of students with disabilities.

### **Steps towards the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education**

Ninth Five Year Plan onwards there's a small shift from a welfare based approach to rights based approach towards the persons with disabilities. 3 legislations have been enacted by The Government of India for the benefit of persons with disabilities in the context of education, employment and rehabilitation viz. (i) Rehabilitation Council of India Act in 1992 focused on the human resource development programmes, certification of Rehabilitation professionals in providing rehabilitation services (ii) PwD (Persons with Disability) Act in 1995 highlighted various aspects for persons with disabilities like equal opportunities, protection of their rights, full participation in education, employment and society, it has also talked about barrier free environment, social security too. (iii). National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism,

Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disability Act (1999) mainly focused on the legal guardianship provisions for of the above four mentioned categories and creation of accessible environment for successful independent living.

Tenth five year plan came up with specific provisions which are for students with disabilities who are pursuing higher education through the scheme called Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) and also mentioned about certain incentives as scholarships for the students with disabilities studying in India and abroad with good academic record in higher education. To ensure adequate financial support for the benefit of students with disabilities, a special financial allotment in the name of 'Component Plan for the Disabled' has been introduced in the various Ministries/ Department's budget. Scholarships were also provided every year during the Tenth five year Plan for students with disabilities pursuing higher and professional courses. The Eleventh five year plan also projected various developmental steps required in the context of higher education of students with disabilities. The 'Disability Division' under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) was planned to strengthen by making a separate department for the effective liaison with all the other concerned Ministries/Departments. Some other related proposed initiatives were

- Promoting and creating better accessibility and a barrier-free environment
- Establishment of National Institute of Universal Design
- Disabled friendly education at all levels by 2020 in different educational institutes and organization like UGC, AICTE, NCERT, SCERT, KVS and all other apex education institutes.
- Special financial supports like scholarships/ fellowships, residential education facilities, remedial coaching, and other appropriate needful measures to institutes having more no. of students with disabilities.
- Setting up of an 'Equal Opportunity Cell' in all universities to bring all schemes and benefits relating to students with disabilities at higher education under one umbrella for effective implementation.
- Creation of National and State Fund to provide financial support to the persons/students with disabilities.
- Emphasis has been given to ensure accessibility in public buildings (both government and private) within a prescribed time-frame.
- Provision of inclusive education in the Government aided and recognized higher education institutions to the students with disabilities.

Policies and provisions for students with disabilities are being implemented by the different educational institutes and organizations. The National Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) 2005 by Ministry of Human Resource Development deliberated with the issue of inclusive education for students with disabilities. This action plan highlighted the equal importance of students with disabilities in the higher education.

The key provisions are as follows:

- Strengthen the number of students with disabilities in accessing secondary education. Smooth transition for young students with disabilities desires and able to access secondary and higher education in the inclusive setup. Consistency in providing for barrier free examination facilities across states/ Central boards and in higher educational institutes/organizations.
- Provision of resource support such as special educators, adapted teaching learning material and rehabilitation professionals of various disabilities ample numbers to assist mainstream teachers in the schools, colleges and universities.
- Increase in number of young students with disabilities in mainstream higher education and vocational courses

In 1999-2000, Teachers Preparation in Special Education (TEPSE) and Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) the important schemes in the context of higher education for students with



disabilities implemented with an aim to develop courses in the field of special education programmes to produce special teachers, counselors and also to provide facilities in various forms for the benefits of students with disabilities. Even though they expected to be implemented in all the higher educational institutions in India but it couldn't happen due to various reasons.

TEPSE-HEPSN has been initiated marginally with eight higher educational institutes such as universities and colleges and financial aid granted within the time frame. HEPSN is an enormously comprehensive scheme in promoting higher education for students with disabilities (NCPEDP, 2005). The three important components of this scheme are :

- Enabling Units in the universities and colleges : The first was the establishment of Disability Units in various universities and colleges of India, to facilitate admission of the students with disabilities in these institutions and to provide guidance and counseling to them. These Units were meant to support students with disabilities to seek productive employment. In order to create awareness on disability and its related issues in the higher education organizations and also to provide essential guidance and counseling to persons with disabilities, establishment of resource units were proposed in the name of Enabling Units in the universities of India.
- Provision of barrier free access to the students with disabilities: The second was to improve the accessible barrier free environment in the higher education institutions by making the infrastructure, architecture and other related teaching learning environment more disabled-friendly. To improve in admission some incentives were also announced for higher educational institutions.
- Provision of Assistive Devices to increase Educational Services for students with disabilities: The third was the provision of special equipment such as assistive, adaptive devices to supplement educational services for students with disabilities in higher education level.

Though the initiatives have been taken towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education institutions still there are only few overt signs of improvement in the education of children with disabilities. We could find meager research in the context of problems faced by students with disabilities in higher education institutes. As we know that achieving mainstream issues of disability is not that much of easy and can be succeed only in long run by continuing very important steps within and outside the environment of higher educational institutes. students with disabilities enter into Higher educational institutions at a critical age. This is the stage where these students are coming out of their safety zone and ready to adjust in a common living society, friends, school or college etc.,

Due to the entry into the outer world, students with disabilities needs face many barriers. In this connection National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP, 2005) made an attempt to find out the students with disabilities data in 119 Universities, but only 52 universities were revealed the records on the number of students enrolled in the respected universalities. From the reported numbers by NCPEDP, 2005 we could understand that only 0.1% of the students with disabilities were found to be enrolled in the various organizations. As earlier 3% now 4% seats are reserved for the students with disabilities in different educational institutes, as per the NCPEDP, 2005 report it reflects that these students with disabilities are not able to reach the higher education institutes.

The higher educational organizations as disability Service providers requires to understand and recognize the need for multicultural awareness on various issues of disability and prepare for the crucial role in the success of students with disabilities education and personal life (Reber, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Students with disabilities also have equal rights and entitlements; right against discrimination, right to self-respect and dignity, right to self-assertion and right to freedom being citizen of the country. Education enhances the skills and capabilities of any individual, which leads to comprehensive development of the individual in many spheres of life. Rights underpinnings in all the schemes, policies, benefits and provisions for students with disabilities in higher education should be given prime importance to address the needs of

students with disability in higher education to compete in aspects of the life with typically developed in the society and lead to better and productive life. Their problems and barriers in higher education like Infrastructural facilities in the institutions, attitudes towards persons with disabilities, transportation facilities, provision of assistive devices, support services and financial assistance to be strengthened for the benefit of them.

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