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CONTENTS

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) in India is currently in the massification stage, which means that many young people from families and communities that have historically not completed schooling are now considering applying for HE. Although enrolment rates have increased, there are still social disparities in HE access, and there are also social variations in the choice of courses and institutions. It is crucial to consider HE choice in addition to HE access because many inequalities are known to occur during the choice phase. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on expanding HE access for socially excluded groups. The policy acknowledges that students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups face significant barriers in accessing HE, including a lack of information about the college-going process and making informed choices. This paper highlights the crucial role of rural-serving state universities and government colleges as knowledge hubs for spreading information about higher education to rural communities. It argues that faculty

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members within higher education institutions are vital sources of college knowledge in rural and semi-urban areas, but their potential is currently underutilised in these settings. Emerging evidence internationally and at the national level indicates that contact with faculty members is valuable for students from disadvantaged groups, both in the early stages of accessing HE and during the transition into it. This paper discusses various global outreach policies aimed at enhancing educational participation among marginalised groups and provides significant examples of institutional strategies with the involvement of faculty members in HE outreach. The authors argue for the need to understand how institutional support structures, institutional culture, and policy frameworks impact HE outreach and faculty participation. The paper thus contributes to the discussion on the landscape of HE outreach policy and the adoption of a socially just and gender-sensitive framework to shape the future of HE outreach initiatives in India.

Introduction[1]

What is Higher Education Outreach?

'Outreach' conducted by higher education institutions (HEIs), as a more general term, can signify multiple types of activity. Outreach and community engagement can involve HEIs by inviting members of the public into the HEI or going into the community for various purposes. In India, there is a highly developed culture of community outreach, which includes adopting villages, helping with clean-up operations, performing sensitisation plays, operating plant nurseries which are open to the public, and so on. In India and in the international higher education (HE) sector, outreach is often used to refer to any activities performed by HE staff/students. Usually, outreach in this sense is linked with the HEIs' mission to engage with communities beyond the walls of the institution, and to contribute to the public good mission of HE. However, there is a more specific definition of HE outreach, which this paper explores across international and Indian perspectives. In this paper, HE outreach refers to a specific set of practices which are defined by the shared aim of ensuring that the potential applicants to HE are aware of the options available to them and the processes they need to follow.

This definition of HE outreach is situated in the international agenda known as 'widening participation' (WP), which aims to open up HE to people who have historically not been able to access HE or fully participate in HE during their studies. While this agenda also fits into the public good mission of HEIs, its aim is different in

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Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

3

that, instead of encouraging community contact with HEIs, it seeks to explicitly encourage young members of the community to consider enrolling in HE, or to support their children to do so. HE outreach activities include opening the doors of the HEI for prospective students and their families to visit the institution to understand more about what HE involves, as well as the process of students and/or staff members from HEIs visiting community settings such as schools or community groups to explain HE options and processes. Underlying HE outreach is the knowledge that many young people are considering attending HE without being able to access reliable and accurate information about HE due to the fact that they are among the first generation in their families and communities to be able to apply for HE (Stewart et al., 2022). HE outreach recognises the potential role that HEIs can play in promoting equitable access to HE by providing information about HE to communities.

Why is HE Outreach Beneficial for India?

HE in India is currently in the massification stage (Varghese, 2015; Henderson et al., 2024), and many young people from families and communities who have historically not completed schooling, let alone entered HE, are now contemplating applying for HE. Particularly in view of the private sector-led HE growth in India, it is increasingly being acknowledged that, while HE enrolment amongst young people from disadvantaged groups has improved, social disparities in HE access persist, along with the emergence of social variations in the selection of courses and institutions (ibid.). Affirmative action policies in India, such as the reservation (that is, quota) system, attempt to facilitate entry into HE for marginalised caste groups, tribal communities, and economically disadvantaged groups. These policies have been extremely effective in improving access to HE for disadvantaged groups. However, the policies rely on young people knowing how and where to apply for HE study. HE outreach activities play a *parallel role* to the reservation policies, where HE outreach can make young people: (i) aware of their options for HE study and, where applicable, (ii) aware of the means of availing of reservation policies or other affirmative action schemes. As such, *HE outreach can arguably play a major role in contributing to HE equity*.

The underlying principles behind HE outreach include, firstly, acknowledging the social importance of degree-level education, and secondly, ensuring that a person's background and life circumstances should not prevent them from knowing about their potential HE options or how to apply.

Firstly, *HE has many purposes and functions in society*: it provides specialist training and skills for specific professions, imparts general or soft skills to learners, and, within a democratic society, is designed to lead to an opening of the mind and to create active citizens (Nussbaum, 2002; Walker, 2005; Wilson-Strydom, 2016). There is a proven connection between attending HE and social mobility (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006). HE also has the potential of breaking the cycle of transmission of socio-economic disadvantage from one generation to the next.

Secondly, given *the importance of HE study for social mobility*, it is essential to at least make young people aware of their options and the means of accessing HE. However, in India as well as internationally, there are still concerns about the comparatively limited possibilities for young people from disadvantaged groups to attend HE. These limitations span both the option of attending HE at all (versus marriage, job, or shorter course) and the option of choosing a HE course and institution that is commensurate with the skills and aspirations of young people. Young people from disadvantaged groups and communities have been seen to have less access to information about HE, especially information based on direct experience of HE and reliable, accurate information from institutional sources. This means that decisions about HE are often being made on the basis of hearsay and assumption about the nature and purpose of HE, which in turn, leads to the selection of less prestigious courses and institutions, while also perpetuating gender and caste/tribe inequalities. HE outreach practices seek to equalise access to HE information in order to ensure that decisions about HE are being made with a more secure information base.

What is The Role of HEis and Faculty Members in HE Outreach?

While there is a substantial body of research on widening access initiatives worldwide, a neglected area has been the role of Faculty Members (FMs) in delivering on HE outreach culture. In other words, studies focusing on the specifics of what FMs do in terms of HE outreach and how they contribute – and how they experience these activities – are rare. The involvement of FMs in HE outreach may be situated within community and civic engagement efforts, such as those mentioned above as 'community outreach', while at the same time sharing some characteristics with other forms of university engagement (Demb and Wade, 2012). In this sense, the involvement of FMs in HE outreach entails different activities depending on the goals set by each HEI and their respective WP agendas. These activities may include:

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

5

- The delivery of a *taster lecture* to illustrate what HE looks and feels like;

- Designing *pre-degree courses* at HEIs which serve to enhance students' preparedness for degree-level study;

- Participating in *comprehensive programmes* that may include multiple types of activity and support;

- Being involved in *outreach programmes delivered throughout the academic year*;

- Leading sessions during *long vacation HE outreach programmes*.

For examples of these initiatives, see Section 4.1.1. Another way in which FMs are involved in outreach activities is by assisting with activities where they provide students with a sense of university life and what academic work may entail.

The involvement of FMs in HE outreach activities may be situated in different stages of students' progression to HE (that is, whether students are in primary or secondary education and starting to form HE aspirations, or are completing their final years of secondary education, or preparing during the summer before starting HE courses). FMs represent vital sources of subject knowledge and expertise, providing meaningful academic experiences to students who may have otherwise been excluded from HE. Moreover, interacting with FMs before entering HE can demystify and humanise FMs, who may otherwise be perceived as unapproachable. However, the participation of FMs in HE outreach is not necessarily a straightforward endeavour. While attempting to engage in HE outreach activities, FMs may face several institutional challenges, such as academic workloads and distribution of tasks, allocation of financial resources and need for capacity building, among other issues, that prevent them from participating in such initiatives (Johnson et al., 2019). The institutional culture and mission and values of an HEI may shape the potential for FMs to engage in HE outreach, either fostering or discouraging HE outreach as a valid form of academic work. We argue that FMs' participation in HE outreach is a valuable experience for students from under-represented groups who are applying to HE, as FMs may play a significant role not only in shaping the views and perceptions of students and their families about HE; but also in *why* and *how* students – and their families – engage in decision-making about progressing to HE.

