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Inclusive Education Project

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Documenting Experiences Of Students With
Disabilities In Higher Education



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PROJECT:
Documenting Experiences Of Students With
Disabilities In Higher Education

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**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PROJECT:
DOCUMENTING EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

May | 2023



TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	ABBREVIATIONS	07
02	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	08
03	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	10
04	ABOUT THE REPORT	18
	CHAPTER 1: CURRENT POLICY ENVIRONMENT	 24
	1.1 INTRODUCTION	
	1.2 CHOICE OF COLLEGE	
	1.2.1 LACK OF ACCESSIBILITY OF INFORMATION ON THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION (HEIS) WEBSITES	
	1.2.2 RANKING AND ACCREDITATION OF HEIS	
	1.3 SUPPORT SOCIETIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY CELLS AND ENABLING UNITS	
	1.4 CAREER GUIDANCE	
	1.5 ASSISTIVE DEVICES AND OTHER LEARNING MATERIALS	
	1.6 SOCIAL EXPERIENCE	
	1.7 CONCLUSION	
	CHAPTER 2: PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS	 32
	1.1 INTRODUCTION	
	1.2 INTERVIEW WITH STUDENTS	
	1.3 INTERVIEW WITH STAKEHOLDERS	
	1.4 MAJOR THEMES OF THE INTERVIEWS	
	1.4.1 CHOICE OF COLLEGE	
	1.4.2 TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO COLLEGE	
	1.4.3 LEARNING EXPERIENCE	
	1.4.4 EXPERIENCE WITH COLLEGE SOCIETIES	
	1.4.5 CAREER GUIDANCE AND PLACEMENT ASSISTANCE	
	1.4.6 SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND EXPERIENCE	
	1.5 CONCLUSION	
	CHAPTER 3: RECOMMENDATIONS	 60
05	BIBLIOGRAPHY	76

ABBREVIATIONS

CRPD -	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
WCAG -	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
NIC -	National Informatics Centre
HEPSN -	Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs
UGC -	University Grants Commission
NIRF -	National Institutional Ranking Framework
NAAC -	National Assessment and Accreditation Council
EOC -	Equal Opportunity Cell
EU -	Enabling Unit
DEPwD -	Department of Empowerment of People with Disabilities
RCI -	Rehabilitation Council of India
PwD -	Persons with disabilities
NEP -	National Education Policy
RPwD -	Rights of Persons with Disabilities
HEI -	Higher Education Institutions
NSS -	National Service Scheme

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PROJECT:
UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION



ABOUT THE REPORT

India has focused considerably on improving its education system in recent years. With nearly 2.68 crore citizens being persons with disabilities, the education system is slowly pivoting to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. For instance, the New Education Policy 2020 makes several provisions to address the inequality of access to education and institutional facilities faced by students with disabilities. However, this attention is yet to overcome the challenges faced by students and researchers in higher education institutions.

Recognising the importance of access to higher education for persons with disabilities, and the role it plays in preparing them for their future, this report highlights the challenges in the higher education system for persons with disabilities. Most discourse on improving accessibility for people with disabilities circles infrastructural changes such as adding ramps and/or elevators in multi-level buildings or building accessible washrooms. However, this work looks beyond architectural solutions.

The study draws attention to physical and social barriers that hinder a conducive learning environment for students with disabilities. It documents first-hand experiences of over 50+ students with varied disabilities across 18 colleges in New Delhi, reviews extensive literature, liaises with stakeholders, and concludes with policy recommendations that may assist in inclusive education for all.

METHODOLOGY

Primary and secondary research methods were combined to understand the inclusive education policies at the higher education level in India. Desk research sourced policy guidelines, legal documents, national and international academic literature, peer-reviewed journals, official reports, and databases to present a thorough assessment. The report's primary research was conducted through interviews with students with disabilities currently enrolled in higher education, to aptly represent and accommodate their lived experiences.

The report approached data collection after pre-identifying themes that may affect the higher education system's inclusivity. These themes span a wide spectrum, from the inclusiveness of the learning environment in the classroom to the inclusiveness of college societies and clubs. Important stakeholders such as disability activists, academicians, and people working with civil society organisations were identified and interviewed to add further nuance.



KEY FINDINGS

The study identifies key areas in a student's college life that influence how students with disabilities experience higher education. Based on our primary and secondary research, the key findings have been summarised in the table below in order of a student's college induction.

Themes	Findings and Implication (Areas for Action)
<p>Choice of College</p>	<p>The University Grants Commission's ranking and assessment mechanisms do not give appropriate weightage to inclusive amenities. Therefore, poor performance on inclusivity hardly affects an institute's rank. Thus, students with disabilities choose 'top ranked' colleges, even if they do not cater to their needs or lack facilities.</p> <p>Distance from the place of residence and accommodation also impacts a student's choice of college. Several interviewees preferred a college in their vicinity or one that provides accommodation. Students with locomotive, visual, or other disabilities find it difficult to commute longer distances. This factor coerces them to opt for colleges that may not align with their professional interests.</p>
<p>The Transition from School to College</p>	<p>The majority of the interviewees shared that they did not receive any support in transitioning from school to college. There were no orientation seminars held for them to adapt to college life. The few institutions that offered orientation sessions did not specifically address the institute's established inclusive policies and services. This caused students unnecessary hassle, making their college experience unpleasant.</p>

Themes

Findings and Implication (Areas for Action)

Learning Experience

The majority of our interviewees shared that their teachers catered to their needs. However, students had to directly ask or communicate with their teachers, either by interrupting them in class or speaking after the class, depending on the urgency of the matter.

Since no uniform pedagogical training exists for teachers at higher education institutes, many teachers are ill-equipped to cater to the needs of students with disabilities, undermining their learning experiences. Since coursework, such as Master's and PhD's, do not have courses on pedagogy on teaching a diversity of students in class, teachers are unable to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Tutorial (remedial) classes are not held regularly, and access to class materials and notes is inconsistent. Such inaccessibility to academic material hampers students' classroom experience and professional growth. It, in worst cases, leads to dropouts.

Our primary study revealed that students were allowed to be examined in alternative forms during internal examinations. Evaluation criteria were also mostly flexible. However, interviewees mentioned that some teachers insisted on particular or rigid forms of internal examination, leading to discomfort for many students. Scribes unfamiliar with coursework have an added disadvantage to students, rather than making the evaluation process inclusive. Rigid assessment/evaluation policy not only hampers the growth of students but also takes away from their right to be independent.

Concerning the availability of learning materials, the students who face the most disadvantages are the ones with visual disabilities. Students with visual disabilities require several methods to access course material and may also have very specific alternative format requirements. For instance, some persons with visual disabilities prefer PDFs of coursework to use text-to-speech applications.

Even though universities endeavoured to make course materials available, insufficient measures, inconsistent pursuit, outdated software, poor quality materials, and unavailability of certain materials in accessible formats raised several issues.



Themes

Findings and Implication (Areas for Action)

Experience with College Societies

Several interviewees reported on many colleges not having functioning Equal Opportunity Cell [EOC] and/or Enabling Unit [EU] in their college. Every college is mandated by law to have an EOC/EU for the assistance of students to make the institutional environment more inclusive. However, the lack of accountability in ensuring EOC/EUs function properly makes higher education institutions an exclusive space for able-bodied students. Students with disabilities find it difficult to transition to higher education and navigate the systems that favour able-bodied people.

Our study showed that students with disabilities participate in fewer extracurricular activities as compared to their able-bodied peers. Societies, clubs, or on-campus events were structured around able-bodied students, making them exclusionary. Students with disabilities had adverse experiences where they were neglected, and assumptions were made about their capabilities.

Career Guidance and Placement Assistance

As pointed out by stakeholders and students, the purpose of higher education is more than providing mere quality education. Higher education also aspires to provide a conducive environment for better future prospects and learning transferable skills to enter the job market. However, most institutions fail to prepare students with disabilities, making it difficult for them to be absorbed in the job market.

Overall Social Interactions and Experience

Most interviewees mentioned they were treated differently and felt excluded because of their disability. This differential treatment, they mentioned, stems from a lack of awareness and sensitisation among teachers and students. In some cases, in their bid to cater to students with disabilities, some teachers ended up over-protecting or unconsciously undermining them by making assumptions about what students can or cannot do. This may make students with disabilities feel less inept compared to the rest of the class, which can hamper their college experience. The students aspire for accommodative measures and not differential treatment.

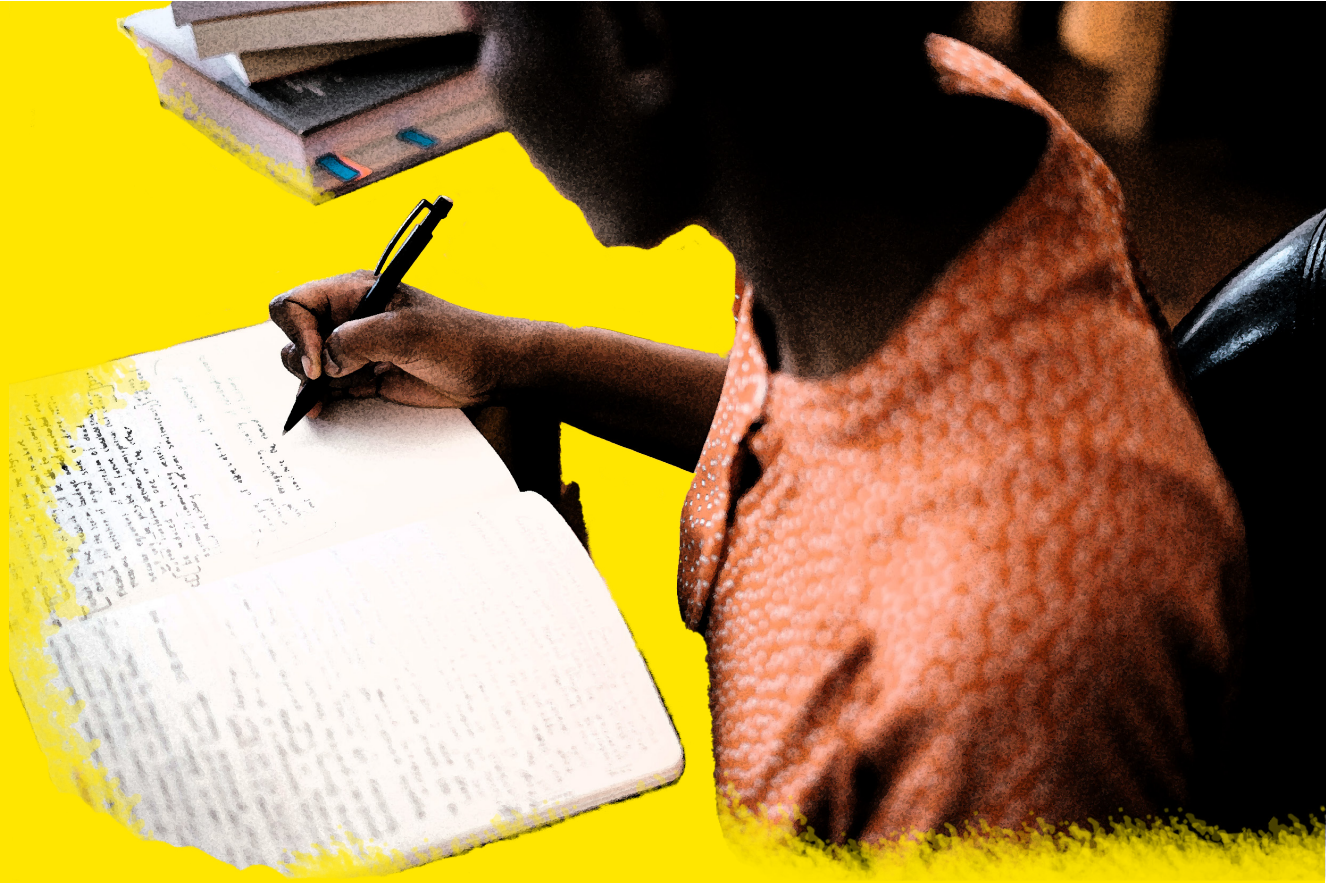
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The report's final chapter lays down recommendations for different stakeholders based on the findings from our primary and secondary research. These recommendations address the challenges identified throughout the report and aim to facilitate an inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities. A set of 14 recommendations emerged from the analysis:

- 01** Ensuring a barrier-free environment in college institutions.
- 02** Increasing weightage of inclusivity parameters for assessing and accrediting higher education institutions.
- 03** Making higher education institution websites fully accessible to students with disabilities to provide accurate information on inclusive and accessible facilities.
- 04** Providing accessible accommodations and hostels with need-based support to students with disabilities.
- 05** Mandating the start-of-the-year orientation sessions and periodic briefings informing students with disabilities about facilities and support available to them in colleges.
- 06** Existing and incoming teachers at higher education levels should receive in-depth training on adapting their pedagogy to consider the needs of students with disabilities.
- 07** Ensuring accessible textbooks and learning materials and adopting assistive technology and technology-based platforms to cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities.



- 08** Devising alternative modes of evaluation to ensure a more inclusive and equitable assessment process for students with disabilities.
- 09** Ensuring proper functioning of enabling units and equal opportunity cells to support students with disabilities better.
- 10** Making extracurricular and other social activities in colleges more inclusive and accessible to all students.
- 11** Recognising the needs and abilities of students with disabilities and revamping the existing system of placements and jobs must make it more inclusive.
- 12** Conducting awareness campaigns and sensitisation workshops to create a fully inclusive environment and promote equal participation of students with disabilities.
- 13** Ensuring proper implementation of reservations for persons with disabilities and easing the process of issuance of disability certificates.
- 14** Collecting regular and reliable data on persons with disabilities for better planning and implementation purposes.



||||| **ABOUT**
||||| **THE REPORT**

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD], adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006, does not formally define disability. However, the preamble of the CRPD recognises that “disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations General Assembly, 2006, p. 1). Therefore, CRPD focuses on the social, economic, and environmental barriers that restrict the full participation of individuals in society rather than looking at disability as an individual problem. CRPD endorses dismantling socio-economic barriers to allow everyone to participate equally in all spheres of life and enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms¹ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014).

Education is fundamental to developing, growing, and expanding life’s prospects. Article 24 of the CRPD recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). It identifies an inclusive education system at all levels as the key mechanism in delivering this right (ibid.). Inclusive education is a system where all children, irrespective of the differences in their abilities and disabilities, study together in “mainstream classrooms” (UNICEF, 2017). Here the teaching

methods, study materials, curriculum, and learning environment cater to the needs of all children to maximise academic and social development. An inclusive education system helps realise the human rights of all children and promotes accepting diversity.

India was one of the first countries to ratify the CRPD on 1 October 2007 (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities [Divyangjan], n.d.). A milestone towards realising the right to education for persons with disabilities, the CRPD strengthened the global shift to an inclusive education system by mandating States Parties develop a disability-inclusive education system (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). Despite this, several barriers still restrict persons with disabilities from accessing quality education, such as poor infrastructure, negative attitudes and misinformation about disability, financial barriers, insufficient and inadequate accommodation, lack of accessible transport services, etc. As a result, people with disabilities have low enrolment rates in schools globally. Even if they attend school, they are often more likely to drop out and leave early (Global Campaign for Education & Handicap International, 2014). Consequently, students and researchers with disabilities remain under-represented in higher education institutes.

