

Role of Equal Opportunity Cell on the Issues and Concerns of Visually Challenged Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

Objective: This article aims to offer thoughts on inclusive practices within the context of higher education. This paper discusses the role of equal opportunity cell in higher educational institutions. The investigators tried to identify what is the relevance of creating an equal opportunity cell in higher education.

Method: For the present study, the investigators selected a case study approach. Here the equal opportunity cell for visually challenged is taken as a case. The present study explains the working of this platform and what are the needs of visually challenged students. This study also deals with the issues and concerns of visually challenged students in higher education. The sample was selected by purposive sampling technique and the interview method was adopted to collect data. The head of the institution, the coordinator of the equal opportunity cell, and the members of the cell are the sample of the study.

Results: The findings of the study ensure that the importance of creating an equal opportunity cell for the person with disabilities.

Conclusions: The visually challenged students should have the right to equal opportunity and social justice on their campuses.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Higher Education, Visually Challenged Students, Equal Opportunity Cell*

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I. Introduction

“Implementing the principles of inclusive education within higher education can be challenging. Inclusive education was originally developed for younger students, before its application within higher education. However, as more students with disabilities complete their early schooling, the need to move towards inclusive practices within higher education has increased” (Morina,2017). Inclusive education is considered a basic human right and a pillar of a just and equitable society (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012, Forlin, 2013). Often considered to be an ethical factor is also considered (Reindal 2016). Inclusive education focuses on the need for a high-quality educational response for all students, which enhances activities that contribute to full participation (Ainscow 2015; Messiou et al. 2016). Under an egalitarian philosophy, diversity is conceived in a broad sense, including multiple capacities, gender inequalities, and social and cultural differences. These variations are seen as a benefit rather than as a problem. The belief is that without exception, all students should benefit from high-quality learning and be actively engaged in the education system.

An inclusive curriculum in pre-higher education settings has been developed and applied. However, for many years, multicultural principles and programs have been making inroads into university agendas, policies, and teaching and learning methods. In the sense of higher education, there is still a long way to go before we can claim full inclusion, and many problems need to be resolved to align educational practices with the ideals of inclusive education.

To ensure equal opportunities and facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities, it is necessary to incorporate the principles of inclusive education and uniform learning design into university policies and procedures based on the social model of disability. Inclusive education postulates the right to full participation and quality education offered to all university students. Diversity is valued in inclusive educational contexts. It enables open educational projects to be developed, taking into account the different modes of learning and anticipating the potential needs that may arise.

Need and significance of the study

As a student joins the university system, the main obstacles encountered by a visually impaired student relate to accessibility: accessibility to materials, accessibility to facilities, accessibility to information, and accessibility to the environment. In the case of students who come from a special education background, these four difficulties are more pronounced. The foundation of this statement is that in many special schools, most of the accessibility requirements mentioned above are taken care of by the system itself. When they leave school, not many students can predict the extent of such inaccessibility problems. Since these students are too reliant on the school to take care of their needs, such students feel at a complete loss in the absence of a replacement support system when they come to college.

In the absence of institutional facilities at colleges and universities, most visually disabled students studying at colleges appear to seek assistance from such NGOs. It is therefore the responsibility of these organizations to inform both higher education institutions and students about different government schemes that, while not sufficient, can be used to encourage higher education in this critical field.

The Higher Education for People with Special Needs is a significant scheme notified by the UGC, which also continues throughout the 12th Programme (HEPSN). Under this scheme, a grant of approximately 18,000,000.00 (eighteen lakhs only) is given to each college for five years. This includes an amount of Rs.10,00,000.00 (rupees only ten lakhs) which is given for infrastructural accessibility, ropes three lakhs for special types of visually disabled equipment, and a sum of ropes one lakh per year for operating the college enabling unit. Also, an amount of 4,000 rupees per month is given to the enabling unit coordinator to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The scheme also provides provisions for disability workshops, awareness-raising activities, etc.

II. Methods

The investigator tried to find answers to the question, such as the function of an equal opportunity cell for visually impaired students in higher education. A qualitative case study technique was employed for this reason. Here an institution/body constituted for people with disabilities is the equal opportunity cell. The researchers chose this as a case for studying the significance of this cell, which supports visually challenged students in higher education.

Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN)

The broad categories of assistance The HEPSN scheme is designed to create an environment for higher education institutions, including universities, to enrich higher education learning experiences of people with disabilities under this program include knowledge of the capacities of people with disabilities, the development of facilities aimed at increasing accessibility, the purchase of various types of educational equipment, etc.

