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# cnrhe **POLICY BRIEFS**

## on **Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education**

### **Policy Brief 1**

Equalising Access to Higher Education in India

### **Policy Brief 2**

Achieving Academic Integration in  
Higher Education in India

### **Policy Brief 3**

Developing Socially Inclusive  
Higher Education Campuses in India

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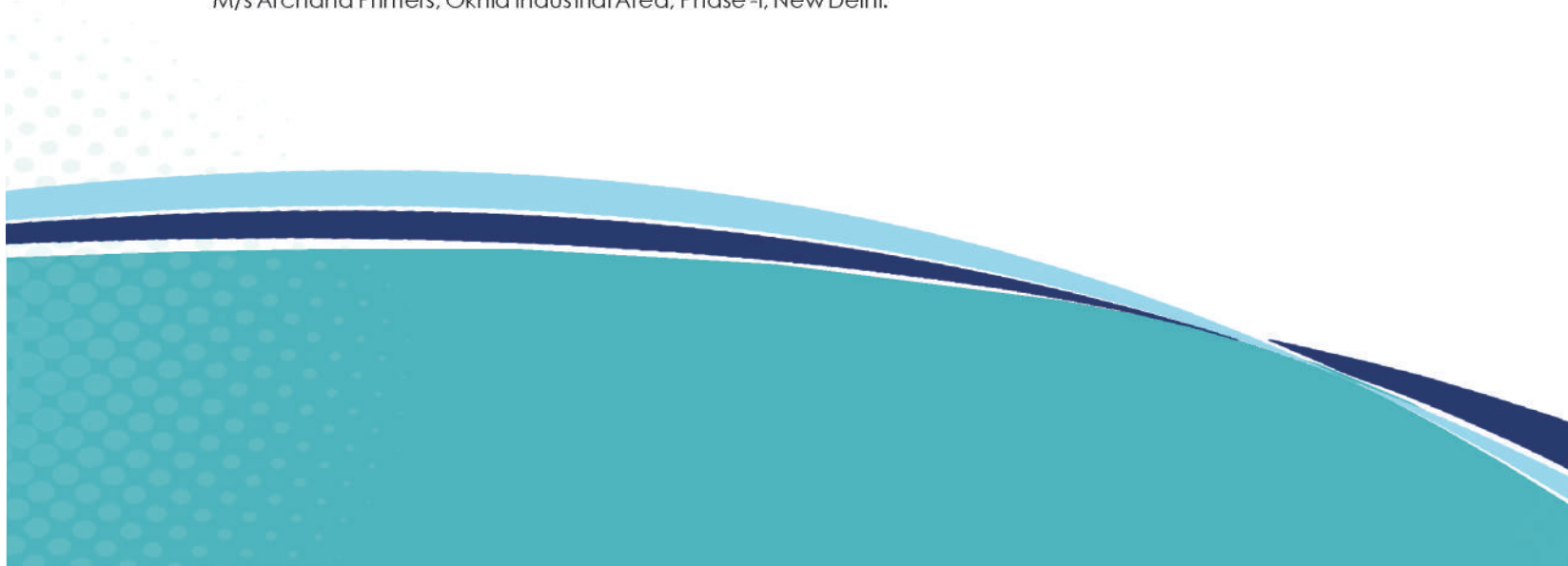
Policy brief are based on the issues emerging from the empirical studies carried out by the Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE), NUEPA, New Delhi. These policy briefs are addressed to the policy makers and higher education managers.

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## Equalising Access to Higher Education in India

### Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that acquisition of higher education helps one in overcoming many professional and personal 'disadvantages' by facilitating lifelong career opportunities. The lack of equal educational opportunities not only reinforces the transmission of disadvantage from one generation to the next but also constrains a country's economic growth by preventing optimization of its human potential. For these reasons, equal opportunity for acquiring higher education is a necessary condition for achieving inclusive growth and a fairer society, wherein a person's birth circumstance and social origin do not determine his/her life-chances and career potential.

