

PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS ON SOCIAL EQUALITY AND EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore college students' perspectives of social equality and equity in Indian higher education system in the present-day context. This study is undertaken to examine the factors leading to inequalities in different dimensions of higher education and to suggest ways to promote equality and fairness in the future. The participants of study included students studying in final year undergraduate programmes of science, commerce, arts and interdisciplinary studies in different colleges across north, south and central Mumbai. The research was designed using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions. The study findings revealed that the majority of students were of the opinion that higher education institutions should have well analysed and researched admission criteria rather than maintaining the traditional system. The students emphasized the utmost need to have merit and economic standing as sole criterion for admission to university education in order to ensure equity and fairness in educational opportunities. Additionally, higher education must prioritize equal distribution of educational opportunities to all members of society, particularly for those students who are living in rural parts of the country.

Keywords: Higher Education, Equality and Equity, Perspectives.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental right of every individual in the society irrespective of gender, regional, religion, language, cultural or from the people coming from different abilities. Equality as written in Article 14 of the Preamble of Indian constitution states that the State or Country shall not deny to any person equality before the law within the territories of India. Thus, social equality means that every person needs to be treated equally by assuring the respect and dignity of each individual. Every person in the society should get an equal status and equal opportunities. When applying the same in the field of education, it assumes that every student should be given an equal opportunity to access the education resources irrespective of any differences among them.

Equity refers to fairness, impartiality and justice. It is much more than equal opportunity. It involves acknowledging differences and overcoming barriers in the system. When applying the same in the field of education, it assumes the principle of fairness in educational opportunities to all the students by making adjustments in the education system to overcome the imbalances to bring success for all the students.

Social equality and equity in higher education in the present research aims to address a number of topics:

Disadvantaged groups: The social structures of every society differ greatly. There are few individuals in the society who enjoy more social and educational opportunities and at the same time there are few disadvantaged sections of society who are deprived of the similar opportunities. Certain disadvantaged groups of people belonging to a particular caste, creed, tribe, low socio-economic background and many others have faced several barriers in accessing higher education resources.

Bhatla (2017) highlighted that many initiatives and incentives for socially disadvantaged to pursue education have been useful, but not sufficient in equalising the enrolment gap between the disadvantaged groups and other groups of the society.

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Differently-abled people: Article 24 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) quotes, "State parties shall ensure that person with disabilities is able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and life-long learning without discrimination and on equal basis with others. State Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities." Saksena & Sharma (2015) explains in the context of higher education, as with elementary and secondary education accessibility goes beyond physical accessibility, to include accessible curricula and delivery and evaluation methodology, as well as the provision of necessary support and accommodation to ensure that students with different abilities have equal opportunities to access their education.

Gender Balance: As we see around the world there has been a considerable increase in the enrolment of women in higher education. Women regardless of this increased enrolment, still need to face several social and cultural challenges. The privileges or the opportunities that women have in terms of enrolment and scholarships still does not spell out their educational achievements in the employment opportunities which becomes a major challenge in the present modern world.

Rural and Urban Youth: There always exists a gap when it comes to the availability of educational opportunities to the rural and urban youth. The inequalities are very much visible when we weigh both urban and rural higher education on a common scale. (Gupte, 2015) called attention to a number of problems that are plaguing rural higher education which included inadequate infrastructure, political intervention, low gross enrolment ratio especially in females, high dropout rates and lack of competent and qualified teaching staff.

The university education needs to ensure educational equality as well as equity to build a strong foundation for the individual, society and country. Since college students are the most important stakeholders of higher education, it is essential to understand their opinions about social equality and equity in the system. Therefore, the research attempts to explore college students' perspectives on social equality and equity in the higher education system in the present-day context. This would significantly help the system to identify and work on the improvement areas to provide a conducive environment and equal opportunities for all the sections of society.

Literature Review

Jacobs (1996) discussed several key aspects related to gender disparities in higher education in the United States. The three areas focused in the study

were access to higher education, experiences in college and after college outcomes. The findings of the study revealed that the access to higher education is good for women, but they are less successful in terms of college experiences and are particularly disadvantaged with regards to their higher education outcomes.

Mwaipopo et al., (2011) in their study discussed how wider structures of inequality such as socio-economic status intersect with limitations to generate disadvantage. The sample included one private and one public university in Tanzania. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The findings of the study revealed that while social policies are increasingly being sensitive to the situation of people with disabilities, several challenges both physical and social were encountered. In addition, the study found that infrastructure inadequacies, resulting from old structures, continue to pose challenges to the higher education sector. The study concluded with the recommendation that there is much to be done, including efforts to educate people on the educational rights of individuals with disabilities and equitable resource distribution to different educational levels.

