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**Equity Policies in Higher Education  
in South Asia with Special Emphasis on India**

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# Equity Policies in Higher Education in South Asia with Special Emphasis on India

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N.V. Varghese\*  
Nidhi S. Sabharwal\*\*

## Abstract

Equity and inclusion are ideas central to democratic principles. Equity implies fairness to ensure that identity is not predictive of opportunities and outcomes. It accepts individual differences and varying circumstances of birth and ensures that they do not constrain a person from realising his/her full potential. Democratic regimes rest on the premise of promoting equality of opportunities as a core value, and they accordingly frame progressive public policies to ensure fairness in the allocation of resources and in the distribution of benefits from development. Equity is a concept that promotes inclusivity by removing barriers to entry to different population segments from fully participating in societal activities and accessing resources according to their needs. This paper examines equity policies in South Asia using both secondary and primary sources of data. It argues that countries with less social diversity tend to rely more on economic and regional factors to target equity policies in favour of the disadvantaged, while countries with high levels of social diversity often focus more on social factors to promote equity. Some countries use a combination of both economic and social factors to identify and prioritise the disadvantaged.

The analysis in the paper shows that most countries in the region, especially India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, exhibit high levels of diversity. Based on this analysis, it is shown that equity policies in this region follow economic, social and regional criteria. Based on the case studies, it is argued that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the region adhere to nationally mandated equity policies in admissions and in extending student support systems, such as scholarships and hostel facilities to support disadvantaged students. These policies, no doubt, have helped the representation of disadvantaged groups in the HEIs. However, very little support is extended to retain them in the institutions and to improve their academic performances. The challenge of rapid expansion and increased inclusion of the disadvantaged in this region is to develop institutional strategies to effectively welcome and put in place practices promoting diversity. The paper argues that even when nationally mandated equity policies help increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education, institutional initiatives are important to ensure their social integration and academic success.

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## Introduction

Equity and inclusion are ideas central to democratic principles. Equity implies fairness to ensure that identity is not predictive of opportunities and outcomes. It accepts individual differences and varying circumstances of birth and ensures that they do not constrain a person from realising his/her full potential. Democratic regimes rest on the premise of promoting equality of opportunities as core values, and they accordingly frame progressive public policies to ensure fairness in the allocation of resources and in the distribution of benefits from development. There is a need to make a distinction between equity and equality. Equality implies equal provision of resources for all, while equity demands unequal sharing of inputs according to one's requirements of the group under consideration to move towards equality in outcomes. In general, disadvantaged groups require prioritised attention and increased support as compared to advantaged social groups.

Equity is a concept that promotes inclusion. It aims to remove barriers that prevent different segments of the population from fully participating in societal activities and accessing resources according to their needs. It's important to note that distributing resources equally is not the same as providing equitable access to resources. Equality involves distributing resources equally to everyone, while equity involves distributing resources unequally to address different needs and move towards equal outcomes. Equity also encompasses the notion of justice, acknowledging individual differences and unique circumstances to ensure that they do not hinder a person from reaching their full potential (Varghese, 2022). Development experience shows that different groups in society progress at different rates, with some facing more barriers to entry than others. These barriers can be visible (economic, physical) or invisible (social), and act as sources of exclusion from societal activities. Equity requires providing basic minimum facilities for all without limiting opportunities for progress.

Disadvantaged groups, in general, require more attention and support than those from advantaged social groups. By ensuring equity rather than equality in access to resources, one is creating comparable conditions for individuals to compete for opportunities at the entry level as well as at the exit points. The provision of additional resources and support to students from deprived groups is an example of equalising the conditions for competing and succeeding in education and professions. The logic of reservation policies stems from this premise (Varghese, 2021).

The move towards legislating education as a fundamental right exemplifies an equity-oriented measure. Similarly, the recent initiatives to make higher education a right may help in reaching equity objectives. Equity is promoted when those groups





left behind are prioritised to progress faster, that is, the idea of progressive universalism. The quota system is an accepted public intervention strategy to expand opportunities for faster progress of the disadvantaged to reduce the gap between them and the privileged.

Inclusion implies access to facilities, and that one is welcomed. It is a sense of feeling at home and a confidence that one's voices are heard. Inclusion in education is approached in two ways. First, barriers to entry should be removed so that learners are integrated into the existing system. Second, the existing system must be transformed to ensure that it respects diverse needs, abilities, and characteristics, and eliminates all forms of discrimination in the learning environment (UNESCO, 2023). The latter is a more difficult but desirable strategy for inclusion since it agitates against all forms of exclusion.

The term 'diversity' refers to all the people who are represented. All societies have diverse segments of the population, representing varying characteristics. Notwithstanding progress, all groups may not be advancing at the same pace. This results in the widening of inequalities among groups or regions. Respecting diversity means that everyone's unique qualities and attributes are valued. The idea of inherited merit was an underlying but unspecified criterion in student admissions and job selections. Replacing this idea with the notion of equality of rights was a move towards equity in access to facilities to enable everyone to perform well in the competition for education or jobs. Further, the move towards the idea of equality of opportunity looks more closely into the variations in the opportunity structure and helps design measures to overcome the barriers. These changes reflect a friendly attitude towards national diversity, an extension of democratic principles, and the legitimacy of affirmative actions by elected governments. Most countries, for example, follow a policy of equality of opportunity in their student admissions, progression in education, and the employment market.

The recent surge in concern for equity has been prompted by public policy and corporate interest. The market interest in diversity centres around the notion of performance. The McKinsey Series (McKinsey, 2023) showed that the growing gender diversity and women's representation in leadership positions in corporate entities had more than doubled within less than a decade from 2015, even when ethnic diversity showed only marginal progress.

Social exclusion leads to cumulative marginalisation, resulting in inequality in any society. Increasing inequality in any society is a sign of social exclusion, leading to marginalisation and capability deprivation (Sen, 1999) and several forms of

disadvantages. Marginalised groups face systematic disadvantages when interacting with dominant social, political, and economic institutions. The disadvantages arise from class status, social group identity, political affiliation, religious orientation, or gender. Rawls (1971) considers ‘justice as fairness’ and argues that inequalities are acceptable only if they are addressed to the greatest benefit of the most disadvantaged.

The inequalities of birth and natural endowment are undeserved and they are to be compensated for. Inequality and social mobility do not move together. More unequal societies experience less mobility between income groups and social categories (OECD, 2008). It results in the stifling of upward social mobility, making it harder for talented and hard-working people to get the rewards they deserve (Sen, 1999). It maintains that each individual is born with unique capabilities and is also faced with multi-faceted barriers. People are not able to realise the full potential of their inborn individual capacities due to the lack of supportive opportunities. Therefore, services need to be prioritised in the most effective way, by targeting the most disadvantaged.