As per Census 2011, almost 2.68 crore people live with disabilities in

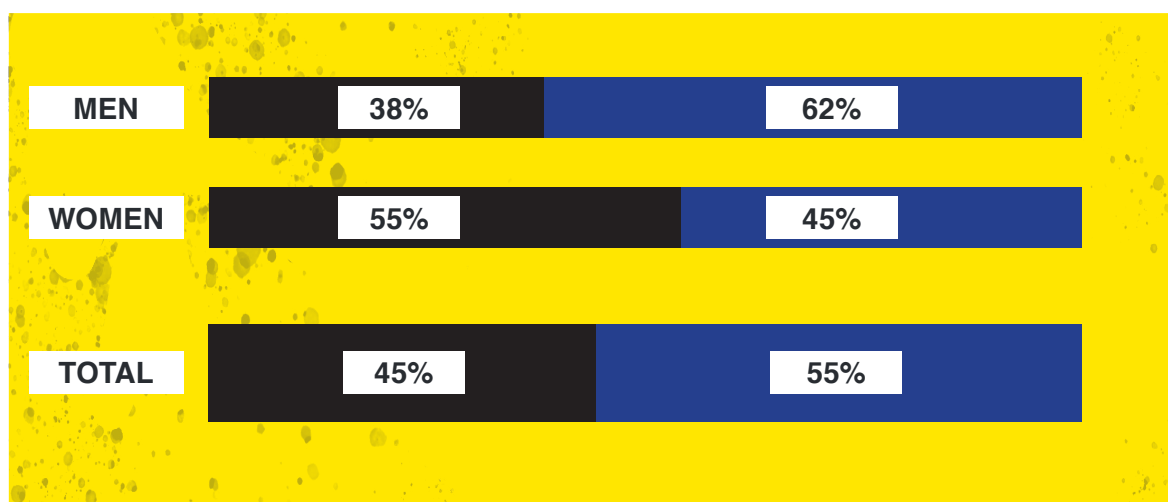
¹ However, as the training guide of the CRPD clarifies, this approach of looking at disability does not deny the importance of medical assistance that individuals with disabilities might require.

India, accounting for 2.21% of the total population. The latest estimates by the National Statistical Office (2019) based on a 2018 survey provide a similar figure for the prevalence of disability at 2.2% of the total population².

As per the Census (2011), 45% of persons with disabilities are illiterate (see

figure 1). This statistic is much higher than the national illiteracy rate of 26%. Additionally, only 5% of persons with disabilities are 'graduate and above', indicating that India's higher education institutions remain out of reach for many individuals with disabilities (ibid.).

Literacy Status of Persons with Disabilities in India



Source: Census, 2011

■ Illiterate ■ Literate

Limited access to quality education hampers the ability of people with disabilities to participate fully in social, economic, and political life. Their exclusion from classrooms deprives them of the advantages of education by, say, limiting employment opportunities. Unsurprisingly, people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by unemployment (International Labour Organization, 2020). Moreover, people

with disabilities usually find low-skill and low-paid jobs in the informal labour market that provide few or no possibilities for career advancement (International Labour Office, 2007). Unequitable access to education, health care, employment, and social and political participation puts people with disabilities at a greater risk of experiencing poverty. Evidence suggests that persons with disabilities have higher rates of poverty

² There are two major sources of statistics on disability in India. One is the decadal Census of India conducted by Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. The other is the sample surveys on disability conducted by the National Statistical Office [NSO]. Census 2011 collected information on eight types of disabilities (disability in seeing, in hearing, in speech, in movement, in mental retardation, in mental illness, any other and multiple disability) during its Population Enumeration phase. On the other hand, the 76th Round of the National Sample Survey, conducted in 2018, covered all disabilities as mentioned under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

than people without disabilities (United Nations, 2010).

The link between disability and poverty is complex and mutually reinforcing (United Nations, 2007). A disability may lead to poverty due to the exclusion from social and economic participation. On the other hand, poverty can result in disability through malnutrition, poor healthcare, and lack of access to safe drinking water, among others. Access to quality education can help people with disabilities escape poverty through decent employment opportunities, improved health, etc., thereby breaking the poverty-disability cycle (Global Campaign for Education & Handicap International, 2014).

In recent years, there has been a considerable focus on making the Indian education system more inclusive of the needs of students with disabilities. For instance, the New Education Policy 2020 makes several provisions to address unequal access to education faced by students with disabilities. However, the attention has been limited to school education, and the challenges faced by students and researchers in higher

education institutions remain underrepresented. Higher education credentials expand the choices and opportunities available to a person for meaningful employment, poverty alleviation, and social inclusion.

Recognising the importance of accessing higher education, this report highlights the remaining challenges to an inclusive higher education system for persons with disabilities. The discussions on increasing accessibility for people with disabilities typically focus on reducing physical barriers, such as architectural or structural obstacles in both natural and artificial surroundings. However, attitudinal barriers also hamper the college experience of persons with disabilities and hinder their academic and social development. Therefore, this report focuses on the various aspects of the college and classroom experience of persons with disabilities. It highlights the factors that prevent the social inclusion of persons with disabilities and restrict the creation of a conducive learning environment for them in higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The report is based on both primary and secondary research tools. An extensive desk review identified the gaps in the existing policies and interventions to promote inclusivity in higher education institutions. Sources such as policy guidelines, legal documents, academic literature, peer-reviewed journals, and official reports and databases released by various government and international organisations were used.

50 students with disabilities currently enrolled in government colleges in New Delhi were interviewed to contextualise the secondary literature and gain insights from their lived experiences. The interview questionnaire focused on students' classroom and overall college experience to identify barriers to inclusive education. These interviews were conducted over 3 months with Revival Disability India. The participants were explained the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of the research. The terms of participation — the confidentiality statement and their right to withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any questions — were communicated before the interview. Furthermore, the contact details of

the researchers were provided to the participants in case of any queries. Several stakeholders and experts on the subject of inclusive education were also identified and interviewed.

The results of this report should be considered in light of some limitations. While the interviews were thoroughly conducted, the experiences must not be generalised due to the limited sample size. The interviews, being concentrated in an urban tier 1 city, may have missed some complex challenges posed by the education system unique to semi-urban and rural areas. For the education system to be truly disability-inclusive, barriers faced by students with different forms of disabilities need to be identified and removed. However, our report limits its focus only to the challenges faced by students with physical disabilities. Future research initiatives on this topic can take these factors into account and look into including neurodivergence and non-visible disabilities.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report consists of four chapters. The first chapter of this report contains an in-depth analysis of the existing policy framework aimed at increasing the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions. It aims to highlight the key policies and strategies

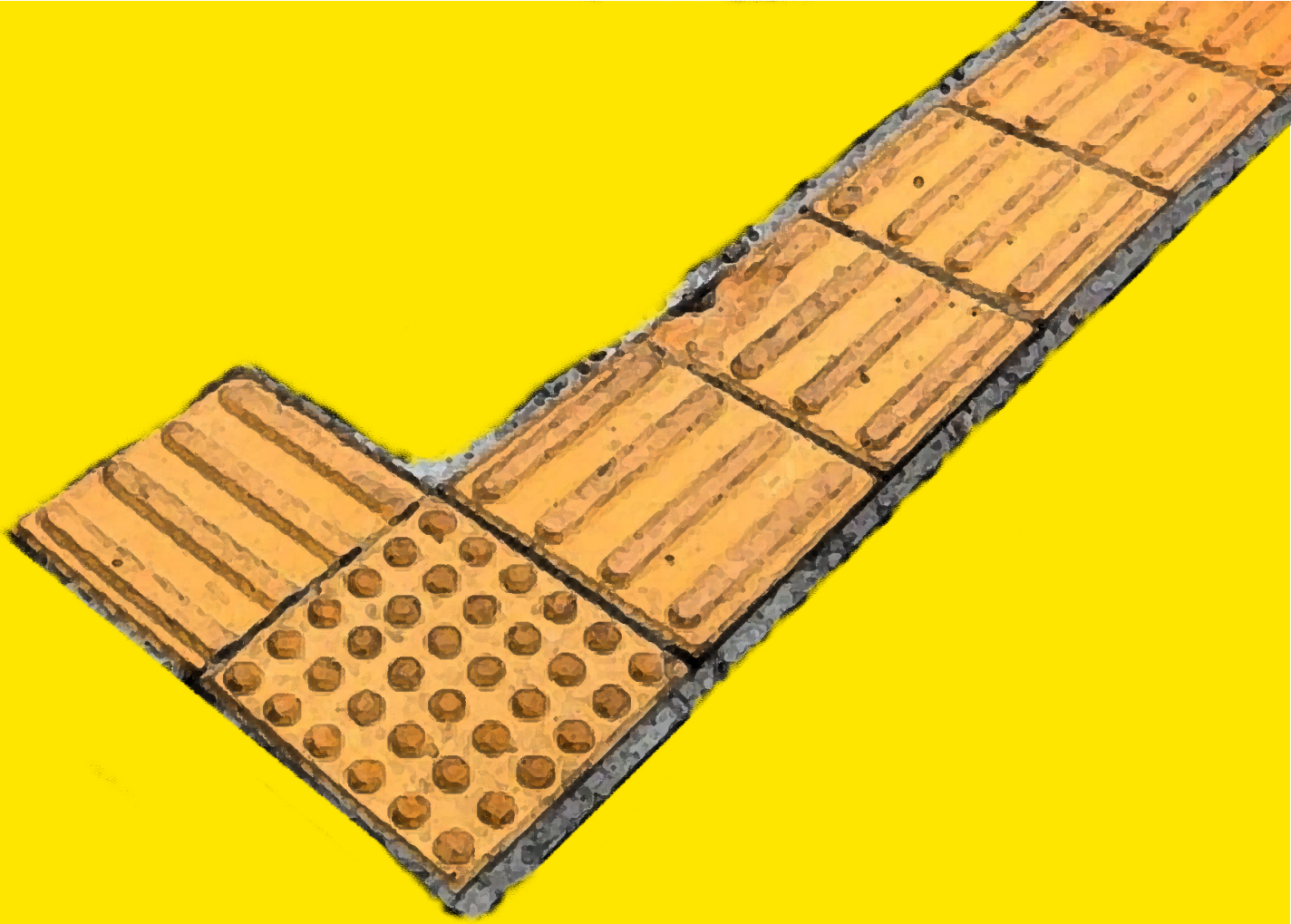
adopted and those still remaining. This comprehensive review of existing interventions is intended to emphasise the various gaps in policy design and implementation. To supplement the policy analysis, Chapter 2 contains the key findings from primary surveys, which

3 Revival Disability India is a United Nations recognised disability-, queer-, and caste-affirmative space that aims to reclaim stories of disability in India. The community focuses on disability, sexuality, and intersectional ableism for disabled and queer folks, by disabled and queer folks.

provide an overview of the on-ground situation. Through discussion, the report intends to highlight some of the challenges that students with disabilities raised during the interviews. The insights from interviews with other key stakeholders, including disability activists, academics, and people working with civil society organisations, have also been discussed in this chapter. Chapter 3 offers recom-

mendations and future course of action for the policymakers to make higher educational spaces disability-inclusive.

For additional information, readers can refer to the footnotes and bibliography of the report.



CHAPTER

01

CURRENT POLICY ENVIRONMENT

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter provides an overview of the existing policy framework aimed at increasing the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions in India.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education remains out of reach for many individuals with disabilities. Although India is one of the first countries to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD], which protects the right to education of persons with disabilities in Article 24, India is yet to make significant strides toward inclusivity in higher education.

Consequently, this chapter provides an overview of the existing policy framework to discuss why the current policies, whether due to design or implementation issues, fall short of addressing the challenges to an inclusive higher education system in the country effectively.

The government adopted the first National Policy on Education in 1968. While the policy explicitly mentioned equalisation of educational opportunities for students with disabilities, the focus was mainly on school education. The government implemented the second National Policy on Education in 1986. Even in this policy, the provisions mentioned for higher education did not identify the strategies that would make higher education more accessible for students with disabilities.

The following is a brief overview of the major milestones in the policy framework to facilitate students with disabilities in their pursuit of higher education:

Major Milestones	Key Takeaways and Provisions	Year
Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) Act	RCI's responsibility includes the regulation and oversight of services provided to people with disabilities, the standardisation of syllabi, and the upkeep of a Central Rehabilitation Register. It maintains a record of all certified professionals engaged in the field of rehabilitation and special education.	1992 (Amended in 2000)
Persons with Disabilities (PwD) Act	The Act required the government bodies to remove architectural barriers from schools, colleges, and other institutions that provide vocational and professional training. The Act also required the appropriate government bodies to make investments in developing assistive technologies, specialised educational materials, and teaching aids. Additionally, the Act had provisions to appropriately modify the curriculum and examination system to benefit students with disabilities.	1995
National Policy for Persons with Disabilities	The National Policy directed the government to expand scholarship coverage for students with disabilities pursuing studies at the post-school level. It also encouraged setting up institutes imparting technical and vocational training to promote skill development. The National Policy also emphasised the need to improve access to universities and technical institutes.	2006
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	India was one of the first countries to ratify the CRPD. The CRPD is an international human rights treaty of the United Nations aimed at protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. The CRPD, recognising the right to education for persons with disabilities, requires the States Parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.	2007
Accessible India Campaign	The Accessible India Campaign strives to provide equal opportunity and an enabling environment for people with disabilities by establishing barrier-free surroundings and accessible ecosystems. This includes developing learning resources and educational institutions that are disabled-friendly.	2015
Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act	This Act replaced the PwD Act of 1995 and increased the number of recognised disabilities from 7 to 21. Additional measures such as 5% reservation in higher education were also provided for persons with benchmark disabilities ¹ .	2016
NITI Aayog Strategy for New India @75	This comprehensive plan for New India, which outlines specific goals for 2022-23, was unveiled by the NITI Aayog. One of the goals was to make higher education more inclusive. The plan outlined the government's goal to empower people with disabilities and create opportunities for them to realise their full potential and lead productive lives.	2018
National Education Policy (NEP)	The National Education Policy lists several objectives for inclusiveness in higher educational institutions. Higher educational institutes are recommended to make the admission process and curriculum more inclusive. These institutes are also required to ensure that all buildings and facilities are wheelchair and disabled-friendly. Additionally, it mandates proper enforcement of all anti-discrimination and anti-harassment laws by the institutions.	2020

¹ According to RPwD Act 2016, "person with benchmark disability" refers to a person with not less than 40% of a specified disability where specified disability has not been defined in measurable terms and includes a person with disability where specified disability has been defined in measurable terms, as certified by the certifying authority.

Over the years, the government has made concerted efforts to bring all the future generations of the country within the realm of education through various legislation and policy interventions.

Recently, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment released the draft new National Policy for Persons with Disabilities for public feedback (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2022). The draft proposes interventions for creating a more inclusive society and is significantly more exhaustive, compared to the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities released in 2006.

However, the draft still lacks some crucial elements essential for creating equal opportunities for personal growth and development where people with disabilities can live safe, dignified, and fulfilling lives. For instance, it emphasises the need for barrier-free access to buildings and facilities in universities and public spaces. The draft outlines several actions that must be taken to accomplish this, including the incorporation of accessibility standards into all local-body building by-laws, and the inclusion of an accessibility component in engineering courses like architecture, town planning, IT, etc. It also requires central and state ministries to ensure that every new public building complies with the accessibility standards at the planning stage. However, the draft does not specifically address the inadequate execution of the established guidelines. To ensure effective implementation, the policy should require routine audits of public infrastructure (Ghosh, 2022). Along similar lines, the state's failure to attain goals set by the Accessibility India Campaign promoting universal accessibility has also been attributed to poor monitoring. The Accessibility India Campaign has also faced criticism for focusing just on first and second tier cities (Singh, 2022).