Introduction to the Empirical Base for the Paper

This paper includes findings from two empirical research projects. Firstly, the paper draws on findings from the project, 'A Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Educational Success in Haryana' (2017-21), funded by the Fair Chance Foundation and located at the University of Warwick, UK, with project partners located in India

(Stewart et al., 2023). The core aims of the project were to explore and discern gendered inequalities, pathways, and role of families in HE decisions and access in Haryana, India. The four phases were: (i) to explore gendered pathways to HE, (ii) investigate the role of families in gendered educational pathways, (iii) explore and develop institutional initiatives for informed choices, and (iv) contribute to the development of educational activities and policy at the state and national levels. In particular, the paper engages with data from Phase 1 of the project, which involved exploring the social and educational background of undergraduate students with an aim to understand motivations and experiences of accessing HE in publicly-funded government colleges of Haryana. To realise the set objectives, a case study methodology was adopted. Three colleges in three different districts of Haryana were strategically selected for the project. The study involved analysis of the institutional profile and background statistics, semi-structured interviews with college representatives, a questionnaire survey of approximately 100 undergraduate students in each college, two focus group discussions in each college with students (including five participants in each group, one group of women students, and one group of men students), and semi-structured interviews with students (four per college, including two women students and two men students). For the purposes of this paper, we returned to the data specifically to explore where FMs were referred to, in terms of their involvement in informal HE outreach activities and their future potential involvement (Sections 3.2, 4.2, and 5).

Secondly, the paper draws on findings from the pilot study conducted for the project 'Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches' (WAHEI) (2022-26), also funded by the Fair Chance Foundation and co-led by the University of Warwick and CPRHE-NIEPA. The core aims of the project are to explore and emphasise the role of HEIs, FMs, and institutional leaders in widening HE access and choice in rural areas. The objectives of WAHEI would be carried out through the following three phases: (i) exploring the current role and potential of HEIs, institutional leaders, and FMs, (ii) role of continued professional learning (CPL) in developing capacity and motivation of institutional leaders and FMs, and (iii) policy measures to embed the role of institutional leaders and FMs for sustainable change.

This paper specifically engages with the pilot study of Phase 1, conducted in 2023 in a government college on the outskirts of Delhi (the college is anonymised), involving testing of the Phase 1 research instruments in the selected HEI. The pilot study consisted of a semi-structured interview with the institutional leader, survey responses from 59 FMs and 148 undergraduate (UG) students, interview-diary-interview study

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

7

with four FMs, focus group discussions with ten UG students, interviews with four UG students, and collection of FM and UG administrative data. The analysis from the pilot study is included in Section 4.2.

Aims and Structure of the Paper

This paper is strategically positioned to contribute important and impactful findings to the policy agenda at the institutional, state, and national levels. We argue that, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where there is a limited history of access to HE, HEIs and their FMs constitute important local sources of information and expertise about HE.

In this paper, we argue for greater recognition of the potential role of rural-serving state universities and government colleges based in rural and semi-urban areas as *HE knowledge hubs*, and for the strengthening of HEIs' efforts in delivering on the equity and social justice agenda for HE in India. Serving as 'HE knowledge hubs' implies that they interact with communities in rural and semi-urban areas surrounding HEIs to improve the communities' knowledge about HE options. This is needed as there is often little direct knowledge and experience of HE in these communities from previous generations. Thus, choices about HE are often being made on the basis of hearsay and informal connections, which largely benefit only those who already have a history of HE in their families or networks (Stewart et al., 2022). In order to develop HEIs as HE knowledge hubs, the paper recognises that the institutional culture and functioning of HEIs and national/state policy contexts regulating the approach of FMs and institutional leaders to HE outreach are influential and must be taken into consideration.

It is noteworthy that this paper focuses on issues pertaining to HE access and choice, rather than focusing on, for example, retention or completion. This paper is designed to contribute to wider ongoing research in India and internationally on the full HE journey, taking into consideration the fact that access is only one piece of the puzzle. Within this puzzle, we argue that HE access—and particularly choice—are still not fully understood, and we therefore, propose to enhance existing knowledge on this aspect of HE (Henderson, Sabharwal, and Thomas, 2024). It is important to include HE choice in addition to HE access, as many inequalities are known to occur within HE choice. The comprehensive term 'HE access and choice' implies: the decision to attend HE or not, the selection of the degree subject and course, and the selection of HEI as well as any other decisions taken in relation to HE (Strecker and Feixa, 2020).

In addition, the paper suggests that the structuring of the academic profession via tradition and policy impacts the potential for FMs to instigate and contribute to

HE outreach. As such, the paper aims to set out ways in which the academic profession is structured in India, and to consider the relationship between the nature of the profession and its potential to contribute to HE outreach.

The sections in the paper are laid out as follows. Section 2 discusses why HE outreach is needed from international and Indian perspectives. Section 3 explores what HE outreach is, in terms of its historical origins, national policy, and forms of HE outreach, again from international and Indian perspectives. Section 4 explores the role of FMs in HE outreach and how it is influenced by the structure of the academic profession, from international and Indian perspectives. Section 5 explores the potential for involvement of FMs in HE outreach in India. Section 6 presents the conclusion.

Why is HE Outreach Needed?

International Perspectives on HE and Socio-Economic Disadvantage

In this section, we set the scene for an exploration of HE access and choice in India by reviewing existing scholarship in this domain both in India and internationally. This is necessary in order to highlight the ongoing need for investigation of and enhancement of HE access and choice for disadvantaged groups.

Young people may miss out on the chance to attend HE or to make informed choices about HE due to several different factors. Historically, both in India and internationally, young people from the socio-economically disadvantaged families and communities have been excluded from HE. For example, Latina students (of South American origin) in the US experience the lowest levels of educational attainment in contrast to those from other ethnic/racial groups in the country. They also score lower on standardised tests and exhibit lower rates of high school completion and participation in HE (Ceja, 2004). This also applies to first-generation indigenous students in Chile who experience 'unequal pathways' (Webb, 2019; p. 529) into HE. These students frequently face significant institutional barriers and 'intergenerational cycles of higher education exclusion' (p. 530). The dimensions of these barriers include disadvantaged geographical location, material constraints, and social constraints.

Locational constraints, particularly in relation to the rural-urban divide, have meant that more isolated communities have had reduced access to schools and colleges, due to the geographical distribution of institutions. This is illustrated in a study by Timmis et al. (2019), which examined the experiences of students transitioning to HE from rural settings in South Africa. The findings of the study revealed that students' knowledge and understanding of university choice and application processes were limited due to the lack of university outreach programmes and preparation they receive in schools in

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

9

these isolated regions. Another issue identified in relation to rurality appears in a study of HE access and choice in Peru (Guerrero and Rojas, 2020), where it is discussed that more traditional social norms are in place in more remote areas, which in turn, shapes perceived educational pathways for young people.

