

## Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education: Strategies for Ensuring Access and Success

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### Abstract

Equity and inclusion in higher education are critical for fostering diverse and just learning environments. Some children are particularly at risk of not attending or completing school – those from poor families; those in remote rural communities; girls; children infected with or affected by HIV; working children or those with disabilities; children from ethnic or other minority groups and those in countries affected by conflict or natural disaster. Gender inequality is a cross-cutting issue in every type of educational disadvantage. Equity requires securing all children's rights to education, and their rights within and through education to realize their potential and aspirations. It also requires implementing and institutionalizing arrangements that help ensure all children can achieve these aims. Inclusion requires responding to the diversity of needs among all learners, through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion from and within education. It involves changes in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, driven by a common vision that covers all children and the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all of them. This paper examines the challenges and barriers to equity and inclusion and proposes strategies for institutions to implement policies and practices that promote fairness, diversity, and belonging. The discussion highlights policy recommendations, institutional reforms, and best practices to ensure equitable access and success for all students.

**Key words:** LRE, STEM, DEI, RTE, SEDGs, marginalized groups etc.

### Introduction

Equity and inclusion in education are becoming more and more important to governments and education policy makers as a result of a number of significant worldwide issues, including changing demographics, the refugee and migrant crisis, growing inequality, and climate change. These changes have increased the variety of the country's demographics and raised questions about how inclusive and egalitarian educational institutions can be for all children. Higher education institutions serve as catalysts for social mobility and innovation. However, systemic barriers, including socioeconomic disparities, racial inequities, and structural biases, continue to hinder the full participation of marginalized communities. The significance of equity and inclusion in higher education provides strategies to create more accessible and inclusive institutions. Inclusive education means that "Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups." (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994).

### Understanding Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Inclusive education means that all children regardless of their ability level, are included in the main stream classroom, or in the most appropriate or least restrictive environment (LRE), that students of all ability levels are taught as equals, and that teachers must adjust their curriculum and teaching methodologies so that

all students benefited (Dua and Dua, 2017). Thus, inclusiveness is about creating an environment where each and every member of any type of community is an integral part of the society notwithstanding physical or mental capabilities, disabilities, economic status and man-made constructs like religion or caste (Bhama, 2009). Equity requires securing all children's rights to education, and their rights within and through education to realize their potential and aspirations (UNESCO, 2010). Equity ensures that resources and opportunities are distributed based on individual needs, while equality provides the same resources to everyone, regardless of their starting point. Equity recognizes, everyone does not begin in the same place within society. Rather, some individuals may face adverse conditions and circumstances in their lives that make it more challenging to achieve the same goals, with the same amount of effort. Equity advocates for those who may have been historically disadvantaged, making it difficult for them to be successful within society. Furthermore, what is "fair" as it relates to equity is not a question of what the same is, but rather the point of where a person begins. In addition, equity takes into account numerous factors in determining what is fair. Equality is one of the central principles of democracy. Additionally, equality is based on the belief that all people should have the same opportunities to be successful and have a productive life. Equality is conceptually rooted in fairness.

The idea of equality is key to the notion that everyone is able to contribute to society based on their efforts and contributions, instead of their status or position. Equality was predominantly important during the civil rights era when individuals did not have equal standing or treatment in society. It is important to note, there has been regular debate about whether equality is enough, and if equity is considered a more important principle to take into consideration the concept of "fairness". Equity and equality are different concepts. Equity means everyone is provided specific resources they need to be successful. Equality means everyone is treated the same exact way, regardless of differences and specific needs. Inclusion means the active and intentional engagement of diverse students, faculty, and staff to foster a sense of belonging. An excellent education system is that which includes all students, and welcomes and supports them to learn, whoever they are and whatever their abilities or requirements. This means making sure that teaching and the curriculum, school buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport and toilets are appropriate for all children at all levels. Inclusion requires non-discrimination, best interests of the children, right of the child to be heard, protection from violence and abuse, opportunity for life within the community, support with mobility, access to health care, habilitation and rehabilitation. Inclusion promotes participation in public life, exercise of legal capacity, work and employment as well as adequate standard of living (UNICEF 2017). Importance of inclusion lies in the fact that it enhances educational outcomes, encourages diverse perspectives and innovation, reduces social and economic disparities and strengthens institutional reputation and effectiveness.

### **Inclusion and equity as principles**

According to Ainscow et al. (2006) inclusion in education should be seen as continuous process. The pursuit of better ways to respond to diversity must be viewed as an ongoing endeavor. It's about learning to accept and even benefit from differences. In this sense, both adults and children begin to view diversity more favorably as a catalyst for learning. Inclusion should be focused on locating and eliminating obstacles. To plan for improvements in policy and practice, it entails gathering, assembling, and assessing data from a wide range of sources within specific contexts. It is also about using different types of evidence to encourage creativity and problem-solving. Further inclusion should aim to increase every student's attendance, involvement, and academic performance. In this case, presence refers to the location of the school and the degree of consistency and punctuality with which the children attend; participation is related to the quality of their experiences there and must therefore take into account the opinions of the students themselves; and achievement is about the results of learning across the curriculum, not just test or exam scores. Last but not the least it should give special attention to student groups that might be at danger of marginalization, exclusion, or poor performance.

This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups that are statistically most at risk are carefully monitored, and that, where necessary, steps are taken to ensure their presence, participation, and achievement within the education system. Meanwhile, it's important to watch out for students who might be missed. A well-planned discussion of these components can result in a broader comprehension of the inclusion principle. Even though this kind of discussion is inherently slow and may never end, it can create the conditions that inspire schools to take a more inclusive approach. Importantly, this approach needs to aim to include all parties involved, such as communities, families, media, and religious and political leaders. Those working in local and national education district offices must also be involved.