The recent increase in the social demand for higher education has been leading to massification of the sector. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India stands at 24.5 per cent (MHRD, 2016). Equity in higher education has been an important concern in the expansion of the higher education system. Reservation policies, relaxation in admission criteria and other positive measures to encourage diversity on campus have been important factors in improving the GERs of the disadvantaged groups. However, empirical evidence points to the persistence of economic, locational, regional and social disparities in access to higher education. Furthermore, the available evidence also suggests that there are wider socio-economic inequalities in terms of access to admissions in elite institutions.

### Persisting Social Inequalities in Educational Opportunities

Even as more and more students are opting to go in for higher or professional education, many continue to be left behind and inequalities persist. Inequalities persist in access to higher education, in subject areas and in admissions to elite universities. The higher education system offers a 'stratified structure of opportunities', with the dominance of hierarchy in institutional prestige and field of study, which in turn, determines earnings and social outcomes. It has been observed that those from the privileged backgrounds have greater access to select institutions and programmes of study vis-à-vis the disadvantaged backgrounds.

Inequalities in educational opportunities are manifested by under-representation of the socio-economically disadvantaged and first-generation learners in elite institutions, and in the science and engineering streams, and a progressive loss of representation as one moves up the academic ladder. The educational levels of parents, specifically in terms of graduate education, significantly impact the students' chances of participation in higher education, controlling for household economic status, region (state), location, gender, and socio-religious affiliation. These factors are discussed in detail below.

### Manifestations of Inequalities in Educational Opportunities

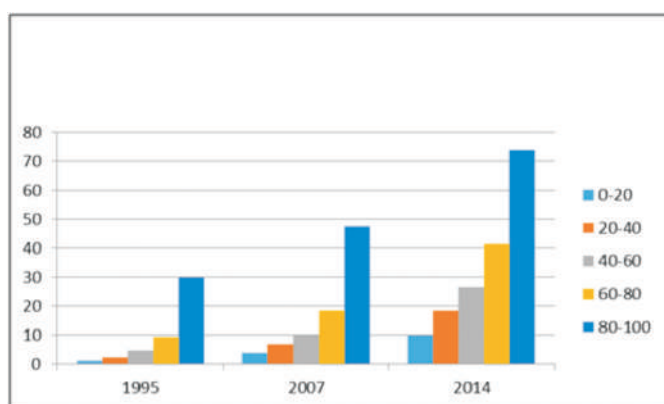
Inequalities in educational opportunities are manifested in the form of enrolment by income levels, regions and social categories. Socio-economic status and parental educational levels, high-school experience and admission

policies also affect access to college, and the choice of college and subjects.

### **Disparities in Access to Higher Education by Income Levels:**

Economic status continues to have a significant bearing on the likelihood of gaining access to higher education: the enrolment ratio is the lowest for the relatively poor vis-à-vis the rich, with access to higher education progressively increasing in every quintile (Figure 1). For example, in 2014, the GER for the lowest monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) quintile (0-20 per cent) was seven times less than that in the top quintile (NSSO, 2014).

Figure 1: GER for MPCE Quintiles across NSSO Rounds



Source: Various National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) Rounds.

**Regional Disparities:** The evolution of higher education development in the country exhibits a classic example of uneven development. While many states have achieved impressive growth in enrolment (GER), some states are falling behind. Consequently, higher education opportunities are unevenly distributed across the country's population. Empirical evidence points to a substantial variation in institutional density (the number of colleges per population of one-hundred thousand) leading to the concentration of higher education institutions (HEIs) in some states and unavailability of HEIs in other states.

This kind of uneven distribution of institutions across states fuels regional inequalities in access to higher education. These regional inequalities in GER are closely associated with the spatial distribution of unaided institutions, as states with a high concentration of unaided institutions register

higher enrolment figures. On the other hand, states having predominantly public universities and colleges have a lower density of institutions. This scenario thus highlights the need for careful regional planning for establishing HEIs.

**Rural-Urban Disparities:** Students in rural areas have much lower access to higher education as compared to their counterparts in urban areas. The NSS data (2014) reveals a GER of only 24 per cent for rural areas while the corresponding figure is 44 per cent for urban areas. Rural-urban disparities in enrolment rates are thus linked to the availability of higher education institutions, which are found more often in urban areas. For students living in remote rural areas, commuting long distances becomes a social disincentive and economic burden, and further deprives these students from the disadvantaged groups of access to higher education opportunities.