Material constraints play an important role too, due to a lack of resources to invest in schooling and HE (in terms of HE access), the urgency of young people contributing to the household economy, and also the type of HE institutions that students can access based on financial limitations. Students from under-represented backgrounds face several barriers when deciding where to enrol. Some of these students do not consider certain types of HEIs, despite being academically prepared, due to their concerns about affordability. A study conducted by Hernández (2015) exploring the experiences of high-achieving Latina students in the US, found that these students 'did not even consider looking into applying to certain types of institutions because they felt that their cost was beyond their means' (p. 210). Issues such as institutional reputation and cost carry a significant weight in HE choice. Ultimately some students may choose the institution that offers the best financial aid package, even though it might not be in their best academic interests. This is particularly relevant for low-income students, who have to balance aspirations against daily financial constraints. In this regard, Hernández found that many of these young women realised 'that their parents had the highest hopes to support their educational dream and found themselves in a position where they had to temper their parents' idealism with their family's financial reality' (p. 212).

Social constraints also play a role due to the difficulty that students from disadvantaged social backgrounds face in acquiring accurate information about HE options, when they are the first generation in their families to attend HE, and do not have direct experience of HE in their families or communities to draw on (Henderson et al., 2021). In a study based in the UK, Brooks (2004) explored parental involvement in HE choice through a comparison of the roles that mothers and fathers played during their children's decision-making processes. Brooks argues that there is an evident difference between families with different socio-economic backgrounds; she pinpoints that working-class families displayed a 'familial passivity' (p. 501) during the HE decision-making process. Another example is the study conducted by Ceja (2006), which examined the role of parents and siblings during the HE choice of 20 Chicana (Mexican-origin students) high school seniors in the US. Being first-generation students, they struggled to find information and resources about HE within their immediate environments. However, having an older sibling who had already attended an HEI offered them the space to discuss issues that could not be addressed with their parents.

Studies across the international research area of HE access and choice highlight the importance of close support systems within the students' immediate environments during the process of HE choice. This is of particular importance for individuals coming from families who do not have a university-going tradition, and individuals who have been excluded from HE due to social and cultural constraints. In addition to close personal support systems, formalised support can be considered essential where there is no history of HE in the family or personal network. HEIs are in a strong position to work with schools, families, and communities to facilitate informed choice for HE decision-making.

Indian Perspectives on HE and Socio-Economic Disadvantage

In India, access to HE has historically been limited for marginalised caste and tribal groups due to interwoven material and social constraints (Borooah et al., 2015; Sabharwal, 2015). Chakrabarti's (2009) analysis of the National Sample Survey (NSS) indicates that the combined effects of gender, caste, and rurality are related to a reduced likelihood of accessing HE. This compounding effect of multiple axes of disadvantage is reflected in a study of access to HE in Punjab by Wadhwa (2018), who found that the planning processes for accessing HE were more structured and informed, and led to a more likely realisation of the plans for students who were from more privileged backgrounds across caste, class, and rural/urban location.

As the 'Fair Chance to Education' project found (Henderson et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2023) (see Section 1.4), young people in rural/semi-urban areas of India are not getting the support they need to make well-informed choices about accessing HE. A study by Gautam (2015) of women students from different backgrounds who were studying in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, showed that students from rural backgrounds had to make HE choices on their own, as their parents were less able to advise on HE options. This phenomenon is also reflected in the study of access to HE in the state of Punjab (Wadhwa, 2018). The study explored high school students' planning processes for moving into HE, and found that the plans of rural students were less likely to be achieved. Additionally, the study by Verma (2014) on women HE students in Lucknow found that students from rural backgrounds experienced a rural-urban divide once they entered HE, with rural students suffering from an 'inferiority complex' (p. 385).

Many young people who are reaching the end of high school in rural and semi-urban India are in urgent need of informed guidance on post-school options for HE, but much of the guidance they are currently receiving is informal and not issued from

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

11

sources with direct experience or expertise in HE. This situation may be attributed to the fact that financial obstacles to accessing education have received much greater policy attention than informational barriers. Increasing financial assistance and reservations have been the favoured policy tools for widening access to education, but these have not necessarily been accompanied by efforts to provide accurate information about HE choices to the sections of the population being targeted by these schemes. Many who access HE in local rural/semi-urban contexts belong to disadvantaged social groups (affected by a combination of caste, class and gender issues). This combination of disadvantages leads to sometimes inappropriate, often restricted HE options for the young people who should be able to take advantage of the expanded HE system. It is also leading to educational choices being made on the basis of traditional cultural roles, reinforcing inequalities of opportunity along the lines of gender, caste and rurality.

Socio-economic disadvantage is an intersectional phenomenon, where different groups/identities are affected by interwoven material, social and cultural facets in specific ways, such as the Muslim population in India, which has been under-represented in HE relative to their share in the total population. In a study of Muslim and Hindu women HE students in Bengaluru, Sahu, Jeffery, and Nakkeeran (2017) found that Muslim students, particularly women, were experiencing restricted access to HE and also had limited choices in terms of the HEIs they could access. The authors particularly link these constraints with poverty, given the higher prevalence of poverty in Muslim communities, and spatial segregation, which means that Muslims often live further away from HEIs. Secondly, in India, historically, people with dis/abilities have not gained significant access to HE. Dis/abled students are excluded from HE due to a mixture of factors, including lack of adaptation of schools and colleges, and lack of understanding of dis/abilities and social stigma (Kannabiran and Vinayan, 2018). For example, a study conducted by Kannabiran and Vinayan (2018) sought to understand dis/ability and dis/ability-related issues within HE contexts. The findings revealed that, when asked about the images that dis/ability evoked, dis/abled students identified issues such as barriers, stigma, and disrespect. Students also cited the lack of resources (that is, screen readers or unavailability of documents in Braille) and inappropriate infrastructural accessibility (that is, ramps, lifts, and space mobility in general) as major sources of anxiety.

Alongside multiple intersecting axes of social inequality, this study argues that gender inequality plays a major role in HE access and choice (particularly choice in the massification era). Therefore, a socially-just HE outreach approach also needs to be

gender sensitive, challenging stereotypes and identity-based judgements about what young women and men, as well as other genders can and should do in terms of HE access and choice. Young people who do not identify as heterosexual—lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer—may struggle to reach HE due to familial and social prejudice, which limits educational opportunities (Shah et al., 2015). All societies have gender norms and dominant codes of masculinity and femininity that cut across class, caste, and other social parameters. Educational choices too are infused with these norms and codes, in terms of what is considered appropriate for a young person to do and to study. Burke (2007), argues that HE spaces serve as a place where 'students' masculinities' (p. 412) are constructed. In this regard, gender manifests in HE access, wherein young men do not attend HE because it is not considered the 'manly' option or where they want to earn sooner, and where young women do not attend HE because it would conflict with the expected age of marriage. For instance, in the above-mentioned study of Muslim and Hindu students in Bengaluru (Sahu, Jeffery and Nakkeeran, 2017), the participants pointed to a perceived upper age limit for women's education; one participant reported that her parents said, "'You have studied enough'" (p. 182).

Gender manifests in HE choice wherein young men choose subjects that will enable them to be breadwinners for their families or when they are expected to contribute towards family expenses if they still live in their family homes with their parents. On this subject, a study exploring the lives of young middle-class people in India revealed that parents expect to receive both financial as well as social support from their sons (Philip, 2018).

Other aspects influencing HE choice include the aspiration of men to become respectable. On this issue, Burke (2007) argues that men construct their HE participation as a project that invokes idealised forms of masculinities: 'they [men] construct respectable selves as those who are university educated, engaged in intellectual rather than manual labour, comfortable and financially able to support a family' (p. 422). Young women are not exempted from gender-related issues when it comes to HE choice. They may choose subjects that reflect caring attributes and are known to lead to jobs flexible for childcare duties. For example, in a study about young women's HE choices in Peru (Guerrero and Rojas, 2020), HE access and choice were deeply influenced by the role of women as caregivers in their families, including an enduring responsibility of caring for their parents and other family members.