The lack of adequate funding is another significant obstacle to inclusive education.

The state's budget spending remains unclear. Furthermore, higher education continues to be largely underfunded since a majority is spent on school education (Alkazi and Bhutani, 2021).

Accurate and reliable data is one of the most important requirements for formulating effective policy. The data that is currently available on disability and people with disabilities forms the foundation of initiatives and programmes. The resource allocation for these schemes is also based on this data. Unfortunately, such data is severely limited. Even the estimates of the number of persons with disabilities living in India are inaccurate due to their gross undercalculation. As per the last Census (2011) and the 76th round of the National Statistical Office (2019), the two major sources of data on disability in India, the estimate is around 2% of the population. In contrast to this, according to estimates by the World Bank (2007), there are around 4 to 9 crore people living with disabilities in India, which accounts for 4-8% of the total population. Therefore, even soundly formed policies would not see success since the data they build around is inaccurate.

Despite such obstacles, the government has implemented policies and programmes in several areas such as the admission processes and curriculum to make higher education more accessible. This chapter looks at policies and gaps relevant to some of these broad areas. The challenges and gaps in policies in those areas adversely impact the quality of college life that students with disabilities experience. Through extensive literature review and student interviews, the report highlights several barriers that remain with respect to those specific areas.

CHOICE OF COLLEGE

Challenges with Accessing Information on Websites of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for Students with Disabilities

Prospective and existing students rely on university and college websites for information on the availability of accessible physical infrastructure, hostel facilities, information on course prerequisites, and so forth. Poorly designed websites, online technology, or web tools can act as barriers for persons with disabilities. According to WebAIM (2023) research, 96.8% of the top 1 million websites worldwide do not provide complete accessibility. This means that over a billion people, or roughly 15% of the world's population, are devoid of digital accessibility (World Health Organization, n.d.).

The government mandated Web Content Accessibility Guidelines [WCAG] 2.0 compliance for all government websites in February 2009. Following this, WCAG 2.1 compliance was mandated in 2018 (National Informatics Centre [NIC], 2018). The WCAG 2.1 guidelines are a wide range of recommendations for enhancing the usability and accessibility of websites and applications. These guidelines aim to make web content more accessible, especially for people with disabilities (NIC, 2018).

These guidelines were circulated by the government amongst Indian government departments as well as educational institutions since they apply to all the websites under the ownership of government departments (ibid.). Despite the mandate, lack of compliance is still a rampant issue. The access to information on institution websites, that help people with disabilities make informed choices, is determined by the willingness of departments and institutions to enforce these guidelines.

Robinson's (n.d.) report evaluated the

top 100 colleges and universities on their compliance with WCAG 2.1. It studied institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, the University of Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ashoka University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, etc. The report assessed whether the websites were:

- A. Accessible to screen readers for people with visual impairments
- B. Complying with low-vision users' criteria for contrast and text size
- C. Allowing persons with limited arm and hand function to operate it without the need for a mouse

Only 18% of the websites of these top 100 Universities fared well on accessibility parameters for both the website as well as the documents uploaded on the website. Not a single website among these 18% is fully accessible. A staggering 56% of the top universities are completely inaccessible. Universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Delhi Technical University, etc. fall into this category (ibid.).

Inaccessible websites of institutions discourage students from making an informed choice about which college to enrol in. Therefore, students typically base their decision on a college's popularity.

RANKING AND ACCREDITATION OF HEIS

Rankings are one of the most important factors that affect the choice of college. Despite the increasing demand for accessibility and inclusion in higher education, the National Institutional Ranking Framework [NIRF] gives a meagre 4% weightage to inclusivity. Such meagre weightage given to inclusivity criteria is unlikely to have an impact on the ranking, even if an institution performs underwhelmingly in creating an inclusive environment. Additionally, digital accessibility specifically finds no place in the overall university rating criteria set by NIRF (Kumar, 2021).

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council [NAAC] Manual's

institutional values and best practices includes key indicator 7.1, which has a weightage of 50 marks (ibid.). This key indicator assigns only 5 marks to facilities provided for students with disabilities at an institute (ibid.). The weightage given to inclusive facilities is too little and it also does not address the issue of insufficient accessibility on university websites in India. When evaluating and accrediting educational institutes, digital accessibility is seldom given adequate weightage. Accessibility should be the norm, and hence should appropriately reflect in the criteria set for ranking and rating higher education institutes.

SUPPORT SOCIETIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY CELLS [EOCS] AND ENABLING UNITS [EUS]

The twelfth five-year plan (2012-2017) proposed several developmental measures by the University Grants Commission [UGC] in the fields of higher education and disability. The major component under the Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs [HEPSN] scheme was the establishment of Enabling Units (UGC, n.d. a). EUs for students with disabilities were established to make the admission process smoother, offer guidance and counselling, raise awareness about the needs of students with disabilities and other general concerns affecting their study, and help students attain employment (ibid.).

The twelfth five-year plan also saw UGC establishing EOCs in colleges. The main functions of these Equal Opportunity

Centres and Cells are to ensure equity, equal opportunity, and social inclusion (UGC, n.d. b). These cells also make efforts to educate the academic community on the issues posed by the social exclusion of disadvantaged groups and to support students in addressing discrimination. These guidelines to establish EUs and EOCs, however, do not provide a robust mechanism of monitoring and implementation, resulting in many defunct units across the colleges (ibid.). Understaffed institutes exacerbate this issue further where the already overburdened staff does not want to take up additional responsibilities of these cells and units. Additionally, the UGC only mandates one faculty member per institution to be responsible for the functioning of EUs, while making a non-mandatory provision for a coun-

seller-cum-placement officer. The responsibility of the operation of an EU resting upon a maximum of two people

is also another reason for the large-scale inactivity of these units.

CAREER GUIDANCE

People with disabilities lack equitable access to employment opportunities. Therefore, legislations like the PwD Act (1995) and the RPwD Act (2016) aim to provide opportunities for people with disabilities through rehabilitative education, employment opportunities, vocational training, job reservation, and manpower development. The RPwD Act also laid down guidelines for skill development under various programs while providing 4% reservation in government jobs. However, the provision for skill development in the act only caters to self-employment, without mandates for universities to provide training programs to students with disabilities. Furthermore, there are no policy guidelines which explicitly mention the establishment of career development cells or placement cells which cater to students with disabilities in public institutions.

The Government of India also took out an Incentive Scheme for Providing Employment to Persons with Disabilities in the Private Sector in 2009 (revised in 2016) to encourage the private sector to employ people with disabilities. Under

this scheme, the payment of employer's contributions to the Employee Provident Fund and Employees' State Insurance by the government was increased to 10 years. The Department of Empowerment of People with Disabilities (DEPwD) pays 1/3rd of the gratuity applicable to people with disabilities (Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India, n.d.).

Yet, despite these provisions, the employment of persons with disabilities remains underwhelming. According to the Ministry of Statistics report on persons with disabilities, only 36% (97 Lakhs) of India's 2.7 crore disabled people are employed (Sharma, 2021). However, the Persons with Disabilities Statistical Report mentions that 1.46 crore people with disabilities are literate. This leaves a large chunk of literate people with disabilities without employment (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2021). This lack of access to adequate employment opportunities further hinders the upward social and economic mobility of people with disabilities.

ASSISTIVE DEVICES AND OTHER LEARNING MATERIALS

Article 17 of the RPwD Act lays down provisions for providing assistive devices and other learning materials free of cost to students with benchmark disabilities (RPwD Act, 2016). However, this provision is only in place for students up to 18 years of age and does not cater

to university students. The Act leaves the responsibility of adult education in the hands of state governments and local authorities. Although the NEP 2020 briefly mentions the provision of assistive devices and technology for students with disabilities. However, this support

is limited to schools only and does not cater to adult education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

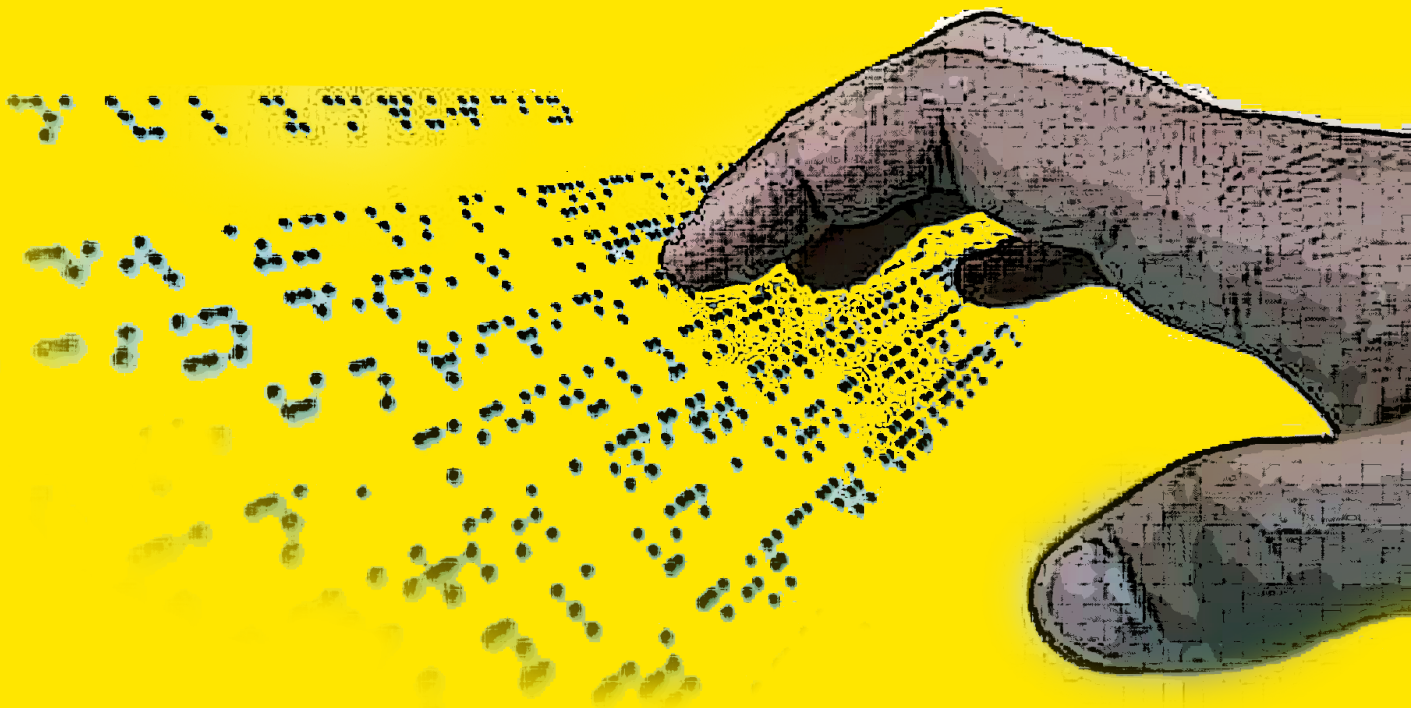
Acknowledging widespread stigma and discrimination against persons with disabilities, the RPwD Act, 2016, focuses on non-discrimination, full and effective participation in society, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, accessibility and building of environments to maximise inclusion. Further, to address issues of systemic exclusion and discrimination, Section 32 of the RPwD Act makes it mandatory for all government higher educational institutions to reserve no less than 5% of seats for persons with benchmark disabilities and give them an age relaxation of a minimum of five years for admission. Moreover, Section 16 of the Act requires all government-recognised and funded educational institutions to make campuses accessible and provide inclusive education by providing reasonable accommodations and individualised support.

However, despite these provisions, the enrollment and participation of students with disabilities have been low in higher education (Alkazi and Bhutani, 2021). Media reports have highlighted the non-implementation of reservations for persons with disabilities in several colleges across India (Jha, 2018). For instance, a study by the Centre for Disability Studies and Health Laws in 2017 showed that only 12 out of 22 National Law Universities fulfil requirements of 5% seat reservation criteria for students with disabilities provided under the RPwD Act (Panday, 2019). Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru University recently conceded before the Delhi High Court that its method of allocation of seats for students with disabilities did not achieve the mandate of 5% reservation provided under the law (The New Indian Express, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Despite policies and legislations recognising intersectionalities and a multitude of different barriers faced by students with disabilities. There exists a lack of research and documentation in understanding the ground realities, direct/indirect forms of discrimination and challenges faced by students with disabilities who belong to socially and economically

disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. As a means of addressing this, we also engaged in discussions with students with disabilities and some key stakeholders in the field of inclusive education. The next chapter summarises the insights from these interviews and discussions.



CHAPTER

02

PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter summarises the key findings from primary research across several themes. These themes account for different facets of college life that affect how students with disabilities perceive their experience.

INTRODUCTION

For primary research, some key areas related to a student's college life were selected. These areas span a wide spectrum, from the inclusiveness of the learning environment in the classroom to the inclusiveness of college societies and clubs. Lack of accessibility and inclusivity in these areas hinder the creation of a conducive learning environment for students with disabilities at the higher education level.

The highlighted themes span a wide spectrum – from the inclusiveness of

the classroom learning environment to college societies and clubs. The respondents were asked several questions on these themes to understand the barriers and difficulties faced by students with disabilities better.

This chapter thoroughly analyses the responses and discussions under the relevant key areas.

INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

For this study, extensive interviews were conducted with 50 students with physical disabilities enrolled in government colleges in New Delhi. These interviews were conducted to gain insights from the lived experiences of students.

While accessible physical infrastructure is necessary for a conducive learning

environment, factors such as access to equal opportunities and a stimulating social environment play an equally important role. Therefore, the survey paid considerable attention to understanding the various social barriers that students with disabilities face at the higher education level.

INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Discussions were held with key stakeholders in the education sector. These stakeholders include disability activists, academicians, and people working with civil society organisations.

These discussions were tailored to focus on specific topics and themes related to inclusive education based on each stakeholder's unique background, areas of specialisation, and areas of interest.

LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS:

■ George Abraham

George Abraham is a social entrepreneur, inspirational speaker, and disability rights activist. He has had a visual disability since the age of 10 months. A Mathematics graduate from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, he began his career in advertising and worked with Advertising & Sales Promotion Co and Ogilvy Benson & Mather. A pivotal moment in George's life occurred during a trip to the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped, Dehradun. He saw young boys with visual disabilities playing cricket with great passion. Soon after, he organised national blind cricket tournaments in the country. He founded the World Blind Cricket Council in 1996 and was its founding Chairman. In 1998, he organised the first-ever World Cup of Cricket for the Blind. To sensitise and educate people about blindness, he established the Score Foundation and started Project Eyeway in 2002. In 2013, he conceived the Television Show 'Nazar Ya Nazariya' for broadcast on DD National, featuring Naseeruddin Shah and Harsh Chhaya as anchors.

In 2004, George co-authored 'A Handbook of Inclusive Education'. George is also an Ashoka fellow and was presented with the CF Andrews Distinguished Alumnus Award by St. Stephens. He continues to advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities by speaking and writing about the subject.

