

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Emily Henderson

Thu 12 Dec 2019

14:15 - 15:30

Student diversity and challenges of inclusion: Understanding experiences of students from socially excluded groups in campuses of higher education in India

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Research Domain: International Perspectives and context (IPC)

Abstract: This paper presents findings from a multi-institution study on experiences of students from the socially excluded groups in higher education, in India. This paper argues that while the enrolment rates of socially excluded groups in India have made impressive gains, the nature of access reinforces inherited social privileges. Caste disparities persist in access to elite institution and programmes, with students from the disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to access lower-prestige higher education institutions, and continuing to lag behind in their access to core study programmes such as STEM. Further, equity in access is eclipsed by unfavourable academic experiences, coupled with alienating social experiences inside the higher education campuses. Relative ineffectiveness of institutional mechanisms to address academic and social challenges in the learning process further results in uneven academic performance and social isolation of students, thus negatively impacting success of students from the socially excluded groups in India.

Paper: Over the recent decades, higher education (HE) campuses in India have opened their gates wider, encouraging participation of students from the socially excluded groups, such as the scheduled castes (SCs: former untouchables in the caste hierarchy), other backward classes (OBCs: other lower castes) and the scheduled tribes (STs: indigenous groups), which were previously under-represented in HE (Sabharwal & Malish 2016). With a gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 25.8% and 36.6 million students (MHRD 2018), India has the second-largest HE system in the world. Rising social demand, increasing school participation rates and expanding supply conditions have led to expansion of the HE system in India. Equity in access to HE has been an important concern in this expansion. Affirmative action policies -- in the form of reservation of seats, relaxation of admission criteria and financial support -- have contributed to improving diversity in the student composition, as represented by students from the socially excluded groups (Varghese et al. 2018).

This paper argues that, while affirmative action policies have been developed to redress caste and ethnicity based exclusion from HE in India, institutions remain exclusionary, rooted in tradition and

elite in approach. Accommodating a more diverse student population creates new tensions in HE institutions: while the point of entry has been 'relaxed', institutional support required for their academic success remains weak. Inter-group disparities in access and success are defining characteristics across HE systems, including India (Varghese et al 2018; UNESCO 2016; Sivasankaran & Raveendran 2004; Edward & McMillian 2015; Henry & Ferry 2017). Single-institution, small-scale studies in India (Ovichegan 2013; Singh 2013; Sabharwal et al 2014) have also drawn attention to challenges confronting students from socially excluded groups, prevailing practices of prejudice, and, discriminatory behaviours against these students on campuses. This paper further explores the extent, nature of experiences and institutional response to support student diversity in HE in India.

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from a large-scale, multi-institutional, mixed methods study implemented in twelve HE institutions located across six Indian states. The empirical base includes a survey administered to 3200 students, interviews with 200 faculty members, 70 focus group discussions with students and analysis of 50 student diaries. The empirical analysis of student diversity across socio-economic contexts and in several HE institutional set-ups allowed a construction of an analytical framework which classifies representation and dimensions of academic and social experiences of students from socially excluded groups into distinct but related stages which helps us in understanding the nature of the challenges in their journey through HE institutions - stage I relates to the extent of social diversity, stage II, after entry, refers to academic experiences inside classrooms, and stage III relates to levels of inclusion in social relations.

Stage I: Persisting caste hierarchies

The findings of this study show that, while students from socially excluded groups, such as the SCs, OBCs and STs, have a majority share in enrolment in HE, there is a progressive loss of representation as one proceeds up the academic ladder, and social inequalities persist in access to elite institutions and science/engineering subjects. Elite institutions often impose admissions selection tests, which skew the access in favour of students from privileged groups. Caste inequalities in access to prestigious institutions and programmes continue to reflect inherited social privileges, determining earning outcomes that, in turn, perpetuate inter-group economic inequalities (Marginson 2016).

Stage II: Humiliating classroom experiences

Classroom experiences for students from socially excluded groups are affected by a complex interplay of factors. Research findings from the study show that majority of these students had experienced overlapping pathways of disadvantaged life-circumstances and educational challenges, which in the literature have links to inadequate academic preparation and performance (Aud et al. 2012; Ross et al. 2012). Life experiences related to being from a low socio-economic background, residing in under-served geographic locations, being the first in the family to access HE, attending high schools that lack adequate resources to aid in college preparation, or having regional languages as their medium of instruction (which negatively influences transition to English as a medium of instruction in HE). Importantly, fewer academic interactions with their teachers, absence of same caste faculty members, lack of academic support by peers, and uncaring and negative attitude of faculty members resulted in an uncondusive classroom environment. It was not uncommon for the faculty members to view students from the socially excluded groups through a deficit lens, holding these very students responsible for lowering the average academic 'quality' in their classrooms. As a consequence, these students remain less integrated in classroom discussions and teaching-learning processes.

Stage III: Unfriendly out-of classroom social experiences
Not feeling included in the social realm, and an unfamiliar and unfriendly campus culture emerged as major challenges influencing out-of-classroom experiences of students from socially excluded groups. The nature of campus culture was found to be deeply embedded in dominant caste norms, stereotypes and beliefs, shaping attitudes and behaviours of faculty members, administrators and peers, which influenced their interactions with students from socially excluded groups. Varying pre-college academic experiences, stigma attached to social group identity and hostility towards the reservation policy was found to result in discrimination, segregation and alienation. Insensitive campus culture and discrimination manifested in the form of social divisions in friendship, segregated residences, lack of informal interactions with teachers, as well as exclusionary behaviour from the administration.

Beyond Stage III, we found that challenges for students from the socially excluded groups become accentuated because of unsupportive administration and weak implementation of institutional mechanisms that support and protect the interest of students, such as remediation programmes, equal opportunity cells and grievance redressal mechanisms. To achieve social diversity in access to a stratified structure of opportunities in India, public policies and institutional commitments are required for finding pathways of access for students. To progress across the stages of inclusive integration, several important institutional interventions are required for academic success of students from the socially excluded groups in HE in India; some of these include supportive teaching-learning strategies and practice pedagogies of care (Meyers 2009) by teachers; and strengthening of student support services through an empathetic administration (Varghese 2018).

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