In a study on gender and HE subject choice in Norway, Myklebust (2019) found that women who had chosen to study a gender non-conventional subject at HE (i.e., a subject that opposed the stereotypical subject choice for women) faced significant

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra,
Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

13

opposition from their friends and mothers, who expressed concern about how they would care for their future children, given the employment conditions associated with their chosen field. A study by Hinton-Smith, Danvers and Jovanovic (2017) found that women's HE choices were related to the anticipated impact of the women's HE on their children and communities, not 'education as a right for their own selves' (p. 820). In a study on gender and subject choice in students studying at JNU, Delhi, Gautam (2015) found that daughters and sons in the same family were directed towards different subjects by their families; sons were specifically directed to subjects such as engineering that are thought to guarantee employment upon graduation. Gender intersects with the social constraints discussed above, in that the expected age of marriage differs among different social groups (Mukherjee and Sabharwal, 2015), and anti-intellectual attitudes are more likely to exclude young men from HE in less privileged social groups but not in those where HE is the norm (Henderson et al., 2021).

In many parts of the world, more women than men are now enrolling in HE courses. This is lauded as progress towards gender equality, and, as Leathwood and Read (2009) note, gender inequality is sometimes swept aside as having been 'solved'. Indeed, India has now achieved gender parity of enrolment at the undergraduate level (GPI: 1.01) (MoE, 2022). This convergence is visible even in the proportions of women and men from marginalised caste groups enrolling in HE (GPI for Scheduled Castes: 1.01, GPI for Scheduled Tribes: 0.98) (MoE, 2022). However, higher levels of education and senior positions for FMs continue to be dominated by men (Sabharwal, Henderson and Joseph, 2020). At the doctoral level, the split has recently been noted to be 55 per cent men, and 45 per cent women (MoE, 2022). In the academic profession, 72 per cent of Professors are men, 28 per cent are women; at the Associate Professor level, 63 per cent of FMs are men, 37 per cent are women; at the Assistant Professor level, the split is 57 per cent men, and 43 per cent women (MoE, 2022). Those on temporary contracts are the nearest to having achieved gender parity: 51 per cent men, and 49 per cent women (MoE, 2022). It has been suggested that women in India are not necessarily enrolling in HE to move into employment, but rather that HE is part of a 'waiting game' for marriage, which in turn, poses questions about the purpose of HE (which in India is frequently constructed as being an employability issue). For instance, Chakrabarti (2009) argues, '[HE] is not seen as an investment for future career option. Rather, for many, it is a safety net... and/or social status' (p. 376).

Women's access to HE is hampered by concerns about sexual harassment occurring in public spaces, including public transport (Adur and Jha, 2018; Iyer, 2017; Vauquline, 2013) and on university campuses (Sinha, 2019). A study of HE choice in Delhi

(Borker, 2021) found that women select HEIs of lower standing in proportion to their academic achievement in comparison to men. The selection process for women is more often based on the nearest HEI or an HEI that can be reached by a safe and direct mode of transport as compared to the corresponding selection process for women (Henderson et al., 2021).

A growing field of research is showing how young people with a range of gender identities spanning transgender, non-binary, and *hijra* are excluded from HE and face discrimination in access to and study within HE. In India, for instance, the Mumbai-based 'Breaking the Binary' study of queer persons who were assigned the gender 'female' at birth found that many participants struggled to complete their schooling as they were forced to flee the family home due to their sexuality (Nevatia et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2015). Another study by Mary (2023), which explored transgender students' experiences of accessing HE in Delhi, found that such students often preferred distance learning. One participant narrated a challenging experience with the binary system of separating admissions queues by gender.

As regards HE access and choice in India, gender parity of enrolment disguises many ways in which gender acts as a limiting factor for young people's choices and aspirations, not least in relation to the choice of the course, and the location and type of HE (Gautam, 2015). Guerrero and Rojas (2020) noted, 'Averages tend to hide disparities in girls' access to HE' (p. 1090). Thus, in view of the ongoing gender inequalities and complexities in relation to HE access and choice, this project advocates a gender-sensitive socially-just HE outreach approach.

All these intersecting characteristics or identities shape a young person's chances of: (i) attending HE at all, and (ii) making informed choices about HE, with relative degrees of disadvantage and privilege combining to constitute a young person's particular place in society. This paper argues for attention to a socially-just HE outreach approach which does not just seek to widen access and choice but also challenges stereotypes and identity-based judgements about young people's potential.

In rural and semi-urban areas which have a limited history of access to HE, HEIs (particularly government colleges) constitute important local sources of information about HE. However, the 'Fair Chance for Education' project (Henderson et al., 2021) showed that there is limited contact between state-funded HEIs and potential students in HEIs' surrounding areas during the pre-entry stages. Despite living near the colleges, many students have never set foot inside a college. Few students had ever met a faculty member before enrolling in college. Most students relied on family members and informal networks to make decisions about their educational futures (Stewart et al.,

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

15

2022). The National Education Policy 2020 has identified the role of colleges in delivering high quality, localised HE provision, including improving outreach practices (MHRD, 2020, 14.4.1, p. 41), as indicated earlier. It is, therefore, a highly promising time for both researching and contributing to the proposed changes. We argue that the potential role of rural-serving state universities and government colleges based in rural and semi-urban areas as HE knowledge hubs is currently under-estimated in India. Secondly, we argue that there is potential to develop the presence of HEIs in the local areas where they are located, specifically in terms of nurturing an HE outreach culture to dispense guidance and advice on HE options.

Summary

This section argues for HEI-led outreach, especially regarding HE choice and access in rural and semi-urban regions of India. HE access and choice in such locations align with international studies on HE access of first-generation and indigenous students who navigate through locational, material, and social constraints while making choices and accessing HE. HE access and choice are further limited due to the intersectional factors of gender, caste, religion, and rurality, which guide HE decisions. In this regard, we argue that rural-serving HEIs have the potential to enable young people to make more informed decisions about accessing HE.

What is HE outreach?

International Perspectives

HE Outreach—Historical Origins

Participation in HE has become a global concern due to the expansion and diversification of the system. The landscape of tertiary education has experienced a significant shift, 'moving from exclusivity to inclusivity' (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 241), challenging the traditional pattern wherein under-represented people are excluded from HE. In this regard, the conception of WP is intended to overcome historical patterns of disadvantage in HE systems through the provision of greater educational opportunities to those 'who would not normally consider a university education as an option' (Thompson, 2012, p. 43). In fact, a WP agenda has become a policy response to the problems of unequal access across the world (McCaig, 2018). Thompson (2012) argues that WP 'provides a modern extension to tackling inequality and social exclusion through education-based initiatives' (p. 43), enabling access to HE based on ability, irrespective of social background. This remains relevant considering that HE, despite

the many equity initiatives across HEIs, remains a stratified system 'in multiple and complex ways' (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 242).

In the UK, WP initiatives were originally initiated in the non-university sector (that is, vocationally-oriented 'polytechnics', now known as 'post-1992 universities') and in further education (FE) colleges as a 'political desire for equality of access' (McCaig, 2018, p. 53). However, the national discourse promoting greater access to HE was not introduced until 1997 through the policies enacted by the 'New Labour' government (Thompson, 2012). The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Great Britain), Dearing, R., & Garrick, S. R., issued in 1997, placed WP 'at the centre of national policy' (Rainford, 2019, p. 20), marking a milestone in the acknowledgment of issues affecting the participation of low socio-economic groups in HE (McCaig, 2018).