■ Kanwal Singh

Kanwal Singh has over three decades of experience in special and inclusive education. She has worked as the Head of the Centre for Special Education

at Action for Ability Development and Inclusion [AADI]. She also spearheaded the establishment of VISHWAS Vidyalaya, an inclusive school in Gurgaon.

A consultant at Enabling Education Network [EENET], UK, she has written handbooks and manuals for educators. Her book 'Hanging On – A Special Educator's Journey into Inclusive Education', based on her experiences, was published in 2020.

■ Neelam Jolly

Neelam Jolly graduated from Panjab University with a Master's in Science in Biophysics and received a diploma in basic developmental therapy from the Spastic Society of India (now AADI). In 2005, she founded VISHWAS, a not-for-profit organisation working on Disability and Inclusive Development, and has served as its full-time chairperson since then. The VISHWAS Vidyalaya was set up to provide quality education in a positive learning environment. It is a recognised inclusive elementary school in Gurugram, Haryana, with over 300 students. Through their well-balanced curriculum, the school aims to work towards the holistic development of each student. Educational trips and a range of extra-curricular activities ensure students access opportunities and quality learning experiences beyond academics.

Through her foundation, she regularly collaborates with different organisations at both state and national levels to advocate for inclusion and accessibility.

■ Dr Partha Pratim Das

Dr Partha Pratim Das is a visiting professor at Ashoka University and a professor at the Department of Computer Science & Engineering, IIT Kharagpur. He obtained his PhD in Engineering (Digital Geometry) from IIT Kharagpur and has over 22 years of experience in teaching and research.

He has worked extensively on inclusive assistive technologies and innovations for people with disabilities in the education sector in India. Previously, he led the National Digital Library of India [NDLI]¹ initiative by the Ministry of Education under the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology [NMEICT]. He has also worked on the project 'DEEPAK' (Disability Education Engagement Portal for Access to Knowledge) under NDLI. DEEPAK was created to promote disability rights and provide disability-related information on a consolidated platform.

■ Dr Sailaja Chennat

Dr Sailaja Chennat is a professor at the Department of Education at the University of Delhi. She completed her PhD titled, 'Structural and Functional Aspects of the Organisations for Children with Hearing Impairment in Gujarat' from Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda. Her primary areas of interest are disability studies, inclusive education, teacher education, and the social inclusion of marginalised people.

In 2019, she edited and authored multiple chapters in the book 'Disability Inclusion and Inclusive Education', which examines disability, inclusion,

and inclusive education through a multidisciplinary lens focusing on academic theory and psycho-social perspectives. It also highlights the ground realities, classroom interactions, experiences, and challenges faced by children with disabilities in schools. Currently, she is working on a book titled, 'Disability: Conceptualizations and Perspectives' with Routledge.

■ Dr Sudesh Mukhopadhyay

Dr Sudesh holds PhD (Education) from M.S. University of Baroda. She is an Associate at the London University Institute of Education in Special Education under the TCTP Fellowship. Previously, she was a Visiting Fellow at Manitoba University, Canada and Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She is the former Chairperson of the Rehabilitation Council of India, the Head of the Department of Inclusive Education at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, and the Director of the State Council of Educational Research & Training, Delhi. She has advised numerous Indian and foreign organisations, including BRAC Bangladesh and Reach India, on areas related to inclusive education. Dr Sudesh has also been a part of numerous committees that draft policies for inclusive education.



¹ Established in 2015, NDLI is a virtual repository of learning resources inclusively providing e-content for different disciplines, available through different access devices and catering to different learners, especially people with disabilities. Currently, it is the largest digital library in India for education

MAJOR THEMES OF THE INTERVIEWS

A Choice of College

This theme explores whether students with disabilities face in getting relevant infrastructure or social barriers restrict information about educational institutions students' choice of enrolling at a particular institute. The report also studies information barriers students and whether these barriers impact their ability to make an informed decision about choosing an institution.

Factors considered when choosing a college

During the interviews, students with disabilities were asked about the factors that motivated them to enrol at a specific educational institute.

For the interviewees, the rank and reputation of the college and the university was the most important determinant in choosing a college. For instance, Ashish^{2*}, a person with a visual disability studying in a prestigious engineering college, stated that his college is “one of the oldest technical institutions in the country. It has distinguished alumni and very good placements. So overall, it seemed like a fine place where there could be holistic development of my skills as well as my personality”.

Another important factor was the accommodation facilities provided by the institute for students with disabilities.

“Mera concern ye tha ki main Delhi-NCR ka rehne wala hu aur DU ke baaki colleges Delhi-NCR ke region ke students ko accommodation provide nahi karte. Lekin iss college mein NCR mein rehne wale PwD students ko accommodation provide kar dete hain [My concern was that I am a resident of Delhi NCR and other DU colleges do not provide accommodation facilities to students from the Delhi NCR region. But this particular college provides accommodation to PwD students even from the Delhi NCR region]”, added Pulkit, a student with a visual disability who did not want to commute to college daily and, therefore, wanted an institute which allowed him to stay on campus.

Some students also shared that the location of institutions — in this instance — Delhi, was a factor. According to

2 Hereafter, the names of the students have been changed to preserve their privacy.

them, Delhi gave them access to better facilities, good coaching institutes for entrance examinations, an active presence of the PwD community, and better overall exposure.

Distance was also an important factor in a student's decision. Some students chose a particular institute because it was closer to where they lived, making the commute easier.

Atif, a student from a prominent institute at the University of Delhi, mentioned, *"sabse pehli cheez jisne mujhe influence kari vo tha distance factor [The first thing that influenced me was the distance factor]. This is the only good college which is located near my house"*.

Other factors that students looked at included the reputation of their preferred course and subjects, the nature of the faculty, and the teaching track record of the institute. One of the students also cited the status of representation of people with disabilities as one of their deciding factors. The students mentioned they wanted to join the institute to increase the awareness and representation of people with disabilities in such institutes.

It is important to note that in some cases, the college the student chose to attend was determined by their cut-off rank or entrance exam performance. In these cases, the students did not research the available facilities.

Availability of relevant information about the institute

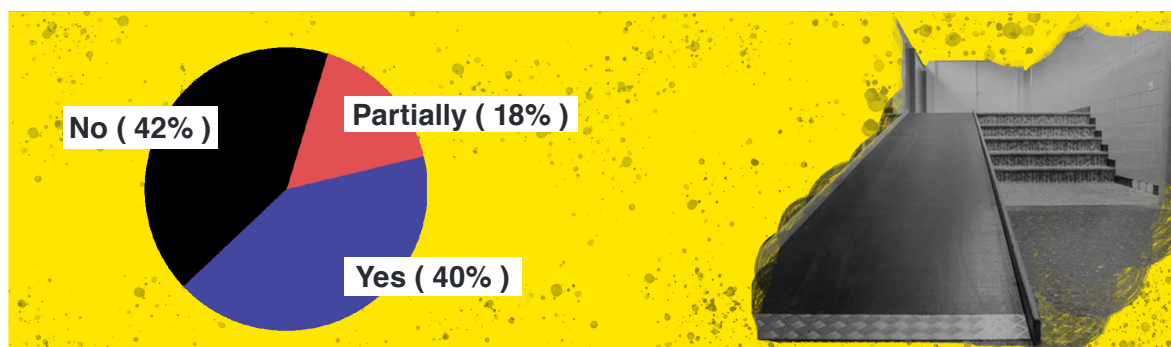
The students were also asked if they had any prior information about how their institute supports its students with disabilities. This support could be in the form of accessible infrastructure or the provision of hostel facilities. Through this, the report aimed to understand whether students with disabilities can readily access accurate information to make an informed decision while choosing colleges for higher education.

Not all students looked at information regarding accessibility practices and support provided by their institutes before joining the college. Only 20 out of 50 respondents specifically researched the nature of disability support provided by their institutes, while 9 mentioned that they did it partially. 21 out of 50 respondents reported not

seeking information regarding college infrastructure, accessibility, and other facilities.



Did you look for any information (about college infrastructure, accessibility, washroom) on how the institute supports the students with disabilities before joining the institute?



Students who looked for information regarding inclusive practices before joining did so by speaking to the seniors and friends with physical disabilities in the college or going through the institute's websites to look for inclusivity measures. They learnt about the support provided to students with disabilities through assistive technologies, accommodation, access to course-related facilities, scholarships, etc. They also looked at the

nature of help provided by the volunteers in the EOCs.

The accuracy of the information with the students on accessibility measures for students with disabilities turned out to be false or partially true in most cases. Many students anticipated infrastructure and institutional support to be more inclusive than what they found when they first began their studies.

Implications of the findings:

■ The college's rank, reputation, and location influenced most interviewees' choice of college. Since ranking and assessment mechanisms adopted by the UGC (NIRF and NAAC) do not give appropriate weightage to inclusive amenities, they hardly affect a higher education institution's (HEI) rank, even if they perform poorly on inclusivity. Thus, students with disabilities choose 'top-ranked' colleges even if they do not cater to their needs or lack facilities.

■ Distance from the place of residence and accommodation facilities also impact a student's choice of college. Several interviewees preferred a college in their vicinity or one that provides accommodation. However, many colleges limit the number of students from the PwD category they can accommodate. This restricts the candidates' choices. Since some find commuting longer distances difficult, they opt for other colleges that may not be aligned with their professional interests but offer lesser commutes.

B The transition from school to college

The shift from school to college can be challenging for any student. Students from varying backgrounds, regions, and experiences join the college. The college environment is also more complex than the school environment since students are expected to make course choices, arrange for their course material, join a college society, and so on. With little to no knowledge about the various

inclusivity and accessibility measures in institutions, students with disabilities often have to navigate the complex new environment independently.

Through primary research, the report wanted to understand whether the institutions take additional steps to make the transition from school to college smoother.

Did your institution provide pre-enrolment transition support to students with disabilities before your course began?



No (62 %)

Yes (28 %)

Partially (10 %)

During interviews, a few students mentioned that their institute had conducted an orientation for the incoming students to discuss the available opportunities and services. However, a majority of these students noted that the orientation did not focus specifically on inclusive practices or support services that the institute has adopted. The students were provided additional information about accessibility measures in a few cases only. This included information about the institute's EOC, the availability of scribes, technology-based support available, and so on.

However, a majority of the interviewees mentioned not receiving any orientation or support for an easier transition from school to college. Without such support from the college administration, some students shared that they received help from the EOCs, EUs, and other college societies in their institute. For example, one of the students shared that

“it [orientation] was not held officially by the college but by one of the college societies. It was helpful and they told us what facilities the college provides to students with disabilities like the support with exams and scholarships”.

Implications of the findings:

■ The transition to higher education institutions from high school can be difficult for students with disabilities. A majority of the interviewees stated that they did not receive any transition support or orientation seminars to adapt to college life. The few institutions that offered orientation sessions did

not specifically address the institute's inclusivity policies and services. It can be challenging and time-consuming for students with disabilities to acquire information on support services and other amenities. Such information should be made available in orientation sessions at the beginning of the session.

C Learning Experience

This section discusses the physical and social barriers faced by students with disabilities in their overall learning experience.

Students were asked questions about the easy accessibility of study material and teaching methods. These inquiries

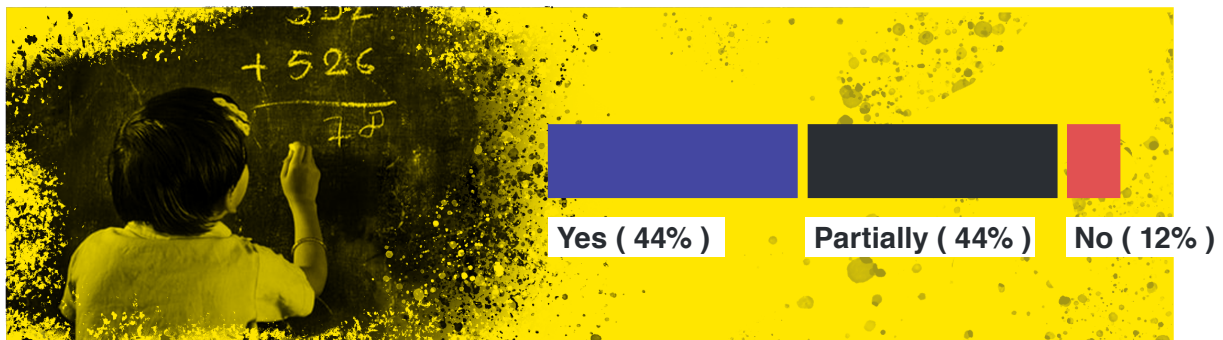
tried to understand whether the current education system fulfills the needs of students with disabilities. The discussion aims to highlight the barriers that hinder the full academic participation of students with disabilities in higher education institutes. It also draws attention to good practices from some institutes.

Teaching practices used by the instructors in the classroom

Through a survey, the study wanted to understand how inclusive in-classroom teaching approaches are and highlight

the barriers students face because of inaccessible and inadequate pedagogy.

■ *Did the classroom teaching methods cater your needs?*



22 of 50 interviewees shared that their teachers were attentive to their requirements. Students content with the

pedagogy shared that their instructors understood the needs of students with disabilities and actively addressed

their concerns. These teachers were flexible in their approach and undertook additional measures to make learning accessible to all the students. In the classroom, these teachers helped students with disabilities by asking them to sit in the front row for better visibility of the classroom board, writing big letters for their comprehension, and spelling out the words if needed. Some teachers were also available outside the classroom over call, WhatsApp, and email. A few also spoke slowly to allow students with disabilities to take notes in

class. Some also explained in Hindi for students whose first language was not English.

Several respondents stated that supplementary classes, tutorials, and seminars offered by the teaching staff aided their academic development. However, they noted that these additional classes and sessions were not held exclusively for students with disabilities but for everyone and catered to able-bodied individuals only.

Dr Sailaja Chennat stated that teachers could adopt certain simple measures to foster inclusivity in the classroom:

“There are basic things that can be adopted by a teacher at higher education level: using big fonts while writing on black or white board, making seating arrangements that would facilitate optimal use of vision and hearing, talking at appropriate pace with clarity for proper comprehension by students with visual impairment and facilitating lip reading by those with hearing impairment, avoiding talking while facing blackboard, repeating points, giving handouts when giving instructions for comprehension etc. Having hand outs is convenient as students who cannot read properly can get assistance for reading it out later at their own convenience. There are many such simple ways which emerge when teachers have empathy with some creativity . These do not require knowledge of advanced technology, but only sensitivity and commitment. For students who are not able to hear well, YouTube links for specific classes are very useful and for those with visual impairment, audio recordings of lectures/discussions are helpful. Teachers can also allow students to record classroom proceedings taking care that the content is comprehensible. Regular recordings of content from important books by volunteers is an activity that can be organised regularly and systematically in any educational institution. This can be taken up by the Enabling Unit of each Department in a University or College”.

The majority of the students who responded positively about their teachers’ inclusive attitude pointed out that their needs were only met after communicating about them with the

teachers. Two students commented that their needs were heard only after repeatedly telling their teachers about their disabilities. *“As PwD students, we need to approach teachers if we are*

having trouble keeping up. If we do not speak up, nothing will happen”, said one of the respondents. Communicating one’s needs was especially of concern

for students with invisible disabilities³, since these disabilities are not apparent, highlighted one student.