Maqbool (2011) conducted a study to investigate the extent of equal opportunities in higher education in Punjab in Pakistan. The sample for the study included administrators, teachers and students from randomly selected 10 public universities. The study found that male students were preferred over girls to enter higher education especially in the science subjects. Also, the study found indifferent behaviour from faculty and administrators towards students from rural areas.

Saksena & Sharma (2015) in their research study highlighted the different types of barriers faced by students with disabilities enrolled in different undergraduate programs of university of Delhi. The sample of the survey study included 168 students with disabilities. The data analyses were based on descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that limited access to information and services pose a significant barrier to access to higher education. Additionally, the results have shown that attitudinal barriers posed by the insensitive behaviour of staff and students are more detrimental than physical barriers.

Gegel et al., (2015) studied the challenges regarding access and quality in higher education for various population groups in modern society. The research was designed as a longitudinal study of the students of Russian higher education institutions. The findings of the study revealed that in several educational policies, equality issues were pushed to

the background. Such policies have serious consequences for different social groups in accessing and participating in several educational activities. Furthermore, the educational system which is tightly regulated at various levels, makes even greater inequality of educational opportunities.

Kimoga et al., (2015) in their research focused upon whether the equity and equality reflected in educational laws and policies which target students from low-socioeconomic students accessing funds to attain higher education were realized. The study employed a mixed method approach whereby cross-sectional survey was carried out on randomly selected students and semi-structured interviews were carried out. The research was focused on two institutions, a private and a public university. The study finding revealed that poor students struggle to access funding and educational loans, and quotas are majorly reserved for science students. Furthermore, the students who manage to make it to higher education also struggle for lunch, stationary and need to travel long distances to reach institutions. The study concluded with the recommendation that the government needs to set policies which treat all students as equal citizens that have a right to access national benefits for their study at higher education.

Kendall (2016) conducted a study to explore disabled student's views of studying in higher education in terms of factors that supported them and barriers to participation. The sample of the qualitative study included 13 female students from a university in the north of England in the UK from three different streams, namely, education, social sciences and humanities. The findings indicated that the student support services and learning support plans were perceived as a positive resource. Additionally, the barriers to participation were identified as the faculty being unaware of students' disability, unwillingness to make reasonable adjustments and lack of assessment choice.

Londhe (2018) conducted research to understand the opportunities available to youth in the rural and urban areas from the perspective of access to education. The variable access to education was operationalised in terms of education level, training and vocational courses undertaken, source of education and distance awareness of competitive exams and vocational courses, financial assistance. The sample of the study was randomly selected and included 110 respondents comprising equal numbers of students from urban and rural youth from Hyderabad. The study found that in terms of education level and awareness of competitive exams and vocational courses the rural and urban youth are at par with each other. Furthermore, on almost all the parameters the urban and rural respondents were of

the same level, the significant gap was evident in the environment offered by urban families.

Abdullah & Chaudhry (2018) aimed to explore the factors that cause injustice and inequity in the education system and to find out the measures for the same by exploring the perceptions of teachers and administrative staff from the universities of Pakistan. The data were generated from 12 participants and analysed using qualitative analysis techniques. The findings of the study revealed that all participants agreed on the fact that there exists a social inequity in higher education and identified the government and people in the ruling class as the major contributory factor towards the social imbalance in the education system. The study concluded that in order to promote equality and equity in education, there is a strong need to break the traditional mindsets and attitudes of the people.

Choudhury (2019) conducted a study to examine the income inequality and access to Indian higher education. The data were gathered from National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) surveys. The findings of the study revealed that inequality in access to higher education had increased substantially by household's economic status in the last few years. Additionally, the study found a noticeable decline in gender inequality, however a significant gap between rich and poor.

Despite the numerous researches conducted in higher education, it was noticed that the areas researched has taken place mainly on the areas of issues and concerns. Many of the references in the existing literature are derived from secondary sources like reports published by international and national organizations. Furthermore, most of the research done to date has been quantitative in nature and conducted outside India. However, it was difficult to locate any research that provided a comprehensive overview of the equity and equality concerns from the perspective of students. Student opinions are seldom taken into account when the system is being assessed, even though they are the main input and output of the system. Hence, in order to close the prominent research gap in the previous research, more qualitative studies are needed to understand the equity and equality phenomenon in the present-day context. It is therefore imperative to conduct further research by presenting an in-depth qualitative design study on understanding perspectives of college students on social equality and equity dimension of higher education.

Research Question

The following was the research question that guided the study:

What are the perspectives of college students on social equality and equity in higher education?