After the release of the above report, the work of universities became more strategic, requiring HEIs 'to produce statements outlining their work to widen participation' (Rainford, 2019, p. 21) across different sectors of the society. Government policy has heavily shaped WP in the UK, such as through the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Great Britain), 1997; Higher Education Act, 2004; HEFCE and OFFA, National Strategy for Access and Student Success 2014, to mention a few of the national efforts towards increasing participation in HE. However, many universities have urged their institutional missions to facilitate access to students from less privileged backgrounds (Rainford, 2019; Thompson, 2012). In fact, some authors suggest that a widespread culture of WP 'is now firmly embedded in the mainstream of higher education providers in the UK' (Moore et al., 2013, p. i).

To create wider access, many of the current interventions are not only focusing on the academic achievements of students, but also on shaping students' aspirations, knowledge, and views of HE (Vignoles and Murray, 2016). The participants of such interventions are commonly referred to as 'non-traditional students', broadly alluding to those who require 'additional support measures to encourage their participation in higher education' (Weedon and Riddell, 2016, p. 49). These students constitute a diversified group, with a wide range of identities and social characteristics that vary greatly across different countries (Moore et al., 2013). For example, in the UK, non-traditional students are likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, attend schools with low HE participation rates, and reside in socio-economically deprived areas. In Finland, men students are more likely to be targeted by WP initiatives, while in Flanders, Belgium, the focus is on students whose parents do not have a HE qualification (Weedon and Riddell, 2016).

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

17

Other targeted groups may be disabled students, students from racial or ethnic minorities, part-time learners, and first-generation entrants, among others. Each of these sub-groups may receive a lesser or greater level of prioritisation depending on the institutional WP agenda of each HEI, often defined as part of the institution's Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) in the UK context (Moore et al., 2013). As HEIs move to welcome a more diversified group of learners, they become more complex institutions that need to fulfil diversified needs. Experts argue that institutional efforts should be concentrated not only in outreach and pre-university activities (that is, mentoring, summer schools, taster days, among others), but also in student success 'within and beyond university' (Rainford, 2019, p. 33).

HE Outreach in National Policy

National policies regulating HE access across countries vary in their scope, the population they serve, and outreach mechanisms, among other aspects. However, a common thread of international interventions lies in the fact that, first, progression to HE has been unequal across socio-economic groups and racial and ethnic minorities, and second, several government efforts have been made to widen the HE participation of under-represented students. Some of these examples are described below.

In Australia, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are likely to be under-represented in HE, while simultaneously students from the highest quartiles tend to have the highest participation rates (McKay and Devlin, 2016). Equity, understood as proportional representation in HE with respect to the wider society, has informed WP policy in Australia during the last three decades (Gale and Parker, 2013). In 1990, the Australian Government identified six targets or 'equity groups': people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESBs), students with a disability, indigenous Australians, people from regional and remote areas, and women in non-traditional fields (that is, STEM related fields). However, since 2009, the WP agenda has increasingly focused on students from low socio-economic status (SES) as a targeted population. In the same year, the Government announced the policy *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, which set the following two targets: (i) 20 per cent of undergraduate students should come from low SES by 2020, and (ii) 40 per cent of 25-34 year-old Australians should hold a Bachelor's degree by 2025 (Gale and Parker, 2013). Regarding funding, the *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program* (HEPPP), introduced in 2010, allocates significant financial resources (around one billion Australian dollars from 2010 to 2015) based on two main criteria: (i) rewarding universities based on the number of students from low SES they enrol each year; and (ii) funding universities on a competitive basis to collaborate with other organisations,

such as secondary schools, in conducting outreach activities. This new national framework 'increased the coherence of WP policy at a national level and made increased funding available' (Sellar and Storan, 2013, p. 57). The initiative encouraged collaborative and regionally focused outreach activity, allowing universities to implement strategies that improve access for people from remote places in the country, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and indigenous people (Australian Government, 2023). In addition, outreach activities follow government guidelines in their implementation; the designs are research-informed, and interventions are coordinated across HEIs to prevent institutions from operating in isolation (Gale and Parker, 2013).

Brazil has one of the largest African-descent populations in the Americas due to a long history of slavery (Lee, 2021). As a result, students who self-identify as Brown, Black, or indigenous have lower rates of school attainment and HE enrolment than their white counterparts. The country sought to correct these historical inequalities through the implementation of affirmative action (AA) policies in education. Specifically, these measures aimed 'to correct the racial, social and ethnic disparities in university admissions' (Childs and Stromquist, 2015, p. 1). In 2012, President Dilma Rousseff signed the Quota Law, establishing quotas for public universities to enrol public high school students, Black students, Brown students, and indigenous students (Lee, 2021). The law mandates that: (i) 50 per cent of the seats in public universities must be reserved for students from public secondary schools, and (ii) at least 25 per cent of those allotted seats must be assigned to 'Brazilians of African, mixed African or Indigenous ancestry' (Childs and Stromquist, 2015, p. 794). Since the Government has not mandated a specific set of guidelines, the objectives and needs of each university determine the type of AA policy they adopt. For example, the University of Brasilia, the first federal university to implement AA policies, reserved 20 per cent of the seats in each department for Black students. Another example is that of The State University of Campinas (Unicamp), which implemented: (i) a waiver for the vestibular fees (the most widely used standardised admissions test; each university has its own vestibular) for students from low SES, and (ii) an addition of bonus points to vestibular scores for students from public schools and for students identifying as racial minorities.

Further, Brazil's University for All Programme (ProUni) is a federal initiative providing scholarships to students from low-income families to attend private universities. The programme offers full and partial scholarships based on family income and academic performance in Brazil's National High School Exam, an admission test for university enrolment in Brazil. ProUni consists of a public-private partnership, with the

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

19

government exempting private universities participating in the programme from a set of taxes in exchange for places in private HEIs for students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups (Fioreze, 2023)

In Chile, 'students' socioeconomic backgrounds continue to play an important role in their access to and success in higher education' (Venegas-Muggli, 2022, p. 418). As a result, the *Programa de Acceso a la Educación Superior* (PACE – *Support and Effective Access to Higher Education Program* in English) was created by a presidential mandate in 2014 during the second administration of former President Michelle Bachelet (Resolución 680 Extenta, 2015) to restore the right to HE for students who had been historically marginalised from post-secondary education (DIVIA, 2022). Specifically, the initiative supports high-achieving students from public secondary schools with high rates of socioeconomic vulnerability. The programme has a partnership component in which HEIs, in alliance with secondary schools, offer academic preparation to students throughout their 11th and 12th grades to support students' progression to HE. Students who successfully participate in PACE (that is, those who have an attendance of at least 85 per cent and are placed within the top 15 per cent of their class) are offered additional seats within the HEIs ascribed to the programme. These students also receive academic support during their freshman and sophomore years of HE (MINEDUC, 2023a). Up to 2021, there were 29 HEIs and 580 secondary schools affiliated to the programme (DIVIA, 2022).

Additional initiatives in Chile include access programmes designed and implemented by selective HEIs. These programmes vary in their components and admissions mechanisms, but 'share a common commitment to enhancing the enrolment of low-income students' (Santelices et al., 2022, p. 499). For example, under the *Educational Equity Priority Admission System* (SIPEE in Spanish) at Universidad de Chile, students are recruited from the three lowest quintiles attending public schools. As a non-traditional access route, SIPEE admits students from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, who are able to reach a predetermined score set by the university in the national entrance exam. Students also receive financial and psychological support during their undergraduate courses (Santelices et al., 2022).