Dr Sudesh Mukhopadhyay emphasised the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment where students with disabilities can disclose their conditions and needs. She said,

“We all also need to understand that students with disabilities in Higher Education are adults and have already acquired coping-up strategies and may not like/ need to disclose their conditions. However, EOC has a provision that they can register, discuss, and request for the support that each requires. Every college also has a designated faculty for this purpose. My doctoral student as well as my direct experience of having these in M.Phil. PhD programmes have taught that much depends on the academic and social environment created in the institutes. For example, one case study in the Delhi University affiliated college reported that a student with Disability never revealed his condition and his peers came to know only when some issues were faced by him. On the other hand, our student at NIEPA/NUEPA shared what she could do and what we as faculty and staff could facilitate. So as a coordinator of the programme, I just shared through a communication with all the faculty members how to facilitate this student, and her peers helped her in taking notes for her when the faculty was speaking. Hence it was just a question of communication and reinterpreting class discipline and sensitivity. Hence, yes there can be arrangements for formal orientation but equally important is the institution’s culture as well as maintaining the dignity of young adults. We also need to encourage persons with disabilities to share their support needs and expectations with their peers, faculty and staff”.

Arushi, a student with a hearing disability, reached out to her teacher when she could not understand what was being taught in the class. She mentioned, *“since everyone was wearing a mask, I could not lip read, and that became a little bit of a problem for me. But when I told the professors about this issue, they made sure that I understood what was being taught”.* While Arushi’s teachers became accommodative of her needs,

Ramesh’s experience was less than ideal. He remarked, *“the classroom teaching is mostly not catered to a person with disability, especially the person with 100% blindness because while explaining concepts, teachers also write on the board and most of the time they do not speak what is being written on the board. Even when we tell them, they say, ‘this will slow down our teaching’.”*

3 Invisible or hidden disabilities are disabilities which are not immediately apparent.

Amongst the students who stated that their teachers were partially accommodative, a majority of them mentioned that while some teachers were inclusive, others were not. These students also reported inconsistent access to class materials and notes. Few additionally acknowledged that extra classes and tutorials were not held regularly. *“Some teachers cooperate with us while others expect us to cooperate with them,”* said one of these respondents.

Some students shared that their teachers were not accommodating to their requirements at all. In such cases, the students with disabilities had to keep up with classroom teaching on their own. The level of accessibility of teaching practices for students with disabilities also differed based on the course, the type of degree (bachelor, master, or PhD), and the college. For instance, according to Hemant, the pace of the coursework was accommodating at the University of Delhi college he pursued

a bachelor’s degree. However, this was not the case at another college in the same university where he completed his master’s degree.

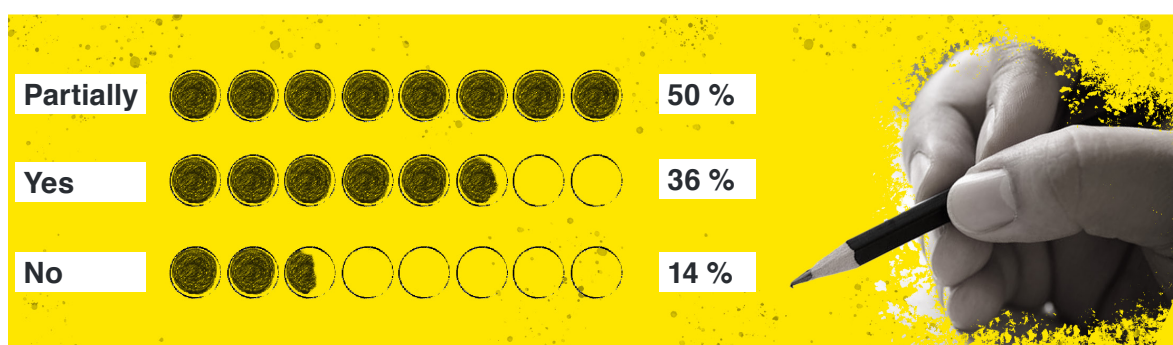
The pandemic also impacted the accessibility of the learning environment for students with disabilities. The respondents had mixed experiences adjusting to the online mode of learning. For instance, two students mentioned that the teachers in their online classrooms did not know of the students with disabilities. Another student shared that due to wearing a mask in offline classes, they had difficulty lip-reading their teachers during lectures which hampered their learning. However, for some students, online classes provided a more inclusive learning environment since exam material was more accessible in the remote learning format. Not having to relocate from their homes and access the college physically proved helpful to some students with disabilities.

Evaluation Criteria and Availability of Scribes

Through primary research, the study wanted to understand whether the evaluation criteria for college examinations used in higher education institutes truly accommodate the needs

of students with disabilities. By doing this, the report wanted to highlight the barriers students face during examinations and assessments.

Does the evaluation criteria/assessment (such as exams, assignments, projects, etc.) account for your needs?



13 interviewees mentioned getting additional time to turn in their tests based on their requirements. Additionally, 6 students mentioned being permitted to use alternative forms of examination adjusted to their disability. For instance, students were allowed to give oral presentations if they had trouble creating PowerPoint presentations. However, during the interviews, students also expressed worries about the evaluation criteria. While some teachers accepted typed assignments, others insisted on handwritten evaluations. The latter was challenging for students with visual or locomotor disabilities to complete.

Kartik remarked, *“kayi professors ko handwritten assignments chahiye hote hain. Toh pehle hum khud type karke assignment prepare karte hain fir vo kisi aur student ko de kar usse handwritten karvate hain aur fir submit karte hain. Toh hum ye independently nahi kar paate, kisi aur ki zaroorat hume padti hai”* [many professors want handwritten assignments. So first, we type our assignment and then we give it to some other student to write. So we are not able to do this independently, we need someone else’s help for this].

A few other students also brought up the reliance on scribes as a source of concern during the interviews. Communication problems between students with disabilities and their scribes made it difficult for them to explain their responses, which was one of their difficulties while working with scribes. For instance, Sandeep pointed out the difficulty in finding a scribe who knows the same language, *“the problem is that in our college, most of the people are English medium students, so it is not possible for a lot of students to write in Hindi for a Hindi medium student. So sometimes we need to find a scribe from*

outside the college”. In some cases, the scribes were not qualified, paid on time, or available. Therefore, students themselves had to find people to write their exams. Rajiv also mentioned the problem with unqualified scribes by adding, *“in my applied mathematics and applied physics course, I was provided with a scribe who had done maths and science till 10th class. So there used to be a lot of trouble communicating my ideas. There used to be a skill mismatch”*. Another student remarked on the ineffective system of scribes at his institution. As a result, the students who required the scribes were forced to find them independently or had to reach out to the EOCs or EUs of their college to get help.

Speaking about the issue of scribes, Dr Partha Pratim Das mentioned, *“we have not recognised this [transcribing] for education. So there is no formal education for transcribing. Transcribing for someone is also not just listening and writing. So we do not even have, I mean, I could not find any significant force to become a transcriber as a career, so that needs to be promoted”*.

Some of the respondents also mentioned instances of inaccessible evaluation criteria. Among these was the teachers’ unwillingness to provide alternative questions in place of those containing visual elements, highlighting their inability to recognise that a student with a visual disability cannot comprehend what is being asked in such situations.



Learning Materials

Lack of availability and accessibility of appropriate learning material plays a huge barrier in a student's academic growth.

The survey, therefore, also focused on the accessibility of the learning materials referred to in classrooms.

Were the learning materials (academic sources, readings, etc.) designed to cater to your needs?



40% of respondents agreed that the learning materials catered to their needs. Measures like making reading material available based on the needs of the students, allowing students to record classroom lectures, etc., were adopted. 37 interviewees acknowledged receiving assistance in recording classroom lectures to help with note-taking. However, 4-5 students shared that they faced difficulties related to the recordings since these were not consistently made available for all the lectures and not all the available recordings were adequate in quality. Some students also faced difficulty recording lectures independently or were not allowed to, impacting their note-taking.

The problem of accessible learning material arose for students with visual disabilities due to a lack of audio-friendly material, which included the unavailability of audiobooks, lack of lecture recording mechanisms, and unavailability of adequate reading material.

A student with a visual disability mentioned that their university provided

a reader's allowance for them to afford someone to read and record the study material. Most students with visual disabilities preferred course material in PDFs that can be read through screen-reading applications. Another student states that PDFs are more readily available than audio recordings for course material and readings. However, several respondents noted that sometimes the PDFs were insufficient and inaccessible. 6 respondents mentioned their screen reader software not correctly comprehending the words because of the poor quality of the PDFs. Some screen reading applications were also unaffordable, while others were inaccurate. A few students also mentioned that a significant portion of their course content was unavailable in electronic format.



During a discussion, **Dr Partha Pratim Das** cited unaffordability as a major challenge in making learning materials accessible:

“Affordability is a big question because I think if you have enough money, then, in today’s time, you really have very sophisticated solutions which can do a lot of things. If we are talking about the complete inclusiveness of everyone, then the affordability has to come either from their individual affordability or from a mechanism, through which it becomes affordable. And that is when the big question comes up. The cost of technology comes from the scale of the technology. The more people use it, the more affordable it will become... Competition brings in different innovations. Converting a PDF to braille is a no-brainer. But the question is you’ll have to finally print it. If you have to print it, then you need the material. And the material cost is not cheap. If you want a little bit of fine-grain material, then you still import them. And there is not enough research into those aspects because there is not enough market so it’s a chicken-and-egg problem. You do not have a large market. So, not many players are interested in it. Finally, it has to make business sense for things to grow. Direct intervention is required.”

Another problem faced by students with visual disabilities in accessing course material was understanding visual components such as maps and images. For example, a student in an engineering course said the screen-reading software had issues interpreting the mathematical symbols needed for formulae, making adequately engaging with learning materials difficult. Himanshu, a student with a visual disability enrolled in a history program, mentioned, *“in humanities and history, teachers use graphics and maps that are not available in the library section in an accessible format. One of the professors was teaching about modern China, and she showed the class how the map looks to give us a geographical sense and showed us pictures around it, but it was not accessible. These things need to be inculcated properly in the*

academic curriculum.”

One student mentioned facing problems due to the font size of the study material. Sonia, a student with a partial visual disability, stated, *“I generally ask for a bigger font size, but the study material was not available in a bigger font size. I just have to use my magnifying glass everywhere. Even in the class tests, it is the same situation, and I should be given a concession of time during the test, but I do not get it”*. Some students also had trouble accessing materials, especially soft copies, written in languages other than English, such as Hindi. Kartik, a student with a visual disability, pointed out, *“Mai Hindi medium se hun aur Hindi mein vaise hi kaafi books aur reading material available hoti nahi hai. Agar Hindi mein ho bhi toh vo uss format mein*

nahi hoti jo hum padh sakte hain” [I am from Hindi medium, and a lot of books and reading materials are not available in Hindi. Even if the books and reading

material are available in Hindi, they are not available in the format in which we can access them].

Dr Sailaja Chennat also raised the issue of the unavailability of learning materials in Hindi in her department,

“There is a heavy dearth of resource books in Hindi language, especially in the area of Research Methodology, an important area at M. Ed level. We have many students with visual impairment pursuing both B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes and most of them are from Hindi medium. At the B.Ed. level, we do have Hindi materials to some extent and these are of immense help. But at the M.Ed. level, we are still struggling to procure readings in Hindi, be it text book or any other readings. The Enabling Unit of our Department is working hard to procure audio recordings of important resources for both B. Ed and M. Ed courses, with the help of volunteering students of the Department. This resource repository is slowly becoming richer and richer each year”.

Furthermore, the reading material in Braille is largely unavailable to the students. According to students, the books in college libraries were insufficient for students with disabilities. A few students also mentioned the issues with physically accessing the library. For instance, Sakshi said, *“the library is highly inaccessible because of the long distance between the main door and the library gate. And you cannot take a rickshaw in front of the library. So accessing the library was always difficult for me”*. Ashish, a student with a locomotor disability, pointed out, *“there is no provision for an orthopedically handicapped person to go to [the] second floor and saare English medium books second floor par hain in the library”* [there is no provision for an orthopedically handicapped person to go to [the] second floor and all the English medium books are on the second floor in the library].

During our interviews, some students also

discussed receiving peer support from teaching assistants, EOCs, or National Service Scheme [NSS] volunteers. The students also stated that their classmates helped record classroom lectures or the reading material for which soft copies were unavailable. *“In my first year, there was a textbook that I was not able to read because the PDF of the book did not support the software that I used. So, I asked my classmates to record that book for me. They divided the task among themselves and did the recording for me, and I got full support for my classes”*, added Atif.

Three students also shared that their institute assigned mentors to help the students with any disability-specific issue. Volunteers from college societies like Equal Opportunity Cells similarly helped access learning material and recordings. However, some students with disabilities pointed out this support was often inconsistent.

Implications of the findings:

■ The majority of the interviewees shared that their teachers catered to their needs. However, they had to communicate directly about them with their teachers by either interrupting them during class or asking after the class. Asking for assistance, especially while interrupting classroom lectures, can be challenging or embarrassing for students at times. Those who cannot vocalise their needs, like asking teachers to reiterate certain sections, slow down, spell out, etc., often miss out on important details of the lectures.

■ The survey also reflected that learning experiences varied from course to course and between colleges. Some interviewees shared that some teachers made their classrooms inclusive, while others did not or were unable to. No uniform pedagogical training mechanism exists for teachers at HEIs to help acquaint them with the diversity of students in class. Hence, several teachers are ill-equipped to cater to the needs of students with disabilities, marring their learning experiences.

■ Some students shared that their teachers were not accommodating their requirements at all. Tutorial (remedial) classes were irregular, and access to class materials and notes was inconsistent. The absence of anonymous feedback or evaluation by students can lead to a sense of complacency among teachers. Without a means of providing feedback without fear of retribution or negative consequences, students with disabilities may be less likely to speak up about issues or challenges they are facing in the classroom. This communication gap could result in teachers being unaware of areas where they could improve their teaching methods or accommodations to support

these students better. Furthermore, without feedback or evaluation from students, teachers may not fully appreciate the impact of their teaching on students with disabilities, particularly in terms of their ability to access the curriculum and learn effectively. An absence of feedback could perpetuate a cycle of complacency, where teachers continue to rely on outdated or ineffective teaching methods rather than proactively seeking to improve their approach to better meet the needs of all students, especially those with disabilities. Hence, classrooms become exclusive spaces which neglect the needs of students with disabilities, hampering their professional growth and even leading to students dropping out.

■ The study uncovered that the criteria for evaluating internal examinations were predominantly flexible and accommodated various forms of assessment. However, the respondents highlighted instances where some teachers imposed particular or rigid assessment formats, resulting in dissatisfaction among the students. Semester examinations are completely hand-written and time-bound, but students are allowed facilities like assistance from scribes and compensatory time. Rather than making evaluation easier and more inclusive, scribes unfamiliar with coursework often have an added disadvantage for students. The rigidity in the mode of assessment leads to negative evaluation, thus harming the careers of students with disabilities. A rigid evaluation policy also takes away from their right to be independent. It manufactures forced dependency that can be avoided by alternate assessment mechanisms, which work well in internal examinations.

Students with visual disabilities are at the highest disadvantage concerning the availability of learning materials. They require several methods to access course material and may have specific alternative format requirements. Irrespective of the modality through which students opt to obtain information, challenges can arise in properly

formatting the content, comprehending it, and accessing images or graphs. Even though universities have tried to make course materials available, sufficient and consistent measures are absent. Outdated software, poor-quality materials, and unavailability of certain materials in accessible formats are some of the prominent issues.