John Rawls (1971) underlies the importance of targeting the most disadvantaged to alleviate inequalities. Amartya Sen’s idea of justice and the capability approach argues for targeting the disadvantaged (Sen, 2009). Both the authors agree that services need to be prioritised in the most effective manner for the most disadvantaged. They also concur on the understanding that inequity arises from overlapping deprivations, which create multi-dimensional poverty. Charles Tilly’s concept of durable inequalities relates to the transmission of poverty that persists through generations, leading to a central concept with respect to equity (Tilly, 2007).

In the absence of progressive public policies, inequalities become durable, resulting in the transmission of poverty and inequality through generations (Tilly, 2007). Durable inequalities emerge because of the dual tract followed in social development—one tract for the privileged reaping the benefits of their social resources and another resource-poor tract for the disadvantaged. The idea of equality of opportunities underlines the idea of justice and equity. Equity is achieved when inclusion is guaranteed. Inclusion implies valuing diversity that we recognise and respect everyone’s unique qualities and attributes. It requires proactive efforts to ensure equitable treatment for practising the culture of care to correct injustices that have existed historically or continue to persist.

As systems expand, they become more diverse, and the possibility of widening inequalities is high unless appropriate public policy interventions are made. Stiglitz argues that inequalities are “the cumulative result of unjust policies and misguided



priorities” (Stiglitz, 2015, p. 3). Democratic framework and committed public policy reforms are necessary to reverse the trend toward equality and to promote conditions for broad-based prosperity (Sirowy and Inkeles, 1990). The policies need to be prioritised in the most effective way in favour of the most disadvantaged.

Most countries in the world have developed public policies to promote social and economic equity. These policies have expanded opportunities for the disadvantaged in providing them access to education and their social and economic advancement. A closer examination of the efforts made and success achieved indicates that the strategies targeting the disadvantaged have helped them progress faster and narrow down disparities in access to public services. The data on enrolments and completion rates in educational institutions show improved performance of the disadvantaged. It seems that the disadvantaged groups, in general, are catching up with the privileged.

The expansion of public education is driven by a political and economic agenda whereas the equity concerns are driven by a social agenda centred around the idea of democracy and social justice. In fact, the question of equity in higher education needs to be looked at from its role in the production of goods and services and in the production of knowledge. When higher education is seen as a factor of production, investment in education is a joint investment by governments, firms, and individuals. Firms prefer to appropriate the returns on their investment in education. If they cannot, they will have limited incentives to invest in education. Therefore, private investment in education may not help expand the system, especially for the purpose of providing social benefits. Investing in knowledge production became a rewarding activity, especially in the knowledge economies. As a result, corporate investment in research and development activities has increased in recent decades.

The argument for continued support for public investment in higher education also stems from its public good and resulting externalities. The global public good nature of knowledge and its production provides the rationale for global/international collective action (Stiglitz, 1999), and for continued state support to massify and even universalise higher education in developed market economies. Interestingly, matured market economies rely on public institutions to massify, if not universalise, higher education while less developed economies rely on markets to massify higher education (Varghese, 2012). In any case, expansion of higher education has become a universal phenomenon in this century.

One of the important questions is whether or not expansion always extends access to higher education in favour of the disadvantaged. It is hypothesised that when expansion is accompanied by an increase in inequality indices, the benefits of expansion

are enjoyed by the privileged. When expansion is accompanied by no change/increase in inequality indices, the relative levels of inequality are retained. When expansion is accompanied by a reduction in inequality indices, the poor benefit more than the rich (Shavit et al., 2007).

Another related argument is that expansion does not reduce class inequalities until the advantaged groups reach a point of saturation. According to the Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) hypothesis, saturation is defined as ‘the point at which nearly all sons and daughters of advantaged origins attain the educational level under consideration’ (Arum, et al., 2007, p. 3). Expansion will contribute to a reduction in inequalities beyond the point of saturation, since privileged groups cannot increase attendance rates any further (beyond 100 per cent). What needs to be noted is that expansion with the targeted interventions in favour of deprived groups can improve equity even when the privileged have not reached a stage of saturation. It is in such a situation that progressive state policy and funding support have become important instruments to promote social equity.

Empirical evidence has shown that strategies for improving equity need to include initiatives for promoting a higher rate of progression in favour of the disadvantaged (Varghese, 2021). This may help the latter attain parity during the later stages. Active public policy and financial support to institutions and incentives to students from the disadvantaged groups have helped achieve greater parity in enrolment among different segments of the population. One of the challenges pertaining to the fast expansion and increased inclusion of the disadvantaged in the higher education sector is that the social composition of student intake has changed. More often than not, institutions remain unchanged and their cultures do not welcome new entrants to the system. Do institutions have strategies to deal with student diversity? Institution-specific strategies may help mitigate the cumulative disadvantages faced by the disadvantaged groups.

This paper is structured as follows. An introduction is provided in Section 1. Section 2 presents a scenario of higher education development in South Asia and highlights the persisting inequalities in access to higher education. Section 3 discusses the degree of diversity present in South Asia based on the Fractionalisation Index and identifies equity groups to target them in public policies in South Asia. This section also outlines the resulting equity strategies in higher education. Section 4 provides a detailed account of equity policies aimed at improving access to higher education and success mandated at the national level in India. Sections 5 and 6 analyse empirical evidence from four case studies on implementing equity strategies at the institutional



level. Section 5 assesses and describes equity strategies implemented at the institutional level as compliance to national commitments and mandates. Section 6 examines the institutional initiatives undertaken by HEIs in addition to the implementation of nationally mandated policy measures. Section 7 concludes the paper.

### **Higher Education and The Disadvantaged Groups in South Asia**

The Asian region, once home to widespread poverty, has emerged as a region of general prosperity, increasing its per capita income and share in global GDP and trade, along with an expanded consumer base (ADB, 2020). The East Asian and South-east Asian countries have succeeded in marrying strategies of economic growth with equity policies. The South Asian counterparts, in general, lagged behind the East Asia in both the rates of growth and more equitable distribution of benefits.

It needs to be noted that the progressive public policies followed by some of the countries such as Sri Lanka in the South Asian region have resulted in growth with equity. Another example from India is the state of Kerala where growth lags behind equity. These examples from South Asia indicate that progressive strategies targeting the disadvantaged have helped them to progress faster and to narrow down disparities in access to public services even at lower levels of development.