Forms of HE Outreach

HE outreach and WP initiatives vary across contexts and among HEIs. a review of international literature on these types of academic interventions helped in identifying activities that differ in their scope, targeted population, and objectives. These are reviewed comprehensively in this section to provide the landscape of HE outreach interventions and research.

'Taster sessions' signify one example of an initiative, where school students are given access to an example HE-style class (see for example, the 'Fair Chance for Education' project, in Samanta et al., 2022). For example, in 2012, the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK conducted an innovative initiative, which introduced the provision of HE outreach led by faculty. The UEA created new posts focusing not only on traditional faculty activities but also on 'the development, coordination and delivery of outreach activities and establishment of strategy' (Harris and Ridealgh, 2016, p. 74). The main reasons behind this initiative were the need to provide high-quality, subject-specific, and research-led academic taster sessions as well as to raise the aspiration of prospective students through a realistic perspective of what university education would entail. According to the authors, these sessions would ideally 'form links between the curriculum at secondary and tertiary level to demonstrate the wider subject possibilities at university, and their impact on future careers' (p. 75). The faculty in these positions were to oversee the creation of networks that encourage colleagues to deliver sessions and set up training programmes for staff and PhD students willing to participate in these instances so that 'a new generation of academics have the experience, and, more importantly, the desire, to continue to promote outreach activity throughout their academic careers' (p. 76).

HE outreach activities may be also delivered during the summer break, or equivalent long school holidays depending on the country. This period represents an opportunity for HEIs to actively involve students in extensive sessions, and to work towards facilitating more socially just educational practices when working with under-represented students. Such is the case in the US, where, despite the growing numbers of students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, schoolteachers are often not fully equipped to work with students who are English learners (Matthews and Mellom, 2012). Thus, with the purpose of determining if a summer outreach programme may reduce the achievement gap for students from these backgrounds, Matthews and Mellom set out to examine a four-week summer enrichment programme for English-learning high school students in the state of Georgia, US. The programme was sponsored and organised by the University of Georgia's Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education in collaboration with school district staff. Among the goals of the programme were to improve students' academic English language skills, familiarise students with university life, and raise HE aspirations. The full programme spanned 6-8 hours per day, four days a week, and included activities such as 'targeted lectures, science labs, field excursions with applied science goals, college and university visits, and interaction with college student mentors' (p. 108). The curriculum was collaboratively designed by the teachers, following district-based guidelines. The

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra,
Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

21

participants were students from an ethnically diverse and high-poverty high school, with the majority being from immigrant families with Latin American and Asian backgrounds. The findings revealed that, after participating in the programme, students became aware of what university work entails and felt more able to accomplish it. Students also reported increased college aspirations and 'self-identified academic gains in language, science, and study skills through program participation as well as increased persistence' (p. 114).

Another example of vacation HE outreach programmes can be found in South Africa. Amidst the social, economic, and academic gaps faced by first-year students in the country, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) decided to design an initiative to institutionally address this issue. Consequently, the Targeting Talent Program (TTP) was created to better prepare academically talented students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The main aim of TTP is to support students in accessing selective universities in the country. In order to participate in the programme, students must first be nominated by their high school teachers. Thereafter, they are asked to fill out a biographical questionnaire and write a motivation essay. When selected, students must 'give up their school vacations for a three-year period during which they are required to attend contact sessions in an academic enrichment program' (Zambri, 2017, p. 892). A critical component of the programme is teaching students how to use the resources provided by university libraries. Thus, the Information Literacy component of TTP promotes access to knowledge through the appropriate use of information. The main expectation of the programme is that TTP will benefit not only students but also their communities.

When considering HE outreach programmes delivered throughout the academic year, The Propaedeutic is a pioneering HE access initiative implemented by Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH). The Propaedeutic, which originated in 2007, is oriented towards students who wish to be part of an early insertion to HE initiative through the development of academic and social skills, critical thinking, and test preparation. The programme recruits talented students from a network of socio-economically disadvantaged public schools within the metropolitan area. The pre-selection is targeted at 12th grade students who, despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, are in the top 10 per cent of their class. The goals of the programme are: (i) to improve the inclusion and retention of talented and socially disadvantaged students into the HE system, and (ii) to develop an equitable model that helps talented students, who would otherwise be left out by the current university selection process, to gain admission to selective institutions (PAIEP, 2022). The Propaedeutic aims to inform educational

policies and influence more equitable access practices. Students who successfully complete the programme are selected for entry into an undergraduate formative course at the university with a full tuition scholarship. Today, 17 universities across Chile have replicated the programme.

An example of a comprehensive programme based in the UK that includes several different aspects within one institution is the PARTNERS Programme, which is a supported entry route to Newcastle University (Newcastle University, 2022). The programme, which has been running since 2000, aims to support students who are less likely to go to university because of their family background, low-income status, or lack of access to information. The initiative was designed by the University's Careers Service and marketing and students' recruitment teams. The programme states that eligible students could: (i) receive a lower conditional offer to Newcastle University (up to three grades lower than the typical entry requirements); (ii) attend transitional events, including a free, compulsory, academic-focused assessed Summer School; (iii) develop academic skills; (iv) meet other students and increase self-confidence, and (v) be supported through the application process. Eligible students attend the PARTNERS Academic Summer School (PASS) after their A level (or equivalent) exams (that is, after completing high school). During the event, which lasts for approximately five days, students take part in lectures, seminars, and practical sessions in the subject related to their chosen course at the University. These sessions are developed and delivered by university academic staff within each discipline. Students are required to complete a formative assessment based upon the work that they have undertaken at the Summer School. The work is assessed by academic tutors who provide written feedback in preparation for undergraduate study.

HE outreach activities may play a significant role considering the rise in the number of under-represented students participating in HE, including by introducing *pre-degree courses at HEIs.* In an attempt to build a more inclusive university and increase participation in Russell Group universities, McLellan et al. (2016) conceived, designed, and implemented the Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities at the University of Bristol. This is a one-year programme based in the Faculty of Arts that seeks to attract learners who would not otherwise access HE (that is, mature students, racial and ethnic minorities, students from low-participation neighbourhoods, recovering addicts, people with significant mental and physical health issues, students with substantial caring responsibilities, people with few or no formal qualifications, and people who had been out of education for decades, among others) through an alternative approach emphasising transformative pedagogy practices. The authors note that the Foundation

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra,
Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

23

Year has positively affected the culture of the university, and helped students to progress to undergraduate degree programmes at the University.

HE outreach schemes can also operate at a higher level, for instance, by providing funding schemes that interested parties can bid for. An example of such funding is the TRIO programmes in the US, which also included training for the leads of the funded projects. The federal programme was created as an outreach initiative to support individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight different programmes targeted mainly at low-income, first-generation students to enable them to progress through the educational pipeline (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). TRIO also includes a training programme for directors and staff who become members of the programme projects. Students cannot apply for grants under these programmes. In fact, the recipients of these federal grants are HEIs and other community-based organisations with experience of serving this population. The curriculum covers areas such as academic tutoring, time management, financial literacy, internships and career guidance, and health and well-being, among others. An example is The Educational Opportunity Centers (EOCs) programme, which provides counselling and information on HE admissions. Another example is The Talent Search (TS) programme, which identifies and assists individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in HE. Since TRIO programmes depend on federal funding, they are subject to changing political agendas and administrations.

