Equity and Inclusion in Open and Distance education

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Abstract

Education is means to achieve social justice and equality. Equity and inclusion are essential elements for attaining sustainable development goals. Inclusive and equitable education is crucial for achieving an inclusive and equitable society. National education policy 2020 emphasizes bridging social category gaps through access, participation and learning outcomes. Quality higher education opens a vast array of possibilities that lifts both individuals as well as communities from cycles of disadvantage. Higher education institutions play a key role in providing socio-emotional and academic support. Student's counselling and mentoring programmes, sensitization of faculty, counsellor, and students on gender-identity issue and its inclusion in curricular and co curricular activities. Conducive environment supports strict enforcement of all no-discrimination and anti-harassment rules in Higher education institutions. Open and Distance education in Uttarakhand Open University is favorite destination of higher education for learners willing to get quality higher education for marginalized section of society.

Key words- Equity, Inclusion, Distance Education.

Introduction-

Education as a basic human right was enshrined in the "1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights". It is crucial to tackling global poverty, improving health and enabling people to play a full, active part in their communities. Inclusive education is fundamental right to access education and not be excluded. Education programmes and services for the peoples concerned shall be developed and implemented in co-operation with them and shall incorporate their histories, their knowledge and technologies, their value systems and their further social, economic and cultural aspirations. Inclusive education is not a new idea. Communities have practiced inclusion for centuries in India. Inclusion becomes sustainable, with community ownership and involvement.

UNESCO's definitions of inclusion stem from the pioneering 1994 Salamanca Conference, and emphasize that "inclusion is a movement, directly linked to improvements in the education system as a whole: based on strong family ties, the value of the individual, coexistence and survival use flexible formats and locations, responding to individual learning needs". Convenient physical or social space and all community members as resources ,relevant and functional content and methods, such as: cooperative and collaborative learning, individual to individual,

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peer tutoring, learning-by-doing and apprentice- ship in real life restructuring cultures, policies and practices to respond to the diversity of students in their locality, learning and participation of all students vulnerable to exclusionary pressures (i.e. not just students with disabilities) ,improving schools for staff as well as students overcoming barriers to access and participation, the right of students to be educated in their local community ,seeing diversity as a rich resource, not as a problem , mutually sustaining relationships between institutions and communities , seeing inclusive education as an aspect of an inclusive society.

Entry into quality higher education can open a vast array of possibilities that can lift both individuals as well as communities out of the cycles of disadvantage. The approach to equity and inclusion must be common across school and higher education. Furthermore, there must be continuity across the stages to ensure sustainable reform. There are certain factors of substantially more intense in higher education. These must be addressed specifically, and include lack of knowledge of higher education opportunities, economic opportunity cost of pursuing higher education, financial constraints, admission processes, geographical and language barriers, poor employability potential of many higher education programmes, and lack of appropriate student support mechanisms. (https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_) Quality education provides people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and creativity needed to solve problems locally and globally, and actively contributes to the sustainable and democratic development of societies. Thus, our aspirations for quality education must go beyond narrow learning outcomes. While literacy and numeracy are necessary and part of the broader set of competences that a quality education offers, they are far from sufficient. Limiting the outcomes of education to one or two easily measurable indicators may encourage teachers to teach to the test and restricts the transformative role and potential of education.

"Equitable quality education can lead to peace, social justice and sustainable development; the challenge is to aim for more than measurable short-term outcomes". This is an opportunity to put in place a framework for sustainable development that is aspirational and courageous. EI advocates a "broad notion of quality education, which covers all elements of the education process, including broad-based curricula, adequate teaching and learning materials, and reasonable class sizes". Every student has the right to be taught by a qualified and well supported teacher, and to learn in safe schools with adequate infrastructure, facilities and resources.

Research methodology-This is qualitative study based on content analysis. Secondary sources were used for collecting data .Qualitative data is analysed and interpreted to draw conclusions.

Collection of qualitative data-
The global education development agenda reflected in the Goal 4 (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by India in 2015 - seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. (NEP_2020)

"A good education institution is one in which every student feels welcomed and cared for, where a safe and stimulating learning environment exists, where a wide range of learning experiences are offered, and where good physical infrastructure and appropriate resources conducive to learning are available to all students. Attaining these qualities must be the goal of every educational institution."