D Experience with College Societies

Through interviews, the study sought to identify the barriers that prevent students with disabilities from joining college societies and clubs and learn how accessible these societies are to

them. Additionally, the study set out to find how approachable and helpful EOCs and EUs are in their mandate of creating an inclusive campus environment for students with disabilities.

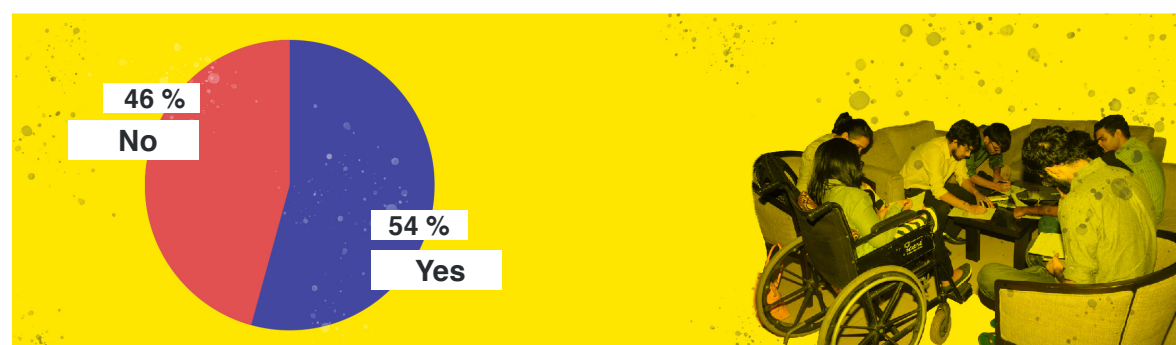
On-Campus Support for Students with Disabilities: Equal Opportunity Cells and Enabling Units

EOCs and EUs assist students with disabilities to participate equally and fully in the university's academic, intellectual, social, and cultural life. These societies exist to address any barriers that students with disabilities might face in college.

asked if they had ever contacted EOCs and EUs in their respective colleges. If they answered yes, they were asked about their experience and whether they had found these societies helpful. If they answered no, they were asked reasons for not reaching out to these cells.

During interviews, the respondents were

Did you ever reach out to the various support societies/equal opportunity cells that are available in your institute for students with disabilities?



These societies helped with assignments and evaluation criteria by locating scribes for exams or volunteers to assist with reading, highlighting the difficulties students face and providing solutions, conducting career planning workshops and seminars, etc. Apart from making learning accessible, these societies supported students' social development by facilitating interactions with able-bodied students and participation in college activities. For example, a student mentioned how their college's EOC had organised excursions for students with disabilities and able-bodied students to facilitate interaction. However, only 6 interviewees found their college's EOCs and EUs helpful.

According to 12 respondents, EOCs or EUs did not exist or were not functional in their colleges. The low enrollment or underrepresentation of students with disabilities in their colleges was one reason several respondents gave for the absence of such support societies. Without EOCs or EUs, students could contact the college administration, such as the Dean or Convenor, for assistance. However, the assistance offered by these substitute systems is not fully inclusive or accessible for students with disabilities. For example, a student shared that "in my current institute, there is only a convenor. She's a faculty member. She writes good emails, but it's only limited to emails".

In the absence of such societies, few students shared that they took the initiative to open and formulate EOCs in their respective colleges. However, a student shared that the lack of funding was one major problem they encountered while setting up an EOC.

Several students shared being a member of their institute's EOC or EU. As part of the society, these members "hold events and help with assignments. If someone

is not able to participate in college fest, they give them the opportunity", shared a respondent who was also a member of the EOC of their college. Being a part of the EOC was also important for students with disabilities to represent themselves and their issues. Shruti, the president of the EOC of a college, remarked, "I am part of EOC, and I am very happy to be a part of it. This is because I do not want any non-PwD student representing us. They can come to learn, and we can guide them on what to do". Another student, Ravi, added, "Our enabling unit was actually headed by an able-bodied person. The problem is that since it was headed by an able-bodied person, so obviously it is not possible ki vo humari problems theek tarah se samajh paye [that they are able to understand our problems properly]".

Some students also shared that their institute's EOCs and EUs did not help them fully and were inadequate and inefficient in their work. A student mentioned that their college's EU could not understand the needs of students with disabilities. Dr Saijla Chennat also discussed the lack of effectiveness of EOCs of some colleges and identified lack of commitment as the major reason for this. She said, "some of the colleges may start an EOC because it is mandatory and then it doesn't function well. That's what happens in many places. Usse koi faida nahi hai [There's no point in this]. They have to do it properly, there has to be some commitment. So I think there is a long way to go, we need to do a lot of work".

Many students shared that they did not reach out to their EOC or EU for help because they did not feel the need to do so. Additionally, they did not have the opportunity to engage with EOCs and EUs in an online mode of education during the pandemic.

Extracurricular College Societies

Extracurricular activities greatly influence students' intellectual and social development and allow them to widen their horizons. Through the survey, the study also wanted to understand whether the extracurricular activities and societies in college spaces are inclusive and accommodative of the needs of students with disabilities. The study also discusses the experiences of respondents who were or had been a part of such societies.

The majority of them agreed that these societies did not take any additional steps to make themselves approachable. This impacted the degree and nature of participation of students with disabilities in such college societies. Students expressed feeling excluded due to the lack of accommodations made by the college societies. For example, one student shared, *"they make us feel excluded - they do not pay attention to blind students- don't explain anything"*.

Other students shared that while the lack of special provisions for students with disabilities did not make them feel discriminated against, it adversely affected their ability to participate in college societies. *"They don't discriminate but they don't even make any special arrangements for disabled people. They do what they think is 'normal', do not consider otherwise. For example, for someone with locomotor disability, it's very difficult to go for art walks,"* shared one student.

The absence of additional measures impacted the degree of accessibility for students with disabilities. Hence, it became 'rare' to see them as members of societies in colleges. *"It's very rare that a PwD student is part of a society,"* shared one student. Another respondent added, *"not many students with disabilities*

are part of societies due to inadequate support and lack of disabled-friendly atmosphere".

One respondent mentioned the unawareness among students and societies about support societies like EOC/EUs. *"Humare college ke saari societies ko hi nahi pata hoga ki koi PwDs ke koi enabling society bhi exist karti hai [All our college societies would also not know that there exists an enabling unit for PwDs]"*, mentioned one student.

Students with disabilities felt their presence and involvement in societies was unwanted or undervalued due to these experiences. However, 5-6 interviewees found societies in their college to be accommodative towards students with disabilities. Two students shared that societies in their institutions raised awareness around disability and ensured that participation in these societies was accessible. According to a student, the EOC and EU of their college played a significant role in ensuring that extracurricular societies included students with disabilities.

Although the membership of students with disabilities in these societies was rare, few students shared their experience being part of such societies in their college. Some respondents also talked about the additional accessible measures taken by different societies for students with disabilities. One of them said, *"for [the] magazine department, there was a provision that if a person wants to give an article, they can give it in audio form, and it used to get transcribed by someone. For photography society, [there was] collaboration where a blind person used to take photos and those photos used to be displayed in photo exhibitions."*

Implications of the findings:

Several interviewees stated that many colleges did not have functioning EOCs and EUs. Every college is mandated to have an EOC or EU to assist students and make the institutional environment more inclusive. However, a lack of accountability in ensuring that they function properly makes HEIs an exclusive space for able-bodied students, making it difficult for students with disabilities to transition to higher education and navigate the systems that favour able-bodied people.

The research findings indicate that students with disabilities exhibit a lower propensity to engage in extracurricular pursuits, such as clubs, societies, or on-campus events, compared to

their able-bodied counterparts. This trend could be attributed to either unfavourable encounters with societies, wherein they encountered marginalisation and were subjected to negative assessments regarding their abilities, or to the exclusionary nature of extracurricular activities that cater predominantly to the needs of able-bodied individuals. Furthermore, the lack of representation of students with disabilities in leadership roles in clubs and societies can impede their access to opportunities for skill acquisition and personal growth. The absence of inclusive policies and practices can exacerbate this challenge, leading to the under-representation of these students in various administrative roles and activities.

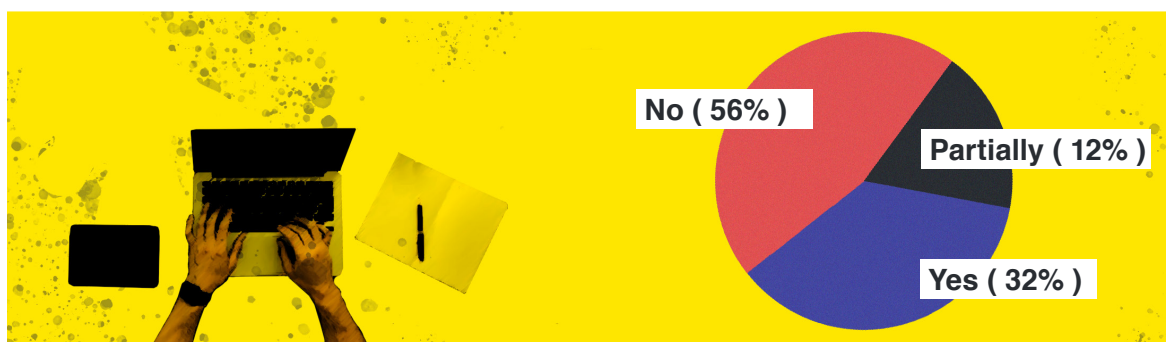
E Career Guidance and Placement Assistance

Higher education is instrumental for promising career opportunities. However, several barriers prevent students with disabilities from maximising these opportunities. These barriers include inadequate support systems, limited access to appropriate training and technology, and a recruiter's bias against the aptitude and ability of students with disabilities.

As stated, there is a general lack of awareness among faculty and peers in higher education institutes about the challenges students with disabilities face. Consequently, students struggle to receive appropriate career guidance.

During interviews, the respondents were asked about career guidance and placement assistance they receive from

Did the classroom teaching methods cater to your needs ?



their teachers or placement bodies in the institutions.

A majority of the students shared receiving no or inadequate guidance and placement assistance from their colleges. Some of the students also complained that career counselling sessions and seminars failed to take into account the needs and restrictions of students with disabilities. Students who reported receiving placement assistance in their colleges said it was limited to a few sessions with working professionals. These sessions usually did not consider the needs and requirements of students with disabilities.

While explaining the need for targeted career guidance for students with disabilities, Dr Sudesh Mukhopadhyay emphasised the significance of inculcating life skills as part of the college curriculum.

She said, *“the job market is not a static concept. Hence, life skills, though introduced at the school level, also need to find a place in the higher education curriculum. Taking initiative, self-confidence, resilience, and excellence in whatsoever one undertakes are some important dimensions. But for such developments, parents, teachers, and communities also need to create space for youth with or without disabilities to explore and discover rather than being guided through control”.*

A common way of learning about job prospects was through seminars. A student revealed that their college’s Disability Research Cell partnered with various civil society organisations to provide advice and training for students with disabilities. These training sessions

were useful in understanding the skills students needed to develop for the job market.

Two students also mentioned receiving help from the EUs in the absence of formal career guidance from their colleges. These EUs conducted webinars focusing on the needs of individuals with disabilities. Informally receiving advice from professors about career prospects was also common among students.

Neelam Jolly commented on the lack of preparedness and initiative amongst staff regarding career guidance for students with disabilities by saying, *“in most of the educational and professional institutions, the staff is neither equipped nor willing to look into the needs of persons with disabilities. Regrettably, very few of them reach a level where they can think of a career due to non-availability of accessible educational facilities even at the primary level”.*

During lectures, professors often advised students and discussed job openings and opportunities that might interest them. Some students also mentioned receiving career advice from their college seniors with disabilities.

In some academic institutions, specific faculty members are designated mentors for students with disabilities. However, a student recently reported that they had not communicated with their assigned mentor, despite the availability of these mentorship programs in their institute. This situation illustrates how difficult accessing existing interventions is for students with disabilities.

“

Professor Partha Pratim Das commented that several prestigious colleges have career development programs that fail to provide guidance and cater to the needs of students with disabilities:

“Institutions have to wake up to the fact that there’s a large number of students with disabilities, whether or not they are documented. And they can really perform much better work to their potential if they are given a little bit of guidance and support through their period of education in the institution, as well as in terms of matching their needs with the opportunities outside through career development advice.”

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Further, George Abraham highlighted the need to create high-quality education and enhance skill-building at school and university levels:

“I believe the focus has to be on quality education. If you want people to do what they’re good at and what they want to do, then I think the focus needs to be on high quality education and developing life skills, while they are in school. So that, when they finish class 12, they have certain abilities and skills to deal with the world. And when they finish college, they are ready for employment. So quality education is very critical and then accessible infrastructure both at the college level, school level, as well as at the city and national level, whether it is public spaces, whether it is corporate India, whether it is technical training centres”.

Implications of the findings:

■ As pointed out by stakeholders and students, the purpose of higher education is more than providing quality education. Higher education must also provide a conducive environment for better career prospects and transferable technical skills suitable to the job market. However, most institutions fail to prepare students, especially those with disabilities, making their assimilation into the job market difficult. Lack of engagement by institutes with job providers, keeping students with disabilities in mind, becomes one of the biggest barriers to a successful transition from education to jobs for these students.

F Social interactions and experience

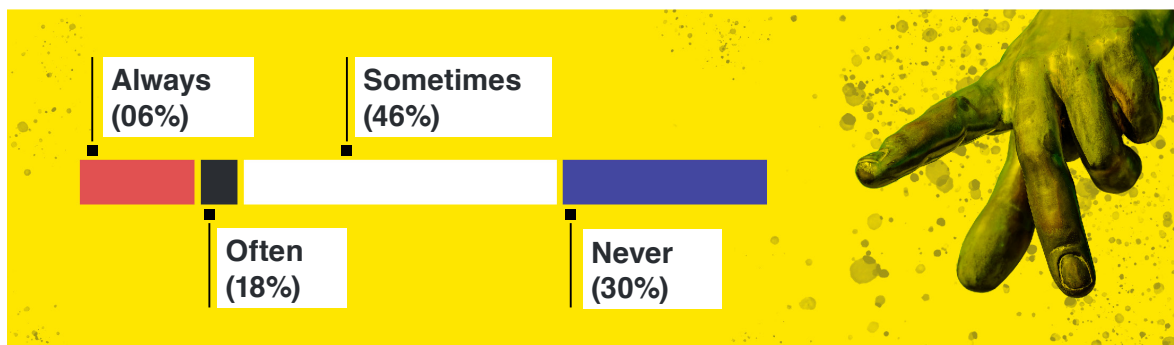
The final section of the interviews with students with disabilities focuses on their college experience beyond academic learning and extracurricular activities. Negative attitudes and stereotypes still exist towards students with disabilities in the education system, impacting their ability to access educational facilities equally.

The discussion under this theme highlights attitudinal barriers to an

inclusive education system. These barriers emerge from a lack of awareness, sensitisation, and understanding of disability issues.

Under this theme, the respondents were asked if they were treated differently because of their disability. They were also asked about the instances that made them feel excluded in their colleges.

Do you feel that other students or university staff treat you differently, because of your disability?



Only 15 interviewees indicated they had never been treated differently because of their disability. These students also mentioned that the teachers and administrative staff in their colleges were well-trained to teach students with disabilities. Additionally, their college was also more aware of inclusive practices.