Insight into Widening Participation at the University of Warwick (UK)

Universities in the UK have implemented widening access and outreach programmes to increase the number of students from under-represented groups who can pursue higher education. As per policy, the University of Warwick has developed a Widening Access and Participation Plan (WA&PP). This plan, set to deliver sustained improvement across all student lifecycle stages, aims to ensure that a student's background does not impact their ability to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education. The latest plan at the time of writing pertains to the period of 2020-2025 (https://warwick.ac.uk/study/outreach/wpatwarwick/app/).

The University of Warwick's WA&PP includes activities which aim to provide equal opportunities and outcomes for all students throughout the student lifecycle. The plan is based on a step-change approach involving a range of transformational efforts linked to pre-entry support and targeted outreach, collaboration partnerships, admissions practices, and alternative pathways to Warwick.

Pre-entry support and targeted outreach: At the pre-entry phase, a range of support activities are provided, including targeted outreach and widening participation programmes that engage with all pre-entry phases and cover a broad geographical area. Early engagement with under-represented groups enhances opportunities for academic success. In primary school, outreach programmes aim to raise awareness and motivation for higher education. This continues through GCSE (Class 10), providing support, guidance, and targeted programmes to improve skills and achievement. Post-16 activities target indicators such as individual, area-based, and prior educational contexts. Special attention is given to low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs), looked after children and care leavers, mature students, and students with no parental history of HE. Schools performing below the national average and those with higher-than-average deprivation values are prioritised.

Collaboration partnerships: The University has established formal and informal partnerships with schools and colleges to strengthen them through various means. These include providing opportunities for student recruitment, widening participation partnerships and provision, initial teacher training (ITT) routes, and collaborations with local Further Education (FE) colleges for 2+2 programmes and ITT. The University is committed to investing significant resources in activities that enhance progression to higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups, particularly from the local surrounding areas such as Coventry and Warwickshire. They maintain relationships with many secondary schools in the sub-region, including Initial Teacher Training, WP partnerships, volunteering, and departmental outreach.

Alternative pathways: The University of Warwick provides alternative pathways to enhance access to higher education for under-represented groups. These pathways include Degree Apprenticeships, 2+2 degrees, Gateway to HE, and the WBS Foundation Year Programme. The WBS Foundation Year Program, for instance, equips students with the skills and knowledge they need for successful progression to Year 1 of the existing three-year BSc degrees in Accounting and Finance, and Management. Degree Apprenticeships, on the other hand, aim to enhance access to higher education through more flexible and industry-orientated study, contributing to regional and national employment needs. The 2+2 programme provides pathways for entrants to access higher education, especially mature students, enabling them to pursue their academic goals.

Admission practices: The University considers contextual data during the admissions process to offer lower admission criteria to students with specific characteristics. This policy recognises individual, area-based, and educational circumstances when

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra,
Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

25

assessing applications. Students who meet certain criteria are eligible for a lower offer of up to two A Level (or equivalent; i.e. Class 12) grades below the standard University offer. Contextual offers are also provided to students in the longitudinal widening participation programmes. If these programmes include academic input and attainment raising, the grade requirements are lowered even further. The strategic objective of using this measure is to promote and support fair access to the University by recognising the diverse contexts in which applicants have achieved prior attainment. This measure especially focuses on key under-represented groups, including students from the least represented areas of the country and care leavers. Using this measure, the University aims to create a more diverse student population and provide opportunities to those who may not have had access to them before.

The examples discussed in this section reveal a wide range of options and opportunities for HEIs to engage in initiatives to improve HE access and choice for disadvantaged groups. Many of these examples reflect the potential for large-scale initiatives within HE systems which already have a strong culture of HE outreach activities.

Indian Perspectives

HE Outreach – The Current Framework

A discourse on equality has been threaded throughout the provisions of the Indian Constitution, and education has been singled out as an arena where the State has a special duty to promote the 'interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Schedules Tribes' (Indian Constitution, Article 46). Although this imperative was specified only in the Constitution's Directive Principles of State Policy, which are not legally enforceable, over time, a right to education was read into the right to life (Indian Constitution, Article 21) by the Supreme Court in the case of Mohini Jain versus State of Karnataka, 1992. Thus, there has been an explicit recognition in Indian law and policy of the role of education in enabling the full development of the personality. Article 15(5) of the Constitution, inserted through the First Amendment Act 1951, allows the State to make special provisions for the admission of socially and educationally backward classes, the Scheduled Castes, and the Scheduled Tribes to educational institutions. To date, these special provisions have almost exclusively taken the form of numerically mandated reservations at the entry level (Sitapati, 2016). In fact, the practice of using reservations as a mechanism for improving the socio-economic status of disadvantaged sections dates back to at least 1902, with Shahu Chatrapati of Kolhapur introducing reservations for backward class

candidates in government posts (Ghadyalpatil, 2018). Since Independence, reservations in education institutions have been extended from the SCs and STs to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and from public educational institutions to private ones.

In addition to reservations, scholarship and mentorship schemes designed specifically for disadvantaged sections are offered, including the Post-Matric Scholarships for Scheduled Caste Students, the Central Sector Scholarship Scheme of Top-Class Education for SC Students, and the Upgradation of Merit of SC students' scheme (Government of India, 2023). However, the focus of government educational policy in India, especially since the 1990s, has been on primary and secondary education. Even the right to education extends only up to the age of 14 years. There are a few reasons as to why subsidising HE in India has been treated as a controversial matter. Accessing HE is dependent on attainment in previous levels of schooling, and in fact, some data suggest that the gap between the proportions of disadvantaged and advantaged students accessing HE based on minimal eligibility, that is, students who had completed the requisite level of schooling for entering HE, was accounted for (Basant and Sen, 2014). Spending public money on improving access to HE was consequently considered counter-productive, as it was felt that the benefits would largely accrue to students who were eligible for entry to HE, who tended to disproportionately come from the socially and economically advantaged sections (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013).

This thinking, combined with budgetary constraints, resulted in the perception that significant public investment in the country's HE was neither desirable nor feasible. This sentiment has been captured in the Ministry of Human Resource Development's declaration in 1994 that 'the higher education system in the country is now sufficiently developed to meet the nation's requirements. The unmet demand for higher education is not considered economically viable' (Government of India, 1994, p. 75). At the time that this statement was published, the proportion of SC and ST students in HE stood at 7.8 per cent and 2.7 per cent of the total students in HE, respectively (Weisskopf, 2004). Since then, there have been significant improvements in the enrolment ratios of SC, ST, and OBC students. Data from AISHE 2020-21 indicate that SC, ST, and OBC students constitute 14.2 per cent, 5.8 per cent, and 35.8 per cent of the total enrolled students, respectively (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, it is not clear whether these increases are attributable to specific policy interventions being advertised more widely, or if they are manifestations of the broader massification of HE in the country.

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra,
Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

27

Since Independence, the bulk of the conversation around social justice and education has revolved around the issue of reservations, implying that the issues of inclusivity in HE have been framed in a relatively narrow way. As Stewart, Sabharwal, and Yadav (2023) point out, the reservation system results in a highly centralised administrative system for implementation of access policies, which may partly be responsible for the relatively limited development of institutional-level HE outreach culture.