**Social Disparities:** The level of access to higher education for disadvantaged social and religious groups continues to be below the national average. Socially disadvantaged groups, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), continue to have lower enrolment ratios vis-à-vis those belonging to other social groups. As one moves up the caste hierarchy from low-caste to middle- and upper-caste groups, the GER also rises, providing evidence of graded inequalities. Muslim community lags behind all other religious groups.

Many factors cumulatively lead to disadvantages for SC and ST students in obtaining access to opportunities for higher education. These include: (i) their low socio-economic backgrounds; (ii) their status of being first-generation learners; and (iii) the location of their residences in rural areas with poor learning infrastructure in schools and family. In addition, due to the high dropout-rates from school amongst the socially excluded groups, only limited students from such backgrounds are able to seek entry in HEIs, which reinforces the persistence of social group disparities in higher education.

### **Under-Representation at the Post-Graduate Level of Study:**

Empirical evidence shows that students from the disadvantaged socio-economic groups, first-generation learners and those belonging to rural backgrounds are unable to progress beyond the undergraduate level even if they manage to enter HEIs. Thus, at the post-graduate level, a majority of the students are from





privileged social groups and urban backgrounds. This clearly reflects the educational and social disadvantages confronting students from the under-privileged groups and first-generation learners, compelling them to drop out at the higher education level or end up with poor grades. The low enrolment of such students in post-graduate programmes, in turn, impacts their ability to enter professions requiring post-graduate degrees, such as teaching at the higher education level, research and other professional courses.

## **Under-Representation in Elite and Prestigious Institutions:**

The process of institutional diversification accompanying the expansion of higher education contributes to a situation where in the elite institutions primarily enroll the socio-economically advantaged students and traditional learners whereas the less prestigious institutions of higher education mainly serve the less privileged groups and first-generation learners.

Studies have shown that cultural capital and habitus (tastes/preferences) impact the selection of colleges by high school students from varying socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to attend prestigious institutions, which they are conditioned to view as simply the next logical step or corollary to their school education. In contrast, students from disadvantaged groups are constantly told that these colleges and universities are inaccessible to them. It has also been observed that families with strong social networks help develop social capital formation among their children, which, in turn, positively impacts human capital formation.

The admission policies followed by HEIs also have a direct impact on the level of representation enjoyed by students from the disadvantaged groups. Elite institutions often impose an additional screening stage for prospective candidates seeking admission. Empirical evidence also shows that since they resort to tough admission procedures based on competitive examinations, elite institutions very often end up enrolling a disproportionately large number of students from the privileged groups. Further, it has been seen that the socially and economically disadvantaged students are under-represented in privately managed government-supported colleges (private-aided colleges) as compared to government colleges. The existence of a 'management quota' in private-aided colleges, which

may not always be based on 'merit', distorts the social composition of their rosters in favour of students from privileged groups.

In situations where admissions are not based on selection tests or in the absence of a management quota, the representation of disadvantaged students in the college enrolment is much higher. Consequently, non-elite state universities and government colleges, wherein admissions are based on the students' performance (scores) at the qualifying level of education, have a far greater representation of disadvantaged groups vis-à-vis elite institutions. The state universities also account for a higher proportion of students residing in rural as compared to urban areas. Thus, these institutions largely serve students from the socially-excluded groups, rural populations, women students, and those who are among the first in their families to attend college and university.

## **Under-Representation of Students from Disadvantaged Social Groups in STEM subjects:**

It has also been found that students from privileged backgrounds usually opt for the STEM (sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects while students from the socially marginalised groups, rural residents and women opt for arts and social sciences courses.

Family background and the pre-college credentials of students also affect their choice of subjects. Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and first-generation learners (who are more likely to have studied in government schools with the regional language as the medium of instruction) most often study less rigorous courses at the school level, a trend that carries on even at the higher education level. Moreover, the use of a regional language as the medium of instruction acts as a barrier for students aspiring for higher education as it does not equip them for competitive examinations that decide selection for higher studies.