Methodology

As the aim of research focused on understanding the perspectives of college students on higher education, the overall design of this study took the form of a qualitative phenomenology approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that is used to describe how human beings experience a certain phenomenon. A phenomenological study attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation. It allows the researcher to delve into the perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of those people who have actually experienced or lived the phenomenon or situation of interest.

Therefore, this approach was chosen by researchers to get an in-depth understanding of how college students view, interpret and perceive the challenges and improvement areas within the higher education institutes for the bringing in the equality and equity in future higher education.

Participants of the Study

In qualitative research, non-probability sampling is used to collect the sample, and it is the most suitable method for selecting small samples. Thus, the study participants were selected by means of a purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method.

In the present research, the participants selected were 43 students studying at the final year undergraduate level in colleges affiliated to

University of Mumbai. The reason to purposely select these participants was to get the perspectives of boys and girls from different regions of Mumbai representing different socio-economic strata. The participants were chosen considering four different faculty groups, namely, science, commerce, arts, and interdisciplinary studies to gain an overall understanding of equality and equity in the present higher education system.

The research setting was the natural settings of the college classroom or a science laboratory or a computer room and sometimes a designated room which had been allotted to conduct interviews. During the interview, the researcher introduced the topic for discussion, developed a rapport, and made them feel comfortable for the interview.

The following table shows the composition of the sample and lists the regions selected for the study.

Table 1: Area Wise Distribution

Regions	Boys	Girls	Total
North Mumbai	6	15	21
South Mumbai	3	7	10
Central Mumbai	7	5	12
Total	16	27	43

Participants in the individual in-depth interviews included 6 male members and 9 female members and focus group discussions included 10 male members and 18 female members.

The following table lists the faculty wise distribution of the participants selected for the study.

Table 2: Faculty Wise Distribution of The Participants of The Study

Regions	Science	Commerce	Arts	Interdisciplinary	Total
North Mumbai	1	14	0	6	21
South Mumbai	2	1	7	0	10
Central Mumbai	9	0	3	0	12
Total	12	15	10	6	43

Out of a total 43 students, 12 students from science stream, 15 from commerce, 10 from arts and 6 interdisciplinary studies participated in individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Using qualitative research techniques, the researchers are able to get a deeper understanding of the person's opinions and experiences. A qualitative study involves exploring and analysing how people

perceive a certain social condition or phenomenon. The process usually involves interviewing or observing the people. For this study, the researchers used two open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires for the individual interviews and focus group discussions respectively to get a clear understanding of what participants think about the equality and equity in higher education. The interviews were scheduled after obtaining permission by the principal of the college. The

interviews were conducted in the natural environment of the college classroom, science laboratory, computer laboratory or sometimes a designated space was assigned. The researcher gave the overview of the discussion, built rapport, and made the participant feel at ease during the interview. After obtaining the consent from the participant, the researcher recorded the whole conversation using an audio recorder.

Results

The audio recordings were transcribed into English language in the word document for the analysis. The theme emerged from the answers of participants was “Equitable educational opportunities for all sections of society”. The theme with participants’ statements is illustrated in the following paragraph.

Categories	Theme
A. Lacuna ▪ Injustice to open categories at the cost of merit ▪ Non uniform fee structure ▪ Seat wise disparity in categories/classes ▪ High Population, Less Colleges ▪ Caste based / quota-based Reservations ▪ Existence of minority colleges are mushrooming ▪ No transparency in admission process ▪ Limited scope for differently abled students ▪ Lack of opportunities for girls in rural areas ▪ Limited transport facilities for students ▪ Extraordinary benefits to disadvantaged sections ▪ Age, Number of attempts Limitations ▪ Aided Vs. Unaided B. Suggestions ▪ Admission based on merits ▪ Attractive fee structure for students from lower socio-economic strata ▪ Uniformity in number of seats based on the population in the area. ▪ Opening of more colleges in rural areas with good infrastructure ▪ Equal opportunities for deserving students ▪ Government should not allow opening of colleges for minority class ▪ Eradicate corruption. Make everything open, transparent and online. ▪ Technological development within the infrastructure ▪ More opportunities for students from rural / suburban areas ▪ Better transport facilities specifically dedicated to students of suburban and rural areas.	Equitable educational opportunities for all sections of society

Theme

Equitable educational opportunities for all sections of society

Evidence in participant's statements

“...Ahead of Virar, Dhanu sides there are no colleges. Also, there is a transportation problem on that side. The transport facility should be improved. Pick and drop buses from colleges especially in village areas would help...”

“...Universities should open more colleges with good infrastructure in rural areas...”

“...Infrastructure development is important in rural areas. Sometimes we also need to have stationary available for students. Most of the time they lack

utilities like books and pens. I believe that whatever school or college is established there, it should be well developed, and every material that students require should be available...”