One of the specific aims of this scheme is to provide equal educational opportunities for people in higher education institutions with different abilities. They were deemed to raise awareness among higher education officials of the unique educational needs of people with difficulties. Equip institutions of higher education with facilities to provide access to them. They also have a special device to provide students with various abilities with improved learning experiences. Last but not least, monitoring the implementation of all current and future laws and policies affecting higher education for people of different abilities.

According to HEPSN, the development of supporting units for people with different skills is intended to raise awareness of the higher education system and also to provide the requisite guidance and advice for people with different skills. HEPSN is proposing to create a resource unit called an enabling unit at universities in the country. The important functions of this unit is as follows

1. Facilitate admission of differently-abled persons in various courses;
2. Provide guidance and counseling to differently-abled individuals;
3. Create awareness about the needs of differently-abled persons, and other general issues concerning their learning; and
4. Assist differently-abled graduates to gain successful employment in the public as well as private sectors.

By the guidelines of Persons with disabilities, these enabling units are strictly established in Kerala by many more institutions. These units with new names, such as Insight, Praptha, etc. seemed to exist in the selected colleges... some of them in the early stages of their formation. But certain institutions are good at operating such units. The visually challenged students are the most important beneficiaries of this in these colleges. One of the visually impaired students shares his experience with perspective, "they are very helpful in taking admission to this college and the volunteers in this cell helped to fill the forms of Another student speaks of the mechanism by which this equal opportunity cell finds the scribes for exams. One of them shares their gratitude for being a cricket player and has trained well with the aid of college equality cell members. In recent

years the number of players has grown. They can not go up to this level in the blind cricket team without the cell's help.

Sampling

The purposive sampling method is chosen for the present study. The members of the equal opportunity cell both visually challenged and sighted and the coordinator of the cell are the main stakeholders of the present study. The coordinator of this cell is known as the grievance and redressal officer in higher education institutions. The snowball sampling is used to identify the participants initially because some colleges have more number of students with disabilities. First of all those colleges are identified by the investigators then applied the purposive sampling technique for selecting the participants of the present study. They have included in the criteria the students are the members of the equal opportunity cell in the higher education institution. There are 30 visually impaired students and 50 sighted students were selected as a sample and 3 grievance and redressal officers were selected for this study.

Data collection

For the present study, the investigators employed different methods for data collection. Data were collected with informed consent. They are an interview with visually challenged students and grievance and redressal officers. The focus group discussions are conducted with sighted students. The logbooks of the equal opportunity cell and field notes are also taken the data from the field. The interviews are recorded on a recording device. The recorded data is transcribed and from the transcriptions, codes were identified and it was analyzed thematically.

Findings of the study

The investigators present the findings of the study in the following themes

Importance of an equal opportunity cell

The major finding of the study the equal opportunity cell is performing well in the higher education institutions than the problems of a person with disabilities especially visually challenged students are most comfortably studying in those institutions. It is witnessed by investigators from the facial expressions of visually challenged students. so the visually challenged students have the same opinion for enabling them through this platform.

A first-year BA English student with visually challenged says that “ *it is my pleasure to talk about the equal opportunity cell to introduce my first time in this college's freshers day program. I am very thankful to the team to help to identify the scribes for my degree examinations. Also, they helped me to address my mobility issues from the new college and hostel, libraries, etc*”.

Those beneficiaries of this unit have importance given to overcome their barriers. They are in the sense of poor family background, communication problems, attitudinal barriers, etc.

Another third-year Arabic student shares his experience in the college, “ *in the first year I am feeling very difficult to enter this institution because I am the first person from my family to attend a degree course. I am not able to find any friends or relatives in the college for the first time because I studied only in special schools and residential schools up to my plus two classes. But the equal opportunity cell is becoming a bridge to me with my friends and teachers in this college and also the coordinator sir was advised me to communicate well with others and attending orientation and mobility classes. It is very much helped me to make friends with other students and my classmates are ready to record the class notes for me and taking me in the library, hostel, playground, etc.*”

One of the girl students reveals that “*I am coming from a poor family background. I have only one old recorder. I used to record my classes and class notes are prepared in Braille scripts. From my college teachers were helped to buy a smartphone through the equal opportunity cell*”.

Another student was unhappy to share the experience of his financial barriers and he was advised to buy a laptop then produce the bills then he will get the money for them. It is another issue for a graduate student.