35 interviewees acknowledged experiencing differential treatment in their institute and feeling left out. Most of these students also noted a general lack of awareness and sensitisation in their institute. A respondent pointed out that the lack of awareness in their institute also stemmed from low enrollment rates of students with disabilities. They said, “the department is not that much sensitised because the enrolment number of

people with disabilities here is really low. My previous batch did not have anybody with a disability. So the faculty members are not that much sensitised”.

Many students mentioned feeling excluded when teachers did not consider their classroom needs or were not sensitive. For instance, a student commented on the ableist language used by some teachers that alienated students with disabilities. Moreover, some teaching and evaluation methods also contributed to this exclusion. For example, a student mentioned that students with disabilities in their department were sometimes excused from submitting their assignments. They would be awarded the required grade

without submitting an alternative form of assessment. Another student mentioned an incident where the teacher asked the students with disabilities to choose a topic for their assignment while other students were assigned a topic at random. These incidents made them feel that they were not on par with the other students. Some students with disabilities also expressed that they were made to feel less qualified than students without disabilities. Ananya, a student with a disability from a prominent institute in New Delhi,

shared, *“I am not considered intellectual enough most of the time because they feel that mera admission reservation se hua hai. [I am not considered intellectual enough most of the time because they feel that my admission has happened because of reservations]”*. Another student mentioned how she was advised to do a B.Ed instead of a PhD because it was assumed that she would not be able to keep up with the more rigorous coursework.

“

Other times, teachers tend to overprotect and overcompensate by providing leeways and exceptions to students with disabilities, further contributing to their feelings of exclusion and alienation. Speaking on the need to balance helping students with disabilities and maintaining their sense of dignity and independence, **Kanwal Singh** commented,

“We are a very committed and compassionate lot with good intentions. We do not want our students to struggle - physically, emotionally, academically - which is why we protect them. We provide support, make accommodations, adaptations and modifications so that students can learn, so that they experience success and avoid failure. Good intentions do not always lead to good results. In spite of having the best of intentions, some of the practices followed by special educators and inclusion facilitators end up creating a disabling rather than an enabling environment. Instead of independence, the result is ‘in dependence’. We over protect our students. We deny opportunities to strive and struggle, to make their own decisions, to make mistakes and learn from them. There are several things we can do to strike a balance between providing the necessary support and also not compromising on their sense of independence”.

Several students expressed a sense of alienation stemming from their peers’ lack of awareness and insensitivity towards disability-related concerns. Such feelings were often triggered by derogatory or insensitive comments made by peers during their interactions. For example, a student with a visual disability shared that other students made fun of them when they asked the

professor to record a lecture in class.

Reiterating the need for sensitisation and awareness amongst students, teachers, and staff, Neelam Jolly asserted, *“the stigma around disability is very prevalent and it is mostly due to the lack of awareness and sensitisation of the able-bodied people. The only way to deal with it is to provide regular disability*

sensitisation training and awareness workshops in educational institutions. These trainings should be cross-disability in nature and should be mandatory for both staff and students to attend”.

Lack of accommodation and engagement during college events also added to this feeling of exclusion. Aditya, a student with a visual disability, added, *“abhi farewell tha humare college mein toh uss time pe left out feel kiya. 1-2 programmes ko chodh kar mujhe koi programme aisa nahi laga jisme hum log bhi enjoy kar sakte hain[We had our college farewell recently, and I was feeling left out. Except for 1-2 programmes, I did not feel that there were any programmes that we [students with disabilities] could also enjoy]”.*

Students with disabilities could also not participate in several social activities because their peers ignored their needs. For instance, Rishi mentioned that the music society of his college used to conduct practice sessions outside of the college campus, making it difficult for him to attend. He said, *“mai jab music society mein tha, practice jo hoti thi vo college mein nahi hoti. Alag alag jagah*

par hoti thi. Aur kabhi kabhi raat 10 baje. Maine unhe bola tha ki mere liye ye feasible nahi hai but unhone changes karne se mana kar diya [when I was in the music society, the practice did not happen inside the college campus. It used to happen in different places. And sometimes even at 10 pm. I had informed them [other society members] that this is not feasible for me, but they refused to make any changes]”.

Few students mentioned that people always viewed them with sympathy or pity. They were also made to feel like a ‘burden’ due to their disabilities. For instance, a student mentioned during the interview that some students stopped interacting with them when they noticed their disability-related challenges. Another student added, *“when we talk to others, they always assume that we need help”.* Instances such as these impacted students’ ability to interact socially or form friendships with other college students. Due to this negative perception of people with disabilities, society and educational systems fail to give adequate attention or importance to their aspirations and goals.

Regarding this, **George Abraham** argued,

“I think there is a predominant perception that people with disabilities are liabilities and dependent citizens of this country and education is more of a pastime than an investment towards creating a human resource. So when you feel that there are a hundred people, and out of them 10 people who are disabled and you believe that they are not going to be part of a human resource. Then, you’re going to use your limited resources and focus on the 90 people rather than on the 10 people...It’ll take a big effort to actually change that perception. I believe technology is available today. And if technology can be strategically introduced into school education for children with disabilities, I think it’ll make a big difference”.

Several students shared that other factors like class, caste, gender, language, and regional background also impacted how their peers treated them socially. For example, some students from Hindi-medium schools mentioned how their inability to converse in English impacted their interactions in college. A student shared, *“special schools are mostly Hindi medium, and this can trickle down and affect college life in an environment where everyone speaks English”*.

A few students also expanded on their experiences. According to them, the lack of interaction between able-bodied students and students with disabilities was responsible for persistent stigma and insensitivity towards students with disabilities. *“Problem starts with students being unaware of our existence. Some of them do not even know what ‘PwD’ stands for or what that category entails. Students are not sensitised at the school*

level, hence, problems arise at the college level. Inclusive education should start at schools so that students do not feel awkward when they meet someone on a wheelchair”, shared another respondent. Emphasising the negative impact of inadequate interaction and awareness among students during their formative years, Dr Sailaja Chennat remarked that *“sensitisation has to start right from school day one but unfortunately, even today, most of our schools don’t have many children with disabilities, even common schools...The more the children are initiated into sharing space with children with disabilities, the more they will be sensitised....So to develop sensitivity later is very difficult. So at the higher education level, because they are already grown up, it is more difficult. It is more challenging. So one way that I feel it can work is if we do it right from the first day.”*

Implications of the findings:

■ The majority of the interviewees revealed that they experienced differential treatment and exclusion due to their disabilities. They attributed such discriminatory behaviour to the lack of awareness and sensitivity among teachers and students towards disability-related issues. According to the respondents, teachers often tended to overprotect or unconsciously underestimate students with disabilities by making assumptions about their abilities, which could engender feelings of inadequacy among such students, thereby negatively impacting their college

experience. The crux of the matter lies in implementing accommodative measures on the part of teachers rather than resorting to differential treatment. It is imperative to create an inclusive classroom environment that fosters equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their disabilities, while also acknowledging and accommodating their unique needs. This approach can help promote a more conducive and equitable learning environment for students with disabilities, enabling them to realise their full academic potential and feel more integrated into the college community.

CONCLUSION

Through primary research, this study highlights the barriers in higher education spaces that prevent these spaces from being inclusive for students with disabilities. During discussions, the students were also asked whether their experience matched their expectations about college life. 54% of the students acknowledged that their college experience fell short of their expectations.

Beyond infrastructural barriers, the unfulfilling social environment was the main cause of students' poor college experiences. A majority of students said that they anticipated a more welcoming college atmosphere but their social experience in college was negatively impacted by a lack of sensitisation among students and teachers. The general absence or little interaction between students with disabilities and those without also played a role in adversely affecting the respondents' college experience. For instance, a respondent mentioned, *"the biggest barrier to inclusiveness is lack of social interaction. There should be interaction from both sides. Sometimes students do ignore or dismiss but that is not the case with everyone. But also, this goes both ways, we also do not approach other students and interact with them. Friends are an important part of college life, we do not want people to be friends with us out of sympathy"*.

As discussed, accessibility issues around college infrastructure and learning materials also contributed to

students' unmet expectations. The inaccessibility of campus canteens, libraries, and campus routes were some factors that contributed to their unsatisfactory college experience. For instance, one of the students shared that they had *"expected [name of the Institute], a global reputed university to cater to the needs of people with disabilities better, but I faced issues of accessibility of infrastructure such as accessing canteen"*. Some students complained that difficult-to-access campus housing and dorms negatively impacted their college experience. Besides that, the expensive and inconvenient public transit system hindered their access to college.

The coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent shift to online education were also among the most prominent reasons for students' unsatisfactory college experience. For instance, Stuti, an interviewee with a hearing disability, mentioned, *"because of the pandemic and everything being online, I did not get to actually experience college life for a very long time. Because of my disability, it is difficult for me to interact sometimes because I cannot hear, so that affects my social life. I am able to manage academics, but my biggest challenge is always the social life and social interactions"*.

The barriers and challenges highlighted in this chapter, amongst others, need to be addressed by policymakers to make students' college experiences more fulfilling.



CHAPTER

03

RECOMMENDATIONS

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter includes recommendations to create a more inclusive higher education system based on our primary and secondary research findings. These recommendations address the challenges identified in the previous chapters and target the Ministry of Education, universities, and colleges. These stakeholders are the main decision-makers in the higher education landscape in India and can bring about systemic change.

Recommendation 1:

Ensuring a barrier-free environment in college institutions.

INSTITUTIONS

Designing Changes and Regular Inspections for Barrier-free Accessibility.

A barrier-free campus environment is designed to be accessible and usable by students with disabilities. It entails buildings, locations and transportation systems that are safe and easily accessible to them. A barrier-free infrastructure design's goal should be to enable people with disabilities to move around and use facilities independently.

The barrier-free design may include ramps and elevators for easy access, wide doorways and corridors for wheelchair users, and accessible restrooms, including features such as grab bars, within-reach sinks and soap dispensers, and toilets with sufficient space for manoeuvring wheelchairs.

The design may also include auditory and visual cues for people with hearing and sight impairments, such as braille signage and audible announcements, in transportation systems.

Regular inspections by institutes can identify and address any barriers or obstacles preventing students with disabilities from accessing and using university facilities, such as classrooms, libraries, and residence halls. Inspections can also help determine required changes, like installing new ramps or elevators or updating signage to make it more accessible for students with visual disabilities.

Recommendation 2:

Increasing weightage of inclusivity parameters for assessing and accrediting higher education institutions.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Increasing weightage of inclusivity parameters in institutional rankings:

The National Institutional Ranking Framework assigns insufficient weightage to inclusivity in the criteria for ranking higher educational institutions. More weightage should be given to accessibility so that universities are incentivised to be inclusive.

Increasing weightage of inclusivity parameters for assessing and accrediting higher education institutions:

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council assigns insufficient weightage to provisions of disabled-friendly amenities at a higher educational institute. While undertaking assessment and accreditation, more weightage needs to be given to the inclusivity features of institutions, within which digital accessibility should be separated from physical accessibility.

Recommendation 3:

Making higher education institution websites fully accessible to students with disabilities to provide accurate information on inclusive and accessible facilities.

GOVERNMENT

Penalising institutions for non-adherence to WCAG 2.1 guidelines:

The government should mandate that institutes adhere to WCAG 2.1 guidelines. It should establish a functional mechanism to audit and penalise institutes that do not comply.

INSTITUTIONS

Ensuring that their institutional websites are accessible:

Most of the websites of top higher educational institutions are faring inadequately on the accessibility parameters. Institutes should thoroughly review and update their websites to follow the Web Content Accessibility

Guidelines [WCAG] 2.1 guidelines. Along with an accessible website, institutes should prioritise providing information that appropriately reflects their institute's accessibility status.

Recommendation 4:

Providing accessible accommodations and hostels with need-based support to students with disabilities.

INSTITUTIONS

Providing hostels on a need basis and increasing the number of seats reserved in hostels:

UGC should provide accommodations and hostels to students with disabilities based on needs instead of course/

marks based. Hostel seats reserved for students with disabilities should also be increased in number.

Providing individualised support and services for making accommodations accessible and establishing a robust feedback system:

Higher education institutes should make accommodations more accessible by providing individualised support and disability services. Further, institutes should gather student feedback to

address common challenges that students with disabilities might be facing while interacting with the administration and the accommodations process.

Recommendation 5:

Mandating the start-of-the-year orientation sessions and periodic briefings informing students with disabilities about facilities and support available to them in colleges.

GOVERNMENT

Ensuring that colleges are hosting specific orientation sessions for students with disabilities:

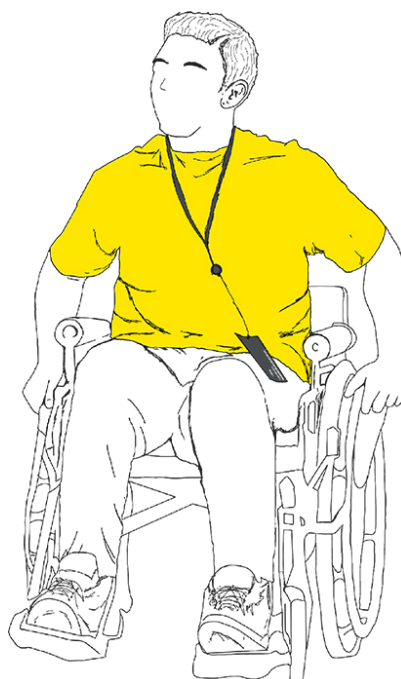
The government must make orientation sessions and intermittent briefing sessions mandatory in colleges. Orientation sessions are essential to a student's transition from school to college. These sessions should be utilised to inform students with disabilities about

various facilities and support services on campus and whom to approach in case of grievances/emergencies. These sessions can also help professors understand the needs of their students better.

INSTITUTIONS

Setting up specific committees that oversee orientation and briefing sessions throughout the academic year:

Institutions of higher education must establish dedicated committees for overseeing and organising timely orientation and briefing sessions for incoming students. These committees can play a critical role in promoting student welfare and success by facilitating mentoring and career development opportunities, establishing mechanisms for sharing and addressing grievances, providing spaces for students with disabilities to voice their concerns, and conducting regular follow-ups to ensure students are not encountering any difficulties while on campus or elsewhere.



Recommendation 6:

Existing and incoming teachers at higher education levels should receive in-depth training on adapting their pedagogy to consider the needs of students with disabilities.

INSTITUTIONS

Incorporating the needs of students with disabilities by improving the minimum qualification of educators:

A Master's degree in a relevant field and passing the UGC NET (or SET/SLET for state-level institutions) exams are the prerequisites for entry-level teaching employment in higher education institutions in India. Alternatively, a PhD in a relevant field is also acceptable.

The UGC NET exam has only 5 questions that cover 'Teaching Aptitude'. The assessment criteria are insufficient to evaluate a person's pedagogical abilities or expertise. Therefore, UGC should

increase the weightage of Teaching Aptitude or pedagogical components in NET/SET/SLET exams. Questions should also account for student diversity concerning disabilities, gender, language, caste, and ethnicity.

Additionally, UGC should issue guidelines for updating the curriculum of PhD coursework to include pedagogical training that addresses inclusive education.

Providing regularly updated Teacher training manuals:

Teacher training manuals must be made available to faculty to ensure students from different backgrounds, abilities, and experiences have access to a conducive learning environment. These training materials and handbooks for instructors will help standardise the inclusion and accessibility process.

