'A sense of social responsibility': Informal higher education outreach practices in Indian academia

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores how academics in India enact higher education (HE) outreach even in the absence of a formal HE outreach culture. While community engagement is strong in Indian HE, the notion of outreach as a practice of sharing information and guidance on HE is less common, though the national education policy (NEP 2020) agenda seeks to alter this. The paper argues that academics in India are engaging in HE outreach practices, but that these practices tend to be informally enacted rather than located within the professional setting. The study underpinning the paper is an in-depth case study of a public HE college in Delhi, India, and the paper sets out the HE outreach activities and motivations of academics, using Capabilities Approach to develop the notion of a HE outreach capability to understand how and why academics engage in HE outreach work even outside their formal roles.

Full paper

Introduction and literature review

In India, many young people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups are making higher education (HE) choices based on incomplete knowledge (Sahu et al., 2017; Henderson et al. 2024). Affirmative action is strongly in place in the public sector in India (Hasan & Nussbaum, 2012), but to avail of affirmative action, a prospective student must be informed about choices in relation to HE and the application process (Stewart et al., 2022). In India, there is a very strong ethos of 'community outreach', where Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) engage with local communities, through e.g. clean-up programmes. Different from 'community outreach', the term 'HE outreach' refers to activities occurring before formal enrolment into HE, which may include taster days which host prospective students at HEIs, and school visits by alumni and/or academics (Harrison & Waller, 2017). Within the public sector in India, there is currently limited HE outreach activity happening in an official capacity, although there is a proven appetite for this work (Stewart et al., 2023). It is noteworthy that the 2020 National Education Policy (MHRD, 2020) refers to HE outreach as an imperative for the future development of HE. HE outreach activities are not currently formalised as part of academics' duties, for instance this area of work does not feature in the Academic Performance Indicator (API) score which is used for academic promotion.

In this paper, we explore existing HE outreach practices (though often occurring informally and not labelled as such) and how these practices are explained by academics. The paper deploys the Capabilities Approach to develop the notion of a HE outreach capability and draws on Walker and McLean's work (Walker, 2012; Walker & McLean, 2015) on professional education and public-good professionalism. While their work focuses on professional university education (e.g. social work), there is applicability to academics in HEIs, where academics too can be conceived as 'professionals who support the capability expansion of their clients by exercising their professional capabilities as public-good functionings' (Walker & McLean, 2015:63). The notion of a professional capability for HE outreach is particularly salient because an orientation towards HE outreach is arguably an ethical and vocational orientation towards social justice.

The study

The empirical base of this paper is an in-depth case study of a government college (i.e. publicly funded HEI) in Delhi that is nested within a four-year research project, 'Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches' (www.warwick.ac.uk/wahei). The government college was selected based on its peripheral location in Delhi, meaning it caters to students from disadvantaged groups. Ethical approval was granted by the appropriate University committee. The case study included several methods and participant groups; for this paper the data considered are a: semi-structured interviews with the Principal and four academics; six-week solicited diary study and post-diary interviews with the interviewed academics; a questionnaire survey with academics (N=59).

Findings

Our case study shows that there is an active but informal practice of HE outreach occurring, with 93.3% of academics (survey data) stating they had guided prospective undergraduate student/s on their HE-related choices. The HE outreach capability can be divided into micro-level functionings. The most common functionings identified in our survey were to guide prospective students on choice of HEI and on choice of course/subject. The study revealed that academics were consulted for HE-related advice in their personal networks; for instance, Athene* (interview) recounted that she had assisted her father's gardener's daughters on their HE choices. The study showed that motivations to engage in HE outreach included 'a sense of social responsibility' (Victor*, diary entry 1), with academics voluntarily acting as 'capability expanders' (Walker & McLean, 2015). The survey identified that the greatest constraint that academics face in terms of formalising their HE outreach activities is the funding resource constraints (see also Demb & Wade, 2012; Johnson et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Our study shows that, even in the absence of a formalised HE outreach culture in public HEIs in India, academics are 'exercising their professional capabilities as public-good functionings' (Walker & McLean, 2015:63), by serving as sources of HE-related guidance and information in their local communities. This practice is supplementing the dearth of formal information and guidance on HE choices for young people in disadvantaged communities. Therefore, there is an argument for mapping academics' role in HE outreach using a capabilities lens, to consider the support and resources that are needed to develop academics' professional capability.

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