The most common equity strategy followed in several countries is that of the affirmative measures targeting students belonging to the disadvantaged groups. This includes a compulsory quota system, and relaxation of age and scores at the stage of admission enabling the students concerned to study programmes and at the entry level in the employment market. Identifying groups belonging to the disadvantaged sections to target them in public policies has not been an easy task in many countries. It seems that the basic criteria for identification of the disadvantaged in Asia are broadly economic, social, and regional. Among these, economic or regional criteria seem to be the most commonly used for identifying the disadvantaged in many countries.

Based on the experience of evolution and introduction of equity policies, one may hypothesise that countries with less social diversity rely more on economic and regional factors to identify the disadvantaged, whereas countries with high levels of social diversity often rely more on social than economic factors to identify the disadvantaged. However, at times, countries follow a combination of economic and social factors to identify the disadvantaged.

The higher education sector expanded fast during the past decade in South Asia, and most countries in the region moved from an elite stage of higher education

development to a stage of massification, with the GER crossing 15 per cent (Table 1). India leads the region with a relatively higher GER for tertiary education (27.1 per cent), followed by Bangladesh (22.8 per cent), and Sri Lanka (21.6 per cent). Although Bhutan and Bangladesh experienced the fastest progress in GER in the past decade, they still lag behind India in terms of GER. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar achieved moderate progress while the GER almost stagnated or declined in Nepal during the period between 2011 and 2020.

It is equally important to notice that the GER is higher among women, that is, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) is more than one in five out of the seven countries. In the South Asian region, Sri Lanka has registered the highest GPI with 1.61 and Bangladesh has the lowest at 0.77. South Asia has reached reasonable levels of gender equality in participation in higher education at relatively low levels of overall GER. This may be a reflection of the outcome of positive equity policies in case of expanding access to higher education of women. However, inequalities in higher education enrolment by income levels and rural urban areas continue to be high. The enrolment in higher education in the South Asian countries shows a bias in favour of urban locations and high-income families.

**Table 1: Gross Enrolment Ratio for Tertiary Education by Gender (%)**

Country	2011			2020			GPI 2020
	Both Sexes	Male	Female	Both Sexes	Male	Female	
Bangladesh	13.7	16.1	11.2	22.8	25.7	19.8	0.77
Bhutan	8.9	10.4	7.4	16.5	16.0	17.0	1.06
Myanmar	14.2	12.1	16.2	18.8	15.6	22.0	1.41
India	20.8	22.1	19.4	27.1	26.9	27.3	1.13
Nepal	14.5	17.5	11.6	13.5	13.2	13.8	1.05
Pakistan	8.3	8.6	8.0	12.2	12.3	12.1	0.98
Sri Lanka	15.2	11.2	19.1	21.6	16.5	26.7	1.61

Source: © 2022 UNESCO Institute for Statistics; <http://sdg4-data.uis.unesco.org/> <http://sdg4-data.uis.unesco.org/>  
For India, the data sources are MHRD, 2014 and MoE, 2020.

Note: Data for Pakistan pertains to the year 2019. Data for Myanmar pertains to the year 2018.

Countries without data available for a given indicator are not displayed.

## HE Equity Strategies in South Asia

An analysis of equity policies in Asia suggests that the bases of equity policies in this region are broadly economic and social. These are not mutually exclusive categories of strategies as they overlap at times. Most countries, while emphasising on one criterion, may be following certain strategies based on other criteria. Further, it is



also seen that countries with a higher level of diversity follow social criteria for equity policies whereas the more homogenous ones follow economic criteria for targeting the disadvantaged. At times, countries may also adopt the criterion of regional backwardness based on the economic indicators. Very often, a social criterion is relied on to extend economic benefits, such as financial support to students and institutions.

South Asian countries are more diverse than their counterparts in the Asian region and in other continents. The sources of diversity can be religion, ethnicity, caste, and other factors. Fearon's ethnic fractionalisation scores (Fearon, 2003) are also used at times to analyse the extent of diversity prevalent in a country. Fractionalisation (F) is the probability of individuals selected at random belonging to one ethnic group or the other. When the F value is equal to 0, it denotes that there is one single ethnic group, implying a perfectly homogenous ethnic structure. When the F value is 1, it implies a highly fragmented ethnic structure. As can be seen from Table 2, Asian countries vary substantially in terms of ethnic diversity. In general, countries in East and South-east Asia are less diverse as compared to those in South Asia. Among the South Asian countries, the F score is very high for most countries such as India, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan, and low for countries such as Bangladesh.

**Table 2: Ethnic Fractionalisation Score by Countries in Asia**

Asia	Ethnic Fractionalisation Score
Papua New Guinea	1
India	0.811
Indonesia	0.766
Afghanistan	0.751
Nepal	0.677
Bhutan	0.605
Malaysia	0.596
Fiji	0.566
Pakistan	0.532
Burma	0.522
Laos	0.481
Thailand	0.431
Sri Lanka	0.428
Singapore	0.388
Taiwan	0.274
Mongolia	0.272
Vietnam	0.233

Contd...

Bangladesh	0.223
Cambodia	0.186
Philippines	0.161
China	0.154
South Korea	0.004
North Korea	0.002

Source: Fearon (2003), p. 217.

An analysis of equity policies across countries further reinforces the above argument that countries with higher social diversity follow social criteria while others follow economic criteria to target interventions in favour of the disadvantaged. For example, India and Nepal exhibit a high degree of diversity (Table 2), and rely on social criteria as the basis for equity policies in admissions in higher education for the disadvantaged groups. Countries such as Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which are relatively less diverse, have relied on economic criteria to support the disadvantaged population groups. Sri Lanka (and, to an extent, Pakistan) have relied on economic and regional criteria for equity policies.

Among the South Asian countries, Bangladesh is a relatively homogeneous country, with 89 per cent of the population belonging to the Islamic faith and 98 per cent speaking Bengali (Minority Rights Group, 2022). The equity policies are based on economic criteria and target the economically poor (low-income) students, especially from rural areas and female students, to benefit from the equity policies such as stipends, student loan programmes, scholarships, and residential facilities (Bangladesh National Higher Education Equity Policy, n.d.; Atherton, 2021). After admissions to HEIs, some universities also extend remedial teaching, tutoring support, and access to additional learning resources to improve learning conditions for the under-prepared students (World Bank, 2019).

Myanmar follows equity policies targeting students of lower socio-economic backgrounds and students from rural and remote areas (Myanmar National Higher Education Equity Policy, n.d.; Atherton, 2021). Equity policies include scholarships, student loans, fee concessions, and provision of dormitories for the disadvantaged (Myanmar National Higher Education Equity Policy, n.d.). HEIs also extend student support programmes such as remedial teaching, tutoring support, social care, and access to learning resources, which are the focus of the initiatives (MoE, 2016). In addition, HEIs are encouraged to offer student support programmes that cover the stages of transition to higher education and progression through higher education.