### **Barriers to Equity and Inclusion**

Socioeconomic barriers include poverty, high tuition fees, lack of financial aid and the digital divide disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds. Biases e.g., toward girls, children living with or affected by HIV, children with disabilities, ethnic minorities affect equity and inclusion. Health and nutritional status of children, lack of identification documents/birth certificate, prevalence of child labor on plantations, in industry, or the informal economy are big barriers to inclusion. Due to systemic racism, discrimination in admissions, faculty hiring, and curriculum design limits opportunities for underrepresented groups. Inadequate accommodations for students with disabilities hinder full participation. Underrepresentation of women and non-binary individuals in STEM and leadership positions also affects inclusion. Lack of school instruction materials, lack of appropriate infrastructure for children with disabilities, quality of teaching and teacher training, the number of teachers per class, attrition rates of teachers and nonteaching education staff, school safety, conflict, violence, sexual harassment, and corporal punishment all these affect inclusion. Lack of transportation, distance to school, lack of water and sanitation at school, poor condition of school facilities, seasonal factors such as rains/ flooding and remoteness and lack of rural development are barriers to inclusion. Students who are the first in their families to attend college often lack the social capital to navigate academic environments.

### **Strategies for Ensuring Equity and Inclusion**

The Government of India has created numerous policies around special education since the country's independence in 1947. The constitution, the Kothari Commission, the 2005 Action Plan for Children and Youth with Disabilities and the 2006 National Policy for People with Disabilities have always leaned towards inclusion. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009) is a recent development towards inclusion in India. Statistics on disability in India vary widely and accuracy of statistics is always questionable. Census 2011 was designed to cover most of the disabilities listed in the "Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995". The World Bank Report (2007) highlighted that 38 per cent of the children with disabilities in the age group 6-13 years are out of school. Irrespective of the estimate, in India the fact remains that a majority of children with disabilities do not have access to education (Das, 2013). Kalyanpur (2008) drawing from the National Census data, found that up to 94% of children with disabilities "did not receive any educational services. To ensure equity and inclusion institutional policies and leadership should make strategies to develop and enforce anti-discrimination policies, promote leadership diversity through intentional hiring and mentorship programs, establish offices for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to oversee implementation. Efforts should be made to make education accessible and affordable, scholarships should be increase and need-based financial aid should be given. Online and hybrid learning should be expanded to accommodate diverse student needs. Inclusive

admission policies should be developed that consider life experiences beyond standardized tests. Curriculum and pedagogy should be developed to incorporate diverse perspectives in course materials. Use of culturally responsive teaching practices should be adopted. Faculty should be provided with training on unconscious bias and inclusive pedagogy. Support systems for marginalized students should be created. Mentorship programs should be created for underrepresented students. Mental health and wellness services should be established to fulfill diverse needs. Student organizations advocating for equity and inclusion should be supported. In the last accountability and continuous improvement survey should be done. Regular equity audits and climate surveys should be conducted. Measurable goals and track progress in diversity and inclusion efforts should be set. Students, faculty, and the community should be engage in policy development.

### **Equity and Inclusion in NEP-2020**

NEP 2020 places a strong emphasis on fostering an inclusive educational culture and structure in our educational system through the provision of infrastructure support and curriculum modifications that include teachings on human values like empathy, tolerance, respect for all people, human rights, gender equality, non-violence, global citizenship, inclusion, and equity. It exhorts the parties involved to use a sensitization program to break down the barriers and eliminate prejudices and stereotypes.

The policy seeks to advance fairness, foster inclusion, and foster tolerance for diversity by creating knowledge among students, instructors, and other school personnel on different cultures, faiths, languages, gender identities, etc. Through effective resource allocation, stronger and better governance, and collaboration and support across schools for the education of children with disabilities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), the implementation of the policy would empower stakeholders. Through reform and empowerment of our educational system from the standpoint of inclusion and equity for all students in schools, school complexes will have an impact on education. School leaders, teachers, students, support staff, parents, and local residents are called upon to work together to provide all possible assistance to school education.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Equity and inclusion in higher education require intentional efforts across multiple dimensions, including policy, curriculum, financial accessibility, and institutional culture. Universities must commit to ongoing assessment and adaptation to create truly inclusive environments. Policymakers, educators, and students all play vital roles in ensuring that higher education serves as an engine for opportunity and social progress. The goal of inclusion is to give all students, including those with special needs or disabilities, equitable opportunity.

However, there are significant barriers to its successful implementation due to social, environmental, and attitude issues. Progress can be hampered by unfavorable attitudes, assumptions, poor communication, a strict educational system, a lack of resources, discriminatory behaviors, and ignorance. In order to overcome these obstacles, it is crucial to implement strategies such comprehensive teacher training and professional development programs, creating an inclusive school culture, a supportive learning environment, making adjustments, and involving parents and the community. It is not just educators who have the duty to promote inclusion. It necessitates a coordinated effort in addition to a shift in beliefs and behaviors. Schools may create inclusive learning environments that empower and support all students by implementing the suggested methods.

**Recommendations**

1. Increase funding for scholarships and need-based aid.
2. Develop more inclusive curricula and teaching methods.
3. Improve accessibility for students with disabilities.
4. Expand mentorship and support networks for marginalized groups.
5. Establish accountability measures to track progress in equity initiatives.

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