The private institutions have significantly contributed to such disciplinary distortions as most of these have been established in the subject areas of engineering, medicine, and management. Empirical evidence shows a larger proportion of students from disadvantaged groups studying in government institutes and social sciences vis-à-vis private unaided institutions.

### Effect of Under-Representation on Access to Educational Opportunities

Disparities in access to educational opportunities adversely affect the ability of young people to acquire relevant skills for entry into the labour market, which, in turn, limits opportunities for inter-generational mobility and reinforces the pre-existing social inequalities in society, thereby impacting overall economic growth. Inequities in access to educational opportunities thus make it impossible to realise the promise of 'Equality of Opportunity' and the goal of inclusive development laid down in the Constitution.

As mentioned earlier, distance between the residence and place of study also acts as a constraint and has a significant effect on the choices made by students in pursuit of higher studies. The non-availability of HEIs offering high-quality education closer to home, coupled with their economic and social compulsions, leads under-privileged students to either drop out of education or compromise on the choice of both subjects and institutions even if they decide to pursue higher studies. Moreover, the potential of academic institutions to impact the society around them by encouraging more responsible social behaviours is also curtailed by their non-availability.

Inequality of access to post-graduate level also has wider societal implications and it seriously impacts disadvantaged students. Since post graduate and research qualifications are essential for entry in teaching and research careers, lower participation of disadvantaged students in post-graduate programmes pose barriers to the achievement of a higher quality of personal and professional life. Inequalities in access to prestigious programmes and institutions continue to reflect inherited social privileges. Moreover, disparities in access to educational opportunities impacts nature of diversity in campuses. The campuses remain less diverse, offering limited opportunities for students of inter-group interactions and learning from diverse peers.

### Areas of Intervention

When educational opportunities are unequally distributed, they become an important source of inequalities, which necessitates corrective public policies and institutional strategies. HEIs can facilitate a more positive role of higher

education in social allocation in order to make societies more equal. The following strategies could be considered to promote equalisation of access to opportunities for higher education:

- Providing higher education facilities in large quantities that are spread and dispersed across regions;
- Expanding of government and private aided institutions, particularly in professional and technical courses;
- Offering professional and technical courses in higher education institutions in rural and under-served regions;
- Establishing hostels in urban areas to improve access to HEIs for students living in remote rural areas;
- Exploring the possibility of extending reservation policies in the private sector as it is largely private institutions that currently offer technical and professional courses;
- Identifying student groups that are under-represented in campuses;
- Finding pathways of access for students from the disadvantaged socio-economic groups and women, especially to technical, selective and prestigious institutions of higher learning;
- Encouraging girl students to opt for science subjects at higher secondary levels of education;
- Organising on-campus summer programmes for high school students that offer information about, and sharpen their skills for securing college admissions;
- Refining the mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of reservation policies in HEIs, particularly elite institutions.

### Conclusion

Expansion of the Indian higher education sector in terms of student enrolment over the last two decades is commendable. However, despite an improvement in the overall GER, disparities persist in many forms including economic, regional, locational, and social group disparities, adversely affecting students from the poor families, marginalized groups and rural areas. Disparities in



access to high value educational opportunities such as the study of STEM subjects and to elite institutions also persist for socio-economically disadvantaged learners. It is evident that family income, medium of instruction in schools, parental education and urban/rural location are important determinants of access to higher education.

Expansion of the sector mostly through private institutions also exacerbates inequalities in access to higher education opportunities. This policy brief calls for interventions at the policy level (by the union and state

governments) as well as at the institution level to address the persisting inequalities in access to higher education while expanding the system. It is imperative to target public investments towards higher education for the deprived groups and affirmative action in the private sector. Such initiatives will enhance the transformative role of higher education in alleviating socio-economic inequities and ensuring equity in development by overcoming social, economic and geographical hurdles to education.

This policy brief is prepared by **Nidhi S. Sabharwal** and **C.M. Malish**, Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE), National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), New Delhi.

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