These support programmes include outreach to target students from disadvantaged groups in their final year of secondary school before they reach HEIs.

Nepal is more diverse than Bangladesh. Although the Hindu population constitutes a majority, the disadvantaged groups account for more than 12 per cent of the total. Nepal relies on social criteria to target affirmative action policies (Bhattachan, 2009). The Constitution guarantees free education with scholarships, from primary to higher education, for Dalit (socially disadvantaged students) students (Salmi, 2023). They also have mandated scholarships for pursuing Medical and Engineering studies and Master's and Research degree programmes. The Quota for Dalits is specified for scholarships (45 per cent), freeships (50 per cent of the total freeships), and fellowships. In the case of fellowships, students from the socially disadvantaged groups are given extra marks during the evaluation of applications, and the age bar for the disadvantaged/underprivileged groups is relaxed by two years. Such forms of affirmative action and financial support are provided for pursuing vocational and technical education (Salmi, 2023).

Pakistan, though homogeneous in terms of religion (comprising 96 per cent Muslims), is diverse in terms of ethnic groups consisting of Punjabis (46 per cent), Sindhis (14.1 per cent), Pashtuns (15.4 per cent), Mohajirs (7.8 per cent), and Baluchis (3.57 per cent) occupying four different provinces of the country (Minority Rights Group, n.d.; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2020). The equity policies in Pakistan are based mainly on economic criteria in the form of the Merit and Need-Based Scholarship Program (MNBSBP) and targeting of students from the economically disadvantaged groups and female students (USAID, 2020).

Sri Lanka has a majority Buddhist religion (70.1 per cent), followed by Hinduism (12.6 per cent), Islam (9.7 per cent), and Christianity (6.2 per cent). The ethnic composition in the country includes nearly 75 per cent Sinhalese origin, 15 per cent Tamils, and an indigenous population of 9.3 per cent (Minority Rights Group, 2018). The equity policies in higher education in Sri Lanka are based on regional criteria (Sri Lanka, National Higher Education Equity Policy, n.d.; Atherton, 2021) as many of the disadvantaged groups are concentrated in some of the districts. Students from the educationally underprivileged districts are allotted nearly 60 per cent of their seats in admission to HEIs (De Silva et al., 2020). Furthermore, policies to favour Sinhalese speakers include a change of medium of instruction in higher education from English to Swabasha to encourage the participation of Sinhalese students in higher education and their chance of gaining employment in Sri Lanka (Lieberman, 2009).

## HE Equity Policies in India<sup>1</sup>

In India, which has a high degree of diversity, equity policies in higher education are mainly based on social factors. Equitable access to higher education opportunities has been an important concern embedded within the expansion strategy of higher education in India. Higher education comprised a relatively small sector in the previous decades, largely driven by public funding. With the proliferation of private universities and institutions, this century has witnessed the rapid expansion and massification of the sector in India (Varghese, 2015). Today, India has the second-largest higher education system after China. It has over 58,500 HEIs, enrolling 43.3 million students (MoE, 2022b). The evolution of higher education from a slow-growing low GER sector into a fast-growing one dominated by private sector institutions also has implications for equity.

India's policies on equity have been progressive and are aligned with the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution. In the years following Independence, India first focused on social factors and then expanded to include economic factors in identifying disadvantaged groups. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends the expansion of the higher education sector and outlines a vision for equity and inclusion to ensure that every social group has access to higher education opportunities. The policy accords special attention towards enabling access to quality education and improving student success in higher education for all, with a particular emphasis on the socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The policy lays a focus on improving access to quality HEIs for the socio-economically disadvantaged groups rather than any particular HEI. The NEP 2020 prioritises the development and support of high-quality HEIs to equalise opportunities for the socio-economically disadvantaged groups to access quality higher education (MHRD, 2020).

In order to promote equalisation of access to higher education, equity measures have favoured women, regions that have lagged behind in the development of higher education, and students from the socially disadvantaged groups, which has been a major equity group targeted for providing support. The disadvantaged groups in India are broadly classified into the following four categories: the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and the Economically

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion on equity policies in India can be accessed from the following reference: Varghese, N. V., Sabharwal, N. S., & Malish, C. M. (2022). Equity in Higher Education for Inclusive Growth: Evidence from India, in S. Chattopadhyay, S. Marginson and N. V. Varghese (Eds.), *Changing Higher Education in India*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp 67-94.



Weaker Sections (EWS). The non-disadvantaged social groups are termed as 'General' categories.

*Reservation of seats in HEIs or Quota System:* In 1950, the Constitution of India recognised the SCs and STs as the two most backward groups needing special protection. The Constitution of India guaranteed 15 per cent reservation in admissions to higher education and employment for the SCs and 7.5 per cent for the STs in 1950. In 1987, an additional quota of 27 per cent was extended to the OBCs in education and jobs. In 2019, the amendment to the Constitution included a 10 per cent reservation of seats in educational institutions and jobs to the EWS within the General category. In other words, the reservation or the quota of seats will now cover nearly 59.5 per cent of the admissions to HEIs. It needs to be added that some state governments follow quota systems in admissions to higher education institutions and in the labour market, which exceed this level.

*Financial Incentives:* Apart from the quota in admissions, the governments (both central and provincial) have introduced financial incentives to encourage the participation of the disadvantaged in HEIs. These measures include fee concessions, provision of scholarships and hostel facilities. The students belonging to the disadvantaged groups, especially the SC and ST categories, are exempted from paying fees and are offered scholarships in the schools and higher education institutions. A monthly stipend scheme is provided to help students meet the non-tuition costs such as books, and stationery, among other things.

More recently, an attempt has been made to universalise student loans with government guarantees to make admission to higher education need-blind and remove financial barriers in access to higher education opportunities (Planning Commission, 2013). Often, some strategies have also provided monetary support to institutions predominantly serving students from the socially and economically disadvantaged groups to retain these students. Such strategies have mostly been in the form of special grants to institutions for students from the SC/ST/OBC social groups for their remedial teaching, preparatory training and special coaching, and provision of counselling services to facilitate proper selection of subjects at the time of entry (Planning Commission, 1981).

The hostel facilities provided take two forms. Some HEIs have created separate hostels for the disadvantaged, sometimes called welfare hostels. In other cases, there are quotas for the disadvantaged in hostels where all categories of students live (Varghese et al., 2022). Since the STs live in remote rural areas, the Central Government has established Tribal Universities in India to promote their education.