“...For rural students’ students I feel that they must be aware about the importance of higher education, and they must know what all opportunities they have in future...”

“...Now a days whether a person is a Sindhi or Gujarati or Marathi he is taking an education, so for the reserved category the quota should come down so that other students should also get a chance to access the education they deserve...”

“...Eradicate corruption. Make everything open, transparent and online. It would be easy for

differently abled people to access details online, Seat details, fees submission all should be online. By making things online, corruption will automatically come down. Remove reservations. These are the two most important things that need to be worked upon to bring equality in HE in India...”

“...Admission should be based on merits only...”

“...If universities consider only the marks and economically backward criteria as the basis for admission then this would be very good from my point of view. And thus, all will get an equal chance to access higher education...”

“.... A student of a particular caste gets preference even if they have less percentage and the eligible candidates are left behind.”

“...Mostly in Mumbai, there are Sindhi and Gujarati Colleges where they have quotas and they prefer their caste people, even if they have less percentage. There is biasness. The suffering bunch of students is from general category...”

“...The only classification should be based on economically backward criteria. No, the equal opportunities are not there...”

“...Although I am from an open category, the fee is high, but people from a few sections have lesser fees and more scholarship facilities are available to them...”

“.... Even in the colleges there are aided and unaided courses. Now with that unaided status, the colleges get a certain sort of autonomy for the admission. And with that autonomy over the fee structure and with all that they really can discriminate upon the kind of admission they really want to take. There is no transparency, no one can ask why the admission is refused, and the college is not answerable because it is not aided. The inequality does exist in the unaided section...”

Conclusion

Based on data analysis, the emerged theme answers the research question representing college students' perceptions of equality and equity in higher education.

Research Question

What are the perspectives of college students on social equality and equity in higher education?

The students have talked about their ideas, opinions and perspectives along with the improvement areas for the improvement to bring equal educational opportunities under the following aspects:

Merit Based Admissions: In the opinion of most students, university education does not offer equal opportunity to access higher education. Age limitations, quota system and caste system which are there in the policies have now become a challenge for deserving students. Most of the students believe that the admission policies and system should now be well analysed and researched upon according to the needs of the present generation. One of the participants commented, “Merit should be the first and foremost criteria in which students should get seats, which is not the case in our country”. The students expressed the need to have admissions in the university either purely on the basis of merit or on the basis of economic status of the student as against any reservation or quota. Students from a few sections of society enjoy extraordinary benefits in terms of course fees and scholarships which needs to be equalised among students from all the sections of society.

Opportunities for disadvantaged groups: The students were of the opinion that in the present times with the advancements in technology, higher education should proactively work towards providing equal opportunities to students from disadvantaged sections of society so as to help these students to grow and live life with dignity. One of the participants commented, “You do not give admission to students with different abilities into the sciences, claiming to know that they would not succeed but you as institution are supposed to help those, you are supposed to make it more accessible than just making them shun away from it. In the disability context I think we are far behind”. Students strongly feel that higher education can actually do tremendous work in this. The university and colleges can encourage teachers to take up courses that help them to understand the educational needs of all students. The technological development within the infrastructure of the college, teachers training, curriculum adaptations and making available assistive and adaptive technology would ensure equal access to educational opportunities. And as far as gender equality is concerned, most of the students feel that girls and boys enjoy equal opportunities to access higher educational resources in urban areas however there still exists a gap in rural areas.

Opportunities for students in rural/suburban areas: The students felt the need to spread awareness in the rural areas about the importance of higher education, and varied opportunities they have in future after higher education. Students also highlighted several challenges that students in rural areas have to face such as lack of educational infrastructure, limited transportation facilities, limited employment opportunities and lack of exposure to technology and various digital

educational platforms. One of the participants commented, "Institutions like universities and colleges should take responsibility for sending people to conduct seminars in rural areas so make students aware of what they can do further". A major hindrance which students expressed to access higher education in rural areas is limited transportation facilities. Another student commented, "In our colleges we have seen students who travel for three hours to reach college. They are coming from Ambarnath and Varjeshwari. Students are wasting their time and money in travelling." Further suggestions included that universities should build more educational institutions with good modern infrastructure to give equal opportunities to students living in rural areas.

Implications of the Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the college students' opinions, feelings and perspectives on the various aspects of equality and equity in higher education. Several implications arise from the study regarding identification of several areas which are critical for bringing equality and in the present-day context. The findings will benefit educationists, academicians, administrators, faculty members and policy makers to recognize and better understand existing gaps in the equality and equity dimension of higher education. The several improvement areas highlighted by the students will offer a higher education possibility to resolve the existing lacunae and thus would lead to greater and equal educational opportunities for all sections of society particularly in rural areas.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors in this manuscript.

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