Peer support and care

The five focus group discussions were made with six members. The findings from the discussions are the following.

They are ready to help the students with the visually challenged. “*Most of the time those visually challenged friends asking for help to applying for scholarships, notes recording and scribe selection*”. The peer groups are particularly classmates or hostel mates. They have suggested them for taking fresher's day activities. The students were excellent in some sports activities like chess, cricket, music, etc. the leisure activities are self-enjoyed we also encourage them to develop their skills. The equal opportunity cell has a regular meeting in the college admission, arts and sports festival season, and also in the examination times. There is a student

coordinator from the sighted students in an equal opportunity cell. One student coordinator remembered that her elder sister has the insight to coordinate the visually challenged students and it is an unofficial group for them. After many years of constituting a group for helping the visually challenged students in their college. That group was modified after years as an equal opportunity cell for a person with disabilities.

The coordinators of the equal opportunity cell were conducted different programs for persons with disabilities especially visually challenged students in their colleges. They are wholeheartedly sharing their experience with visually challenged students. They said about “ *most of the visually challenged students were the first generation student. So they have no wide knowledge about society. They have given motivation classes, psc coaching, spoken English classes, orientation mobility classes. These are enriching their experiences to become a socially independent citizen. Through this equal opportunity cell, different cultural programs were conducted. Visually challenged students have more confidence to become a blind cricket team in Kerala. Another student has got a chess championship at the national level. The leadership qualities are enhanced through the platform for example one of the students becomes chairman of the college union*”. These facts are verified from the logbook and college records.

On the other side, there is no syllabus oriented books in audio format or visually challenged students have need more advanced technology.

Revamp the institutional policy

Postgraduate student talks “the recordings of each lesson can be a huge file. If the recordings are in the daisy format it would be better. But there is a suggestion from equal opportunity cell to the institutional management to take sufficient step.” It seems that the authorities made sufficient policies and to prepare the program of action. It was executed through the platform of the equal opportunity cell.

III. Discussion

The major findings of the present study were discussed here. The investigators finding the important role of equal opportunity cell for the person with disabilities especially visually challenged students. It is reassured by the participants that the equal opportunity cell is very fruitful for visually challenged students in higher education institutions is showcased by the visually challenged students and the sighted students helping them and also the coordinators of the equal opportunity cell. The historical background of disability resources ensures that “individuals involved in the development of policy and in the provision of quality services to meet the needs of the persons with disabilities involved in all areas of higher education” (AHEAD,2014).

The person with disabilities can make changes in their lives through their education. they need support and care in different ways such as financial support, emotional support, personal guidance and counseling, motivation for academic achievement, and skill development for personal and employment. So the institutions must take sufficient programs are executed through an equal opportunity cell. Institutional characteristics play an important role in shaping the type of work disability service practitioners engaged in. disability resource office or disability enabling units are as diverse as the institutional cultures they are embedded within and the types of students whom they serve (Evans J.N. et al). Kalivoda and Totty (2003) noted, “programming design for disability services...varies widely just as size and characteristics of institutions vary”. So the authorities should realize the needs of the persons with disabilities and should revamp their institutional policies according to their needs. Institutional characteristics can be conceptualized in a variety of manners, including enrollment size, geographic location, residential or commuting campus, public or privately funded, minority-serving, nonprofit or for-profit mission, open access or selective admissions, and two-year or four-year degree focus. Other findings of the study, the equal opportunity cell can act as a turning point in the life of visually challenged students who have to create self-confidence, leadership qualities, and good communication skills through this platform. But it varies from different institutions. “Therefore, it is important to design institution-specific interventions when engaging students with disabilities”.

IV. Conclusion

This study reveals that the enabling units are made to overcome the barriers of persons with disabilities in higher education. For visually challenged students to live meaningful lives in society, their roots must be nurtured during their higher education both by the institutions in which this higher education takes place as also by the equal opportunity cell. While service delivery through equal opportunity cell remains important to promote higher education, the thrust should now move towards linking higher education institutions with government and disability-specific schemes, sensitization, professional counseling, and meaningful lobbying and advocacy. Such enabling units like equal opportunity cell can make a vital difference in promoting quality education in both micro and macro spheres through innovative solutions. The visually challenged, like others, have the right to take advantage of growing opportunities in education but for this to happen, a level playing

field, equality of access and individualized attention will have to be ensured, which is something only all of us, the stakeholders and partners in our struggle for meaningful education for all can ensure.

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