Diversifying HEIs has been another strategy adopted by India to channel students from disadvantaged social groups into various streams and specialisations. Special institutions offering employment-oriented technical and vocational education (for example, in craft, trade and agricultural operations) have been set up for the SCs and in tribal-dominated rural areas. In addition, the option of distance education has been an important strategy to improve equity in access to higher education and the need for continuing education. Distance education has been promoted through the provision of a network of facilities in the form of open universities, evening colleges, correspondence courses, and part-time education. Diversification of study programmes and institutional differentiation have proved to be important measures for attracting large numbers of students and students from the socially disadvantaged groups (Varghese, 2011).

*Strategies to Promote Gender Equity:* The Constitution of India provides equal rights and privileges for women and special provisions for their development. A range of gender-sensitive measures have been initiated to improve access to higher education, reduce gender access gaps, and raise the status of women. For women students, establishing special universities and colleges, providing alternative admission pathways, introducing courses of special interest for women in the subjects of Home Science, Music, Drawing, Painting, Nursing, and encouraging institutions offering STEM subjects to practise affirmative action in admission policies have been important equity measures to attract women students to higher education. Moreover, various strategies have also considered compounded barriers to access for women from the disadvantaged social groups and those residing in rural areas. Provision of hostels and boarding facilities has been an important strategy to improve access to higher education for women from the disadvantaged social groups and those residing in rural areas.

Extending financial support to students in the form of subsidised tuition fees in public institutions and philanthropic private-aided institutions, scholarships and freeships, and provision of affordable hostels for students from poor backgrounds and socially excluded groups in India, and for women students, have helped boost the enrolment of students from these groups and improve equity.

*Strategies to Promote Regional Equity:* Beyond social factors, equity policies have also focused on promoting regional equity in the development of higher education in India. In order to promote regional equity and encourage students from the under-served disadvantaged regions in India, strategies of opening new HEIs in rural areas and the educationally backward districts (with enrolment rates lower than national



average), provision of additional funds to educational institutions located in rural, hilly, remote, tribal, and border areas, and in educationally backward areas, and, giving preference to districts with a cluster of minority population, particularly Muslims, have been common strategies for targeting students from diverse social groups residing in dispersed settlements. In addition, financial support has been extended to distance education activities to increase access for the north-eastern and backward areas.

The most recent National Education Policy 2020 prioritises raising the GER in low GER districts and promoting access to high-quality institutions in disadvantaged geographies by expanding and improving the already established HEIs (MHRD, 2020). In addition, the NEP 2020 focuses on promoting accessibility and improving the quality of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes for students from the Socio-Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and disadvantaged geographies to address the digital divide and achieve the aims of access, equity, and inclusion in HE.

*Support for Continuation and Attainment in HE:* In India, various equity programmes are available to support students from the socially disadvantaged groups who face academic challenges and financial difficulties. Learning support strategies have been designed to help these students continue their higher education studies and graduate successfully. These strategies include generic programmes that benefit all students, including those from the socially disadvantaged groups, and targeted learning support programmes that aim to facilitate learning amongst the disadvantaged groups. These programmes have been implemented to remove any educational, financial, and social barriers that may hinder the disadvantaged students from continuing and graduating from higher education. Learning support programmes can provide the necessary support structures to help these students navigate the complexities of college life, stay engaged, and ultimately graduate. Some examples include tutorials and seminars, book bank facilities, book grant facilities, remedial teaching, coaching for entry in services, National Eligibility Test (NET)/State Eligibility Test (SET) coaching, and preparatory courses.

Tutorial programmes are comprehensive educational programmes designed to provide students wide-ranging access to learning activities. The main objective of these programmes is to enhance the overall quality of education and help all students achieve their academic goals. In addition, other learning support programmes are specifically targeted towards the disadvantaged social groups. These programmes are designed to provide additional support and resources to students struggling with their studies due to various socio-economic factors. For instance, the Book Bank Programme is an initiative that aims to provide financial support to students for purchasing books

prescribed in the syllabus or essential readings in relevant disciplines. Separate provisions have been made for this scheme, facilitating the purchase of a wide range of books that students can borrow. However, it is important to note that only SC and ST students are allowed to borrow books and keep them for an extended period under this programme. This ensures that students from the disadvantaged backgrounds can access the necessary resources to succeed in their studies. Another initiative that supports students is the Book Grant, which is provided to students to purchase books. This grant is aimed at helping students who may not have the financial means to purchase the necessary books for their studies.

Furthermore, there are programmes that are implemented in HEIs in India which aim to provide additional learning input for students who wish to improve subject knowledge and prepare for competitive examinations, and for supporting students in the pursuit of academic excellence. The first is remedial coaching, which is designed to provide additional learning inputs to students who wish to improve their subject knowledge. The second is the entry in services coaching, which helps students prepare for competitive examinations for recruitment. The third is NET/SET coaching for lectureship. This is a competitive examination introduced by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to provide fellowships for doctoral studies and to decide the eligibility for academic positions in the universities. The NET/SET coaching scheme is specifically designed to help students qualify for NET and Junior Research Fellowship tests. All three schemes provide financial support to HEIs to organise coaching classes, which can be a valuable source of guidance and support for students who want to excel in their studies. The NEP 2020 similarly recommends that HEIs should set up high-quality academic support programmes for the educationally disadvantaged students.

The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) has designed a preparatory course scheme to increase the intake of SC and ST students. This scheme is aimed at students who do not qualify for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), a highly competitive test for admission to engineering courses. These students are provided with a one-year residential training programme that covers basic Science disciplines and English. The training is designed to improve their academic skills and prepare them for future academic challenges. Upon successful completion of the program, students are offered admission to BTech or dual degree programmes based on the available vacant seats reserved for them. This provides them with a second chance to achieve their academic goals and succeed in the field of engineering.

The pre-examination training programme is another part of the scheme that provides training for appearing in recruitment tests of government and Public Sector



Units (PSUs). This helps students prepare for future job opportunities and enhances their employability. It is important to note that the scheme is not limited to currently enrolled students, as even those from outside college roles can benefit from it. This means that students who have dropped out of college or those who are not currently enrolled in any course can still enrol in the programme and benefit from it. In addition, the IIT has allocated funds to develop Braille books, which facilitate learning among visually challenged SC students. This is a significant step towards creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment for all students.

*Support for Creating an Inclusive Environment:* Student study homes and student hostels aim to provide housing and quality learning environments for disadvantaged students studying at the higher education level. These initiatives recognise the importance of a quality learning environment in ensuring academic success and, therefore, work to provide safe and comfortable living spaces for students who may not otherwise have access to such facilities.