It is imperative to establish a system that guarantees regular updates to ensure

that the guidelines are relevant and responsive to the changing needs of students. This system can be achieved by scheduling periodic meetings and consultations with representatives from teacher and student organisations. Such a system would enable ongoing assessment and refinement of the guidelines, ensuring their continued effectiveness and alignment with current best practices in the field.

Providing pre-service and in-service training for educators:

Educators in higher education need to be given adequate pre-service and in-service training. Pre-service training trains future educators before they enter the workforce. On the other hand, in-service training facilitates existing teachers to inculcate new skills and improve their ability to engage with students. The

training programmes should consist of coursework and workshops to equip them to cater to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds better. Additionally, they should integrate new research on disability, pedagogy, and practical strategies for inclusive practices.

Recommendation 7:

Ensuring accessible textbooks and learning materials and adopting assistive technology and technology-based platforms to cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

INSTITUTIONS

Ensuring that colleges are hosting specific orientation sessions for students with disabilities:

The government must make orientation sessions and intermittent briefing sessions mandatory in colleges. Orientation sessions are essential to a student's transition from school to college. These sessions should be utilised to inform students with disabilities about various facilities and support services

on campus and whom to approach in case of grievances/emergencies. These sessions can also help professors understand the needs of their students better.

Building more open-access repositories and digital libraries:

UGC should aim to create more open-access repositories and digital libraries of teaching-learning materials. These resources could be modelled after Sugamya Pustakalaya, a shared online library of accessible format books

created jointly by the Government of India and non-government organisations. The digital library would contain publications on various subjects in multiple languages and accessible formats.

Producing teaching and learning material in several languages:

It is imperative to develop teaching and learning materials in different languages, with a particular focus on making them accessible to students with disabilities. Several students have faced difficulty finding learning materials in languages other than English. This issue is compounded for students with disabilities who require materials in alternative formats. Limited English proficiency or non-English speaking students face language barriers that hinder their full participation in the learning process and achievement of their educational potential.

Many students with disabilities require materials in alternative formats — such

as Braille, large print, or audio — to accommodate their visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments. However, finding such materials in languages other than English can be particularly challenging, as they are not widely available and often require additional resources for translation and adaptation. Funding and resources should be allocated to support the translation and adaptation of teaching and learning materials.

Recommendation 8:

Devising alternative modes of evaluation to ensure a more inclusive and equitable assessment process for students with disabilities.

GOVERNMENT

Improving provisions for evaluation mechanisms for students with disabilities:

Handwritten exams are a common evaluation method in higher education institutions. However, this approach poses significant challenges for students with disabilities, making the learning environment and examination inaccessible.

The process is burdensome and time-consuming since students depend

on external aids like scribes. Identifying and verifying scribes for students with disabilities can consume a significant exam preparation time. Such a tedious process can limit the abilities of students who prefer using scribes. Additionally, scribe-based assessment mechanisms can impede self-paced revision as students have limited control over what is written during the exam. Furthermore,

dictating quantitative tests to less experienced or unqualified scribes can be time-consuming and arduous. The qualifications of scribes should be reviewed to ensure the examinees are not disadvantaged. Another alternative is to make timed exams accessible through assistive technology such as screen readers. Alternative evaluation methods, such as oral exams or take-home assignments, should also be considered as they provide a more inclusive and equitable assessment process for students with disabilities. These methods can be especially beneficial for students with physical or cognitive disabilities

who may struggle to complete traditional written exams or in-class assignments. For instance, take-home assignments can provide students with disabilities with the flexibility they need to complete their assignments at their own pace and in their own space. Alternative assessment methods must be carefully designed and evaluated to ensure they are aligned with the learning objectives and are as rigorous as traditional methods. Instructors should also be trained to develop and implement these methods effectively and fairly and to avoid any potential biases or assumptions about students with disabilities.

Recommendation 9:

Ensuring proper functioning of enabling units and equal opportunity cells to support students with disabilities better.

GOVERNMENT

Enforcing UGC guidelines which mandate the establishment of equal opportunity cells and enabling units:

There already exist UGC guidelines to establish and operate equal opportunity cells and enabling units in colleges. However, the on-ground implementation of these guidelines is poor. Many colleges in the University of Delhi do not have these cells. Even in colleges where these cells exist, they fail to provide proper and timely support to students with disabilities. Most individuals who run equal opportunity cells and enabling units are able-bodied students and committee members and, hence, may lack adequate knowledge or training in disability support. This can result in inadequate

or inappropriate accommodations being provided to students with disabilities. It is crucial to address this issue by ensuring adequate representation of students with disabilities in equal opportunity cells and enabling units, prioritising their involvement in all aspects of disability support services, and developing ongoing training and adaptation programs. The UGC must ensure that the colleges establish functional and inclusive equal opportunity cells, enabling units, and other support systems that are active throughout the academic year.

INSTITUTIONS

Establishing a governance unit to conduct periodic checks on the functioning of support societies in colleges:

Tackling the inactivity of enabling units and equal opportunity cells in colleges is necessary. Higher education institutes must establish a central committee which oversees the operation of these units in colleges and conducts periodic checks

on adherence to expectations. This committee can further specify minimum standards and requirements for enabling units and equal opportunity cells, such as the minimum number of members or faculty that must be a part of these units.

Ensuring that enabling units, equal opportunity cells, and other support societies are not devoid of resources and are functioning as expected:

A recurring problem that enabling units and equal opportunity cells face in the University of Delhi's colleges is the problem of adequate financing. College administrations must ensure that equal

opportunity cells, enabling units, and other support societies receive funding and administrative support like allocation of rooms, computers, and other logistical support on time.

Recommendation 10:

Making extracurricular and other social activities in colleges more inclusive and accessible to all students.

INSTITUTIONS

Issuing guidelines to colleges for ensuring inclusivity in extracurricular and social events:

Students with disabilities from many colleges across the University of Delhi mentioned that extracurricular activities and social events, in general, are not inclusive. Many of these students also recalled being discriminated against by event organisers due to their disabilities. Universities must mandate that colleges make such activities and events inclusive

and accessible for all students while conducting periodic checks to ensure that students with disabilities do not face any discrimination. Additionally, central universities can further support students with disabilities by setting up a complaint portal in case of non-compliance by college societies or organising committees of events.

Ensuring that students with disabilities do not face any barriers in participating in extracurricular events, competitions, and social events:

Colleges must provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities and social events. These accommodations can include assistance with conveyance and communication, adequate training facilities for

competitions, and sufficient incentives and rewards to motivate these students. Colleges must also involve students with disabilities in planning committees for such events.

Recommendation 11:

Recognising the needs and abilities of students with disabilities and revamping the existing system of placements and jobs must make it more inclusive.

DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Making the operation of Placement Cells mandatory in colleges and universities:

Including and recognising the needs and abilities of students with disabilities is crucial for their overall development and professional success. The existing system of placements and jobs needs to be revamped to make it more inclusive. An inclusive placement cell is critical to informing students with disabilities about professional opportunities. In this context, the University Grants Commission [UGC] must ensure that the operation of placement cells is mandatorily inclusive.

An inclusive placement cell recognises and accommodates the needs and abilities of students with disabilities. It can provide specialised training and

support to members who work with students with disabilities. The cell must provide relevant information and support to students with disabilities about professional opportunities that are open to them. It should also ensure that the information provided is accessible and communicated in a format that suits the needs of each student with a disability.

INSTITUTIONS

Improving access to the Central Placement Cell for students with disabilities:

University of Delhi's Central Placement Cell aims to provide adequate job and internship opportunities to all students enrolled in the university. However, the cell and its online platform are riddled with several problems. Students must follow a lengthy registration process to be registered with the Central Placement Cell. Moreover, the Cell's website does not provide any contact details in case students wish to contact the committee members. Placement Cells must be made accessible in all institutions to students with disabilities by:

- 1 Updating the website to include text-to-speech support;
- 2 Making the registration process simpler by reducing the requirement of submitting hard copies of documents; and
- 3 Ensuring adequate outreach to market these specific job opportunities to maximise student interest and participation.

Organising periodic career development and vocational skill development workshops:

Interactions with students from different colleges across the University of Delhi revealed that colleges are not taking adequate initiatives to organise skill-building sessions and career development workshops. Such workshops are essential for students

to develop vocational skills and be up-to-date with the requirements of today's job market. Colleges must focus on organising such workshops and sessions to better equip students with the knowledge and skills required to be employable.

Recommendation 12:

Conducting awareness campaigns and sensitisation workshops to create a fully inclusive environment and promote equal participation of students with disabilities.

INSTITUTIONS

Making provisions for sensitisation workshops, awareness campaigns, information dissemination, etc., to address social and attitudinal barriers:

Negative attitudes and harmful beliefs create significant barriers to education for persons with disabilities. A combination of socio-cultural and systemic factors, such as lack of awareness, shame, fear, misinformation, and superstitions, create negative perceptions towards students with disabilities. Thus, a holistic and participatory approach is needed to generate positive social and behavioural change and create a fully inclusive environment for students with disabilities. At an institutional and university level, this can be done through interventions such as sensitisation workshops, information dissemination, advocacy programs, and awareness campaigns. These sensitisation programmes and training should be cross-disability (including all forms of disabilities) and made

mandatory for teachers, administrative staff, and able-bodied students to attend. To promote greater sensitivity towards students with disabilities, the language and focus of sensitisation and awareness programs should be restructured to emphasise the symptoms, characteristics, and challenges these individuals may encounter. Awareness sessions should actively involve students with disabilities, provide them opportunities to share their experiences and struggles, and encourage faculty and students to interact and ask questions.

Awareness campaigns and information dissemination should also address the knowledge gap among students and parents about policies, acts, rules, and regulations regarding disability rights.

Recognising and addressing challenges arising from intersectional socio-economic identities:

Stigma and discrimination are multi-faceted and cut across various socio-economic identities such as caste, class, gender, etc. There is an urgent need to understand and document how different socio-economic identities

and vulnerabilities interact to create new challenges for students. For instance, to address gender disparity in education and double marginalisation faced by women with disabilities, it is important to understand the particular

challenges faced by women with disabilities, adequately address them, and make more provisions to promote their enrollment and retention in higher education institutes.

Building accessible complaint and feedback systems:

Institutions should establish accessible mechanisms for students, parents, and representative organisations, to lodge complaints and provide feedback concerning the implementation of inclusive education, including claims of disability-based discrimination.

Recommendation 13:

Ensuring proper implementation of reservations for persons with disabilities and easing the process of issuance of disability certificates.

GOVERNMENT

Ensuring Effective Compliance and Implementation of Reservation Quotas for Students with Disabilities:

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act stipulates that all government higher education institutions and other institutions receiving government aid must reserve a minimum of 5% of seats for people with benchmark disabilities and provide them with an age relaxation of at least five years for admission. Despite the legal provisions, there is widespread non-implementation of reservations for individuals with disabilities in various colleges and institutes throughout India. For instance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, a prominent academic institution, recently acknowledged before the Delhi High Court that it had not fulfilled the legal obligations of reserving 5% of seats for students with disabilities. To address this issue, the government must ensure effective compliance and implementation of the RPWD Act's provisions through regular monitoring and inspection.

Streamlining and Simplifying the Disability Certificate Issuance Process for Students with Disabilities

In order to provide affirmative action for students with disabilities, they are often required to produce a disability certificate as proof of eligibility for specific programs and services, such as free assistive devices, reservations, and special programs. However, acquiring a disability certificate is

lengthy and challenging, involving medical evaluations, assessments, and paperwork. As a result, students with disabilities may face delays in accessing essential programs, opportunities, and

services. Therefore, obtaining disability certificates should be streamlined and simplified, ensuring that students with disabilities can access the resources and support they need on time.

Recommendation 14:

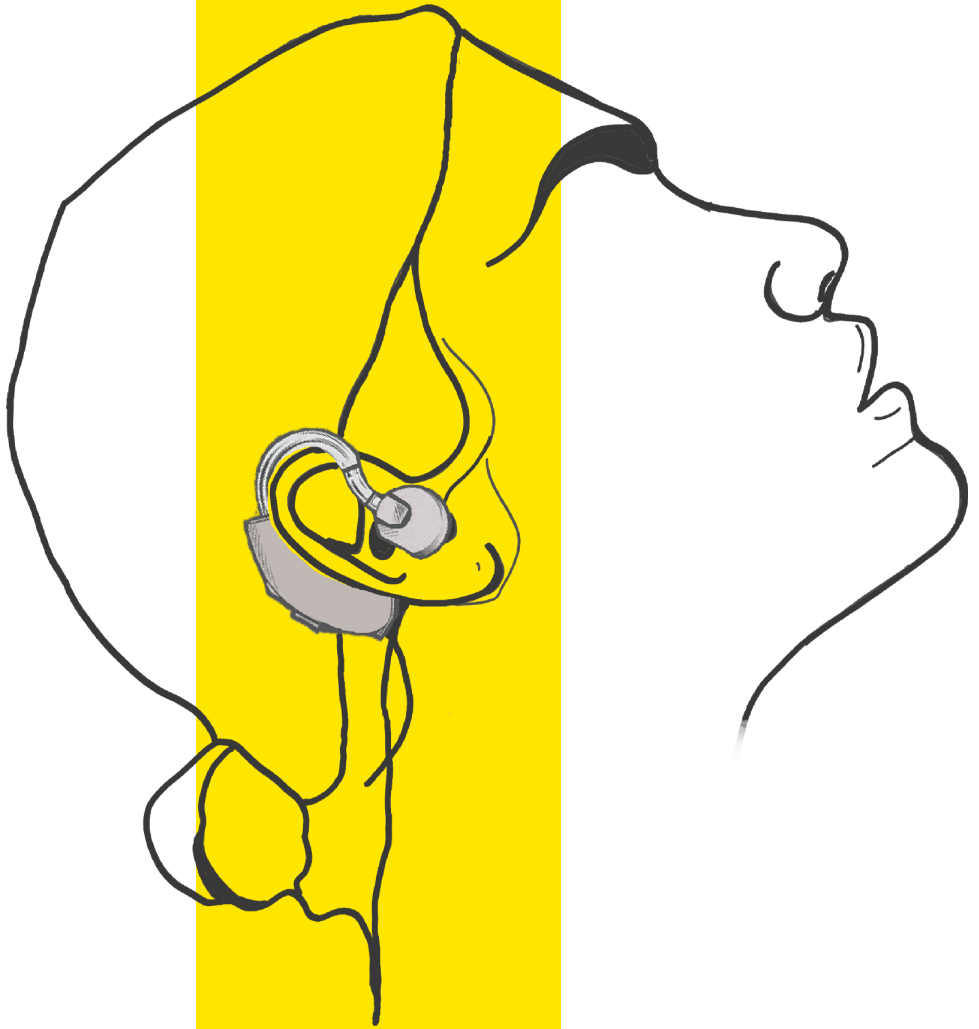
Collecting regular and reliable data on persons with disabilities for better planning and implementation purposes.

GOVERNMENT

Strengthening the accuracy and consistency of data collection methods to enhance inclusivity for persons with disabilities.

The absence of accurate estimates of India's population of persons with disabilities impedes the development and implementation of effective policies and programmes aimed at making educational spaces more inclusive. Therefore, the Indian government must ensure that data and statistics on disability are collected more consistently and accurately.

The surveys in India often undercount people with disabilities. To counter this, survey organisations must redesign the surveys and comprehensively train and sensitise surveyors on disability in consultation with various stakeholders. Additionally, the differences in the definitions adopted by different survey organisations must be reconciled for consistency and accuracy.



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