Inclusive education is guided by principles that will honor and promote respect, dignity, equality, diversity, human rights, justice, self determination, mutual responsibility, inclusion, moral courage. All persons are entitled to equal access and opportunity. Equality demands protection from all forms of discrimination or harm, and access to the supports necessary to enable equal participation.(https://inclusiveeducation.ca/about/what-is-ie/)Widening access to higher education aimed at improving social justice by granting conditions of access to all social groups and improving economic performance. Social inequalities can be reduced through the massification of higher education. The higher education sector in India has experienced an unprecedented expansion in the recent decades.

"The idea of inclusive growth is based on the notion of equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity demands that deserving students from all social groups are provided sufficient opportunities for self-development. The main bases of exclusion in India are region, religion, caste, gender, economic disparities, and disabilities". Therefore, strategies for achieving inclusive growth necessarily need to include affirmative policies targeting the socially disadvantaged, and marginalized, economically poor, and people with disabilities. The progress made in any society needs to be assessed on the basis of the distribution of benefits among different social groups for assessing the inclusiveness of growth and development.

"The massification of higher education helps to equalize geographical inequalities and distribution of higher education facilities." In India both Public & Private institutions play important role in dissemination of higher education in India .Private institutions are mostly established in the urban, sub-urban, and semi-urban areas where there is a market for higher education due to the presence of students with the capacity to pay the fees. This leads to polarisation of access to higher education and regional inequalities in the distribution of higher education opportunities. The experience in India indicates that expansion of higher education in the country is accompanied by widening regional disparities. The disparities have widened because of varying rates of growth of HEIs among the states.

Kalpana (2022); revealed that inclusive education requires recognizing impairment as many forms of human diversity and appreciating diversity as a resource rather than challenge. Students who have participated in inclusive education develop qualities such as patience and trust and became more aware and responsive to the needs of others .Inclusive education supports to develop increased awareness and acceptance of diversity among students.

Varghese (2019);stated that "public policies have helped in widening access to higher education for students from the disadvantaged classes, a strict implementation of reservation policies has helped enhance the participation of members of the disadvantaged groups in higher education". Similarly, the success of EFA programmes has resulted in the creation of a larger pool of

secondary school graduates who are eligible for pursuing higher education. Various incentive schemes being offered by the Government have also attracted students to join HEIs while also helping to retain them in the institutions until the completion of their studies.

An analysis of the employment market shows that "labor market outcomes do not favor graduates from the disadvantaged groups". Unemployment rates are high and earning levels are low among graduates from the disadvantaged groups in comparison to their counterparts from privileged backgrounds. Access to higher education has improved across all segments of the population, including those from the disadvantaged groups following massification of the sector.

Interpretation

The total estimated student enrolment is 38536,359 out of which nearly "51% are male and rest 49% is female students. SC student enrolment is 14.7% of the total enrolment and the male-female ratio is more or less similar to the all Social Groups. On the other hand, students belonging to ST group constitute only 5.6% of the total student enrolment and male female ratio is similar to all Social Group. 37% of the total students belong to OBC with 50.5% of male OBC students. According to the response received during the survey, 5.5% students belong to Muslim Minority and 2.3% are from other Minority Communities. Muslim Minority and other Minority communities have more female students than male students. There are 92,831 PWD students enrolled in higher education. Out of which 47,830 are male and 45,001 are female students. Female participation among PWD students is highest in ST group with 119 female per 100 male followed by SC (78)" (source-AISHE 2019-2020).

"Distance education has become a useful mode of obtaining degrees for a large number of students who are staying in far off and remote areas and for whom accessing universities on regular basis is still a dream". Distance enrolments constitute 11.1% of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 44.5% are female students. (AISHE 2019-2020)Reveals that Open and Distance education has key role in enhancing accessibility towards higher education. For qualitative higher education there is need for focusing on Open and Distance education .Open and Distance education plays deciding role for strengthening equity and inclusion in higher education. Philosophy of odl is based on concept of anyboby.anytime.anywhere, anydevice, any mode. Open and Distance education plays important role in dissemination of Higher education in Uttarakhand a state of India.