Hostels and counselling centres for girls also strive to improve learning by providing a quality learning environment. These centres are specifically designed to cater to the needs of female students and provide them with a safe and secure environment where they can focus on their studies without distractions. Additionally, under the girl's hostel scheme, funds are allocated to purchase equipment, furniture, utensils, books, and periodicals to ensure that the students have all the necessary resources to succeed in their education.

Besides infrastructural development, many other interventions are being undertaken to create institutional mechanisms for coordinating equity provisions for targeted groups. Initiatives at the institutional level include establishing Equal Opportunities Cells (EOCs), SC and ST Cells, and Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) in HEIs. These cells are dedicated towards promoting equity and supporting students who may face socio-economic, cultural, or physical challenges. During the Eleventh Plan period, an Equal Opportunity Office (EOO) was also envisaged to ensure better planning and coordination of these initiatives.

According to the UGC, it is mandatory to establish these cells in all colleges and universities. EOCs were visualised as an umbrella organisation overseeing various schemes for promoting equity. The aim of these interventions is to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment where all students can thrive and reach their full potential, irrespective of their background or circumstances.

The public policies related to reservation are closely monitored for their implementation. The UGC has issued instructions to strictly adhere to the reservation policies in all public institutions of higher education. However, the extent to which these measures have helped in promoting the upward mobility of the disadvantaged is debatable. A more challenging task is to analyse how institutions are implementing the national equity policies, on the one hand, and assess the extent of institutional strategies for addressing student diversity to improve learning outcomes, develop inclusive campuses, and improve employment outcomes. The experiences of some of the institutions in offering compensatory classes, organising programmes for improving performance in competitive examinations in the job market, and introducing courses to foster improvement in English language proficiency have been found to be very helpful for students from the disadvantaged backgrounds (Malish and Sabharwal, 2021). Public policies may focus on these measures to develop inclusive campuses and to improve higher education outcomes.

### **HE Equity Strategies at The Institutional Level<sup>2</sup>**

In order to understand the varying institutional approaches to equity and the strategies in operation, this paper presents a detailed analysis of four prominent universities, including three from India and one from Nepal. More details on these case studies (Acharya, 2023; Annalakshmi, 2023; Devkota and Tuladhar 2023; Malish, 2023) can be accessed in the book *Transforming Lives at the Institutional Level: Equity Promotion Initiatives Across the World* (Salmi, 2023).

Among the above four HEIs, Tribhuvan University was the first university established in Nepal in 1959. The HEIs selected from India include a central university, an elite non-university, and a state or provincial university. These institutions have been drawn from different regions of India and also reflect institutional diversity in higher education in India. Among the HEIs in India selected for analysis, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is a prominent Central university located in Delhi, the capital city of the country. The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), located in the western state of Maharashtra, is one of the prestigious technology institutions of India. The Bharathiar University (BU) is located in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu and is a large multi-disciplinary state university. These three institutions from India represent diversity in terms of ownership, governance, and orientations of the institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> The institutional write-up is based on the case studies of four institutions prepared by Sanghmitra S. Acharya, Narayanan Annalakshmi, C.M. Malish, Kamal Raj Devkota, and Sumon Kamal Tuladhar as part of the project on Equity Promotion Initiatives Across the World (see Salmi, 2023).





As discussed earlier in the paper, there are constitutionally mandated and nationally accepted forms of equity policies which need to be followed by HEIs in India. At times, the state governments may have their own (designed and funded) equity policies targeting particular groups in addition to the nationally decided mandatory reservation policies. The State of Tamil Nadu is in the forefront in terms of extending reservation policies for the disadvantaged groups in India and is far ahead of the level of quota mandated by the constitution of India.

Equity strategies followed by HEIs can be broadly divided into two types: a) equity strategies as compliance to national commitments and mandates, and b) institutional initiatives in addition to the implementation of nationally mandated policy measures.

### ***Equity Strategies as Compliance to National Mandates***

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) ensures that every citizen shall have the right to access compulsory and free education up to the secondary level. The UGC established in 1993 has been entrusted with the responsibility of promoting higher education. One of the objectives of higher education in the country is “to make higher education inclusive and accessible to disadvantaged and marginalised communities” (UGC, 2019/2020, p. 1). The country envisages cost recovery from 80 per cent of the students and extends financial support to 20 per cent of the students enrolled in higher education. The equity initiatives in the country are broadly categorised into: a) scholarships; b) freeships; and c) fellowships.

The National Education Policy 2019 (MoE Nepal, 2019) of Nepal elaborates the most recent equity policies stressing on equity-based scholarship provisions for the Dalits, people with disabilities, and economically indigent students. The national initiatives under the SDG framework extend these facilities to girls, and poor and Dalit students. The freeships are distributed on the basis of merit or social disadvantage. The fellowships are awarded to research scholars enrolled in MPhil, doctoral, and post-doctoral studies.

### ***Characteristics of The Institutions Selected for The Case Study***

IIT Bombay is located in the city of Mumbai, the capital of the western state of Maharashtra. Mumbai is also one of the largest cities in the world and the economic capital of India. It is also one of the three cities where the first universities of India were established in 1857. IIT Bombay occupied one of the top positions— third position—in the national ranking of HEIs in 2021, as per the National Institutional Ranking

Framework (MoE, 2022b). It was ranked 177 in World University Rankings in 2021 and is the first among the Indian institutions in the QS World University Rankings 2022.

India initiated a process of setting up of Institutions of Eminence (IoE) in 2017. The objective of this scheme was to develop world class universities in India by promoting some of the existing institutions to attain global standards in terms of teaching, research, and publications. India envisaged setting up of 20 IoEs, including 10 in the public sector and 10 in the private sector. IIT Bombay was one of the first set of institutions selected under the IoE category. IIT Bombay has 15 departments, three schools, and six centres offering study programmes in engineering, science, humanities, and social sciences at the undergraduate, Master's and doctoral levels. It enrolls around 7500 students at the undergraduate and graduate level studies and more than 3000 students at the doctoral level. The Institution awarded 2222 degrees (all levels) in 2021.

Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) was established in 1969 in New Delhi, the capital of India. It is one of the premier central universities funded by the Federal government. It is a research-intensive university, mainly enrolling students at the graduate and research levels. The university was ranked number 2 according to the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2022. JNU promotes inter-disciplinary studies and research through its 14 schools and 21 centres, offering programmes of study and research in nearly 80 disciplines. It also offers study programmes at the under-graduate level in Foreign and Indian languages, and graduate and research study programmes in Social Sciences, Humanities, Management, Sciences, Computer Sciences and Engineering. JNU enrolls around 1117 students at the under-graduate level studies, 3500 students at the post-graduate level, and close to 4232 students at the doctoral level (MoE, 2022a). Thanks to its admission policies, JNU has one of the most diverse university campuses in India.

Bharathiar University is located in Coimbatore, in the southern state of India, Tamil Nadu. It is a state (provincial) university established by the government of Tamil Nadu in 1982. Unlike the other two Indian institutions in the case study, which are centrally funded, Bharathiar University is a state-funded university with more than 100 colleges affiliated to it. It is one of the better performing state universities in India and has been consistently ranked among the top 15 universities according to the NIRF 2022. Bharathiar University has 34 departments offering 115 academic programmes at the undergraduate, Masters, and doctoral levels. The University also offers over 300 programmes at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels and offers study programmes through a distance mode. The University enrolls around 440 students at



the under-graduate level studies, 2694 students at the post-graduate level, and close to 200 students at the doctoral level studies. The colleges affiliated to the University enrol thousands of students, mostly at the undergraduate level.

Tribhuvan University is located in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. Nepal is a relatively small but diverse country in South Asia, with a population of 26.5 million. Although it is Hindu majority country, it has several ethno-linguistic groups (ADB, 2015) and caste groups within the Hindu community. It is also one of the less developed countries in the region. Tribhuvan University was the first university to be established in 1959 in the country and still remains the largest and the most prominent university of the country. According to 2019 statistics, Tribhuvan University enrolls more than 75 per cent of the total students enrolled in higher education in Nepal. There are nearly 1200 public and private campuses affiliated to the University. It offers around 3500 courses and 300 study programmes at the undergraduate, Master's, and doctoral levels. A majority of the students (77 per cent) are enrolled in Humanities, Social Sciences, Management, Education, and Law, while the rest are enrolled in technical programmes such as Science and Technology, Engineering, and Medicine.

It must be emphasised that the institutions selected for the study in this paper reflect diversity in governance, management, and study programmes. All the public institutions are owned and funded either by the national governments in India and Nepal or by the state government in India. The public institutions have been chosen partly because they have a long history of existence and have played an important role in expanding higher studies and research in the respective countries. Further the public institutions, unlike the private universities, are mandated to strictly adhere to the national equity policies.

### **Implementation of HE Equity Policies at The Institutional Level**

Tribhuvan University implements all the nationally mandated equity policies. It has also developed guidelines for the award of scholarships and other financial support measures. The Scholarship Act 2021 of the Government of Nepal mandates that states should allocate 45 per cent of the scholarships for inclusive quotas for the social groups, including the economically and socially poor, women, disabled, *Janajatis*, *Dalits*, persons from backward and remote areas, *Madhesis*, Muslims, martyrs' families, and those injured in wars. Pursuing this policy guideline, Tribhuvan University has developed guidelines to provide scholarships to the students at both Institutes (science and technology, engineering, forestry, medicine and agriculture), and Faculties (management, education, Humanities and Social Sciences and law).

The scholarship guidelines have mainly included: (a) student enrolment quotas, (b) Jehendar scholarship quotas (scholarship on merit basis), (c) freeships, and (d) other scholarships. Equity policies are followed even in the recruitment of university employees. Following the Public Service Commission (PSC), the TU Service Commission has developed a policy of inclusive and open competitions for recruiting new teaching faculties and non-teaching staff. In this regard, 60 per cent of the seats are to be filled in open competition. The remaining 40 per cent of the seats are allocated as reserved quotas for the social groups that include women, *Janajatis*, *Dalits*, *Madhesis*, and disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

Student admissions to study programmes in JNU are based on competitive entrance tests organised at the all-India level. However, in order to ensure the admission of students from disadvantaged groups, JNU had earlier evolved an admission criterion wherein 20 points were awarded for socio-economic and regional deprivations, 30 points for interviews, and 50 points for written tests. The students from the backward districts were given 2 or 4 points depending upon the level of backwardness. All women candidates were eligible for 5 deprivation points. Although 20 deprivation points were awarded, no individual student could obtain more than 10 deprivation points. This system of equity policies was changed and replaced by a system whereby written tests and interviews were awarded scores in the ratio of 4:1 (80 per cent for tests and 20 per cent for interviews). The following equity policies as per the nationally mandated quota system are also followed in JNU admissions—7.5 per cent of the intake should be from the STs, 15 per cent from the SCs, 27 per cent from the OBCs, 10 per cent from the EWS, and 3 per cent from the physically disabled.

In addition to these equity-friendly provisions at the entry level, the students receive support during their studies and stay at JNU. Under its ordinances, the university has created the Student-Faculty Committee (SFC), comprising representatives from among the faculty members and students. The SFCs are involved in the admission procedures and student support systems post the admissions. The student representatives in the Committee are elected by the students of each Centre/Department.

JNU has one of the most diverse campuses in the country as it attracts students from all regions of India. The equity policies followed at the university also ensure a diverse student body. Many of these students face difficulties in terms of language since the medium of instruction is English. The university thus organises remedial classes to support students from different backgrounds through the EOO and the Centre for English, School of Languages and Cultural Studies, by offering opportunities



for acquiring reading, writing, and speaking English skills. JNU has instituted several scholarships/fellowships for students who do not secure financial support from other agencies. It has also established the Gender Sensitisation Committee against Sexual Harassment. The committee comprises students and faculty members, officers, and staff members to support its activities and programmes in various ways.

IIT Bombay adheres to the national policies on reservation and the nationally mandated quota system is strictly followed in the admissions to the university. In addition, the university follows several institution-based measures to facilitate students from disadvantaged groups. This starts with subsidies given to students from disadvantaged groups to purchase application forms. The Institution also offers relaxation in entrance scores to students belonging to the disadvantaged. After finalising the open merit cut-off points, OBC cut-off scores are decided at 90 per cent, and the SC and ST cut-off scores account for 66 per cent of the open merit cut-off point/percentage. If the quotas for SCs and STs are not filled due to the non-availability of eligible candidates, a proportionate number of students below the cut-off will be admitted to a Preparatory Course. Preparatory Course for SCs and STs is a two-semester (one year) course. The course teaches foundations of Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, and English, which are believed to be essential to begin undergraduate study programmes at IIT. Students are admitted to first-year undergraduate programmes after completing the course.