Estimated Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher education in India is 27.1%, which is calculated for 18-23 years of age group. For Scheduled Castes it is 23.4% and for Scheduled Tribes it is 18.0%. GER for male population at all India level is 26.9% whereas for SC Male it is 22.8% and 18.2% for ST male. Similarly, GER for female population at all India level is 27.3% whereas for SC female it is 24.1% and for ST female, it is 17.7%. The GER for female in all social groups is highest in Sikkim with 67.6%. Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh,

Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, Punjab, Telangana and Uttarakhand also have GER of more than 30% for female in all categories. (AISHE 2019-2020)Women among the lower-caste group suffer more acutely in terms of access to higher education vis-à-vis women from the higher castes. For instance in 2014, as against the overall average of 27.73 per cent for women, the GER was 13.05 per cent among the ST women followed by 18.17 per cent among the SC women, 23.11 per cent for OBC women, and 35.39 per cent for the non-SC/ST/OBC women.(Varghese et al 2019).The Uttarakhand Open University mainly caters to the development of women, tribals and those sections of society which have been left out of main stream education. In a short time span the University has evolved considerably and has been successful in reaching out to the unreached.

Conclusion-
Education or lack of it impacts the economic growth of nations, individual incomes, and the social well-being of all the citizens of a country. The attainment of education provides an opportunity for all to grow and improve their life chances. Given this crucial role of education, it is important to provide everybody an equal opportunity to pursue education. Higher education is a necessary condition for achieving inclusive growth and a fair and inclusive society free from discrimination. The development of higher education in India has progressed at a fast rate, leading to its massification. The expansion of the system has been accompanied by the widening of regional inequalities and persistence of social inequalities. Inequalities in opportunities of access to higher education continue to persist for poor students and those from the socially excluded groups and from rural areas .The increase in the GERs of students from the SC, ST and OBC categories is a reflection of this positive achievement.

Uttarakhand Open University provides access to "higher education for large segments of the population, and in particular, the disadvantaged groups such as those living in remote and rural areas including working people, housewives and other adults who wish to upgrade or acquire knowledge through studies in various fields", promote acquisition of knowledge in a rapidly developing and changing society and to continually offer opportunity for upgrading knowledge, training and skills in the context or innovations, research and discovery in all fields of human endeavors", provide an innovative system of University level of education, flexible and open, in regard to method and pace of learning combination of courses, eligibility for enrolment, age of entry, conduct of examination and operation of programmes with a view to promote learning and encourage excellence in new fields of knowledge; contribute to the improvement of the educational system by providing a non-formal channel complementary to the formal system and encouraging transfer of credits and provide education and training in the various arts, crafts and skills of the country, raising their quality and improving their availability to the people; promote national integration and the integral development of the human personality through its policies and programmes.

Suggestions

There is scope for devising better strategies for social integration and developing inclusive higher education in India. The issues of equity and inclusion in the expanding system can be assessed based on the extent to which HEIs succeed in producing equitable outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds. Strategies for achieving for inclusive growth necessarily need to include affirmative policies targeting socially disadvantaged and marginalized economically poor and people with disabilities.Acess to education has improved at all levels meanwhile income inequalities and persisting social inequalities also raised consequently. The unequal distribution of opportunities for developing human capital can be a source of inequalities. Therefore promoting faster growth of higher education among disadvantaged section of the population is necessary for ensuring equity and inclusion in higher education in Uttarakhand. Mode of Open and Distance education is preferred option for those who are willing to avail higher education but missed opportunities due to lack of resources, unavailability of conventional mode of higher education. The global education development agenda reflected in goal 4(SDG4) of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development adopted by India in 2015 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. World is undergoing rapid change in knowledge landscape. India is also making fruitful efforts for accepting such changes in each level of education. Indeed with the changing employment landscape and global ecosystem now children need how to learn, how to think critically and solve problems. The aim of India is to have education system with equitable access to the highest quality education for all its learners regardless of social and economic backgrounds.

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