The students from the disadvantaged groups, especially those belonging to the SCs and STs, are exempted from paying tuition fees and are provided free boarding and lodging facilities. In addition, they are given pocket money and scholarships, book loan facilities, and special funds for the purchase of books. The institution has established an SC-ST Cell, a Gender Cell (Internal Complaint Committee), and an SC-ST and OBC Liaison Cell. The SC-ST cell monitors the implementation of reservation policies, promotes the social coordinates fellowships, and looks after the academic well-being of the SC and ST students. Issues related to sexual harassment on campus are directly addressed by the Internal Complaint Cell.

The other equity initiatives at the institutional level include: a) the Student Mentorship Programme, b) Student Wellness programmes, c) the Academic Rehabilitation Programme, and d) Gender Awareness Courses.

Admissions into IITs are based on all-India competitive examinations, attracting students from all regions of India. Many students face difficulties in the initial stages in terms of adjusting to a new place, new academic engagements, and social interactions. The primary objective of the Student Mentorship Scheme is to create a friendly

atmosphere and provide a support system for newly enrolled students to make them feel at home. The SMP scheme promotes constructive and positive student interaction and facilitates guidance and mentorship to junior students by senior students. The activities are coordinated by senior students who act as mentors. The institute is also planning to organise SMP schemes specifically targeting students from disadvantaged families.

*Student Wellness Cells (SWCs):* IIT Bombay has had facilities for student counselling. In fact, the Counselling Care Centre (CCC) has been functioning for decades. As per the usual practice, the Counsellors used to visit hostels to provide their services. The idea of counselling, however, had a negative implication, which prevented students from approaching the counsellors. Therefore, the CCC was renamed as the Student Wellness Centre (SWC) in 2015, with a designated office in the main building of the Institute. The SWC conducts surveys among the students to identify those undergoing psychological stress and emotional disturbances. Based on the survey results, the SWC classifies students into different categories to facilitate intervention strategies based on the level of stress faced by the student. The demand for counselling services also increased substantially during the recent pandemic (COVID) period.

*Academic Rehabilitation Programme (ARP):* The 'back paper syndrome' is common in many HEIs. It is manifested in terms of the inability of some of the students to successfully complete some of the courses on time, which adds to the backlog of the courses to be completed. The ARP tries to address the issues related to this academic backlog by addressing the academic and language challenges faced by the students in the initial years of their entry to the institution. A faculty member acts as an ARP coordinator in each department who monitors the students' overall progress in the semester. IIT Bombay also organises Gender Awareness Courses for all the students. The Institute has developed online modules for gender sensitisation programmes. It is a mandatory non-credit course for all the students.

The state of Tamil Nadu, where Bharathiar University is located, has a quota system that surpasses the quotas mandated by the national government. The state government quota is as high as 69 per cent for the disadvantaged and 31 per cent for the General categories. In addition, the State Government provides scholarships for students from the SC and ST communities with an annual income of the family less than Rs 2,50,000, and for students from the disadvantaged communities with an annual income of less than Rs 2,00,000. The government recently established fellowships of Rs 1000 per month for three years during the undergraduate study for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.



In addition to the State-level initiatives, some of the University's departments offer fee-free education to a limited number of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They are also supported with boarding and lodging costs for an initial period of 2 years. More than 40 students were given fee free seats and boarding and lodging facilities in the year 2021. The University has also directed all the self-financing colleges affiliated to it to offer free seats to students belonging to poor socio-economic backgrounds.

### Conclusions<sup>3</sup>

This study has attempted to analyse equity policies in South Asia based on secondary and primary sources of information. While diversity is a common element in most countries in the region, it is particularly high in countries such as India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. While the secondary sources covered all the countries in the region, the primary sources covered institutions from the most diverse countries such as India and Nepal. The detailed analysis of institutional policies is based on three institutions from India and one institution from Nepal. All the institutions selected are public institutions mandated to strictly adhere to the national equity policies. The Institution selected for the study in Nepal is the first and foremost national university of the country. The institutions selected from India are federally funded institutions, including—a technological institution and a research-oriented university and a provincial (State-funded) university.

The analysis based on secondary sources of data and studies of selected institutions indicates that most equity policies are either based on social factors or based on economic factors. Countries which are more diverse largely follow equity policies based on social factors while less diverse countries follow equity policies based on economic criteria. One interesting trend that has been noticed is that irrespective of the criteria applied for the identification of target groups for equity policies, the support involves a quota system in admissions and financial support after admissions.

The study clearly indicates that most institutions follow nationally mandated equity policies. In fact, the equity policies are nationally determined and the institutions have been implementing these policies. In addition to the nationally determined policies, many institutions have introduced measures to support the disadvantaged in terms of scholarships and hostel facilities.

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<sup>3</sup> An abridged version of this paper by the authors can be accessed from the following reference: Varghese, N.V. & Sabharwal, N.S. (2023). South Asia Case Studies. In Salmi J., *Transforming Lives at the Institutional Level: Equity Promotion Initiatives Across the World*. USA: Lumina Foundation and Star Scholars, pp. 222-275.

One disadvantage with the nationally mandated equity policies is that they mostly signify efforts to bring the students to the HEIs. Little attention is paid to support students after admissions. In fact, institutional initiatives become more important and relevant in this context. The studies indicate that most of the institutional initiatives were related to making the students comfortable on the campus, focusing on mental wellness, overcoming the initial adjustment problems and remedial teaching.

In fact, language plays an important role in integrating the new students with the institutional culture. The medium of instruction in many of the prestigious universities in India is English language. Many of the students, especially from the disadvantaged groups and rural areas, find it difficult to follow classroom transactions in the English language as their orientation is in regional languages. The support system provided by the institutions, especially language classes and compensatory education, are thus very important support systems for the disadvantaged.

It can be fairly conclusively argued that the nationally mandated equity policies and their implementation in the HEIs have helped tremendously to expand higher education opportunities for disadvantaged groups. However, this opportunity will become more meaningful when students are in a position to perform well in academics. Institutional initiatives, in many instances, have helped to help the students perform well and attain rapid progress in their academic pursuits.





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## ➔ About the paper

Inequalities have been widening globally. Education plays an influential role in determining the extent of inequalities. A more equal provision of education, especially among the disadvantaged, is a guarantee to promote equity in societies. Equity policies in most countries, in general, are based on economic, social or regional criteria. Based on the empirical evidence from South Asian countries, this paper shows that more diverse nations tend to implement social-based policies and less diverse countries rely on economic criteria for shaping equity policies. The paper argues that nationally mandated equity policies significantly enhance opportunities for disadvantaged groups to access opportunities for higher education. Based on the studies on institutional practices in India and Nepal, it is argued that institutional initiatives aimed at mental wellness, adjustment challenges, remedial teaching and other support empower disadvantaged students and help create an inclusive higher education sector.

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