HE Outreach in National Policy

In the initial decades after India's Independence, while the expansion occurred through establishing universities and colleges in the public sector, the sector remained small, with the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) being below 5 per cent (Varghese, 2015), and HE outreach was not given due consideration in the policy literature on HE. For instance, the Report of the University Education Commission (MoE, 1962) expressed the need to make admissions procedures more selective, and reduce, rather than increase, the number of students who enter HE. This sentiment is most acutely reflected in the following statement in the Report of the University Education Commission (MoE, 1962), which states that 'there has been a growing pressure for an increase in the number of admissions at the universities, but unfortunately, this wide and eager demand for university education is not proportional to the capacity to profit from such an education' (p. 87) and that 'it is the duty of the university to make its admissions very carefully so as to take in only those students who are likely to profit by university education' (p. 83). However, the Commission did recognise that disadvantaged social groups such as the SCs and OBCs had suffered unequal access to educational opportunities for prolonged periods, which it viewed as a form of social injustice. The Commission advocated for reservation of one third of the seats in colleges for students from these groups (MoE, 1962, p. 46) as a strategy of equalising opportunities of access to HE and for advancing social justice in HE in India.

Consequently, the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, proposed an alternative by the recalibration of the existing HE system. The open university system, such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), was to be strengthened to cater to the increased demand for HE. Two new state Open Universities, the Nalanda Open University in Bihar and Kota Open University in Rajasthan, were proposed to be established in addition to the recently established Andhra Pradesh Open University in 1982, thus facilitating access to a wider population. IGNOU was to be responsible for coordinating and maintaining these new open universities. In line with the recommendations of the earlier Commission, the demand for massification of HE

was to be met with effective consolidation and recalibration of the existing HEIs. Fair access to HE was to be ensured through the academic merit of the candidate, rather than the domicile or regionality (MHRD, 1992). Consecutive plans for access to education across all levels could be tracked through the implementation of Centrally Sponsored Schemes, namely Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) 2001, followed by Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in 2009, the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009, and the recent Samagra Shiksha Scheme 2018-2019. Under the ambit of these policies and acts, clear strategic plans were created for the establishment of mechanisms to ensure the functionality of school at the elementary and secondary levels of education. The RTE was the key in establishing access to education as the constitutional fundamental right of every child in the age group of 6-14 years in India. Special attention was also paid to addressing the issue of dropouts, meeting infrastructural demands, ensuring geographically accessible schools, and the need to reinforce participation of girls and marginalised communities in education. A synthesis of SSA, RMSA, and Teacher Education was forged to form the Samagra Shiksha Scheme, with the objective of ensuring a continuum in quality education in tandem with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all' (UN, 2015). As a result, this would also create an increasing demand for HE across different communities in India.

The SSA and RMSA at the primary and secondary levels of school education, propelled the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) 2013 to meet the demand for HE by the school graduates. RUSA was targeted at effective access to HE and increasing GER at the national level (MHRD, 2013). Implementation of RUSA aimed to address concerns such as planning of HE at each state in India, filling up of vacancies at HEIs, reforms in governance, equity, capacity development of professionals and institutional restructuring. A special focus on equity was ensured by regarding each state of India as a unit. Apart from ensuring access, budgets were also set aside to provide remedial academic support to marginalised communities (MHRD, 2013). These strategic educational mechanisms provide a plausible explanation for the increased GER, which soared from 5.9 per cent in 1990 to 25.8 per cent in 2018 (Varghese, 2015).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (MHRD, 2020) includes a focus on widening HE access for socially excluded groups and acknowledges that students from the socially and economically disadvantaged groups who are trying to access HE face significant barriers in gaining access to knowledge on the college-going process and

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

29

making informed HE choices. The government has committed to strategically manage aspects of the HE sector over the next period in order to meet its social justice agenda with regard to educational access and attainment.

State universities and especially government colleges are prime sites for the strategic implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (MHRD, 2020) equity goal of improving access for students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs).

Entry into quality higher education can open up a vast array of possibilities that can lift both individuals as well as communities out of the cycles of disadvantage. For this reason, making quality higher education opportunities available to all individuals must be among the highest priorities. This Policy envisions ensuring equitable access to quality education to all students, with a special emphasis on SEDGs (Section 14.1, p. 41).

NEP 2020 has identified the role of government colleges particularly in delivering on high-quality, localised HE provision, which may include improving HE outreach practices (MHRD, 2020, Section 14.4.1, p. 41). It acknowledges a 'lack of knowledge of higher education opportunities' and 'admission processes' (14.3, p. 41) as substantial barriers for young people from disadvantaged socio-economic groups who are looking to access HE. It is, therefore, a highly promising time to both research and contribute to the proposed changes. Thus, this paper aims to explore, consolidate, and maximise the role of HEIs through state university and college FMs and college principals in providing guidance on HE access/choice in the communities they serve, to ensure that young people entering HE for the first time in their families and communities are making informed choices about their futures.

HE Outreach in India: Mapping the Terrain

There are several different stakeholders with an involvement in HE access and choice in India. These include national and state actors who formulate policies and fund large-level schemes (for example, the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao scheme), which seek to intervene in the education of young people, as well as to oversee state-funded schools and HEIs. There are also non-state actors, such as NGOs and internationally funded initiatives that operate in this space. At a local level, schoolteachers and career advisors play a role, as do localised services such as cyber cafes and local forms of government such as panchayats (Henderson et al., 2021; Thomas and Henderson, 2022). Families and communities also shape HE access and choice, as decisions about HE are often taken within tight-knit extended families and village communities (Thomas and Henderson, 2022). Each actor comes with their own priorities, perspectives, motivations, and

understanding of the purpose of HE, implying that the landscape is complex and multi-faceted. Any reshaping of HE access and choice needs to take this complex and interconnected landscape into account. This section addresses the context for the involvement of HEIs and FMs in HE outreach, including drawing empirical evidence from the 'Fair Chance for Education' project.

Although the role of HE in realising 'social emancipation' (MoE, 1962, p. 43) and overcoming 'caste and class hierarchy, patriarchy and other cultural prejudices' (MHRD, 2009, p. 11) is repeatedly acknowledged in Indian policy on education, limited attention has been given to how HE may fulfil these functions, other than the aforementioned provision of financial incentives, reservations, and accommodation facilities. Even the National Policy on Education (MRHD, 1986), which proclaims as one of its aims 'the reorientation of the whole education system to promote women's equality, special provisions for the SCs, STs, other educationally disadvantaged sections, minorities…' (p. 6), pays limited attention to the issues of HE outreach and information provision for increasing access to HE. The role of HE outreach is mentioned only with respect to increasing the enrolment of children from SC/ST backgrounds in schools through the adoption of an 'extension approach at the village level to persuade parents to send the children to school with the involvement of teachers, parents, local leaders, and social workers' (p. 108). The importance of establishing relationships among teachers, parents, and the community has also been emphasised in the context of ensuring the consistency of education at school and at home in the Report of the Secondary Education Commission (MoE, 1953). The report points out that 'in the education of character, the school has to win the active cooperation of the parents and the community in general' (p. 98) and that by engaging actively with the parents and the community, 'the staff of the school can tactfully help in building up a pattern of influences and activities in the life of the community…' (p. 99). A similar cooperative endeavour among schoolteachers, parents, headmasters, principals, and guidance officers has also been encouraged for the purpose of providing 'accurate, comprehensive and continuous information about occupations and about institutions of higher study to pupils, as without this information they cannot intelligently determine their future line of action' (p. 108).

More recently, the Vigyan Jyoti programme has been launched by the Department of Science and Technology at the school level to bring gender parity in the choice of STEM subjects in HE and careers. It is more of a lifecycle programme located at the secondary school level (government schools) and involves constant mentoring and engagement with young women students studying in Class 9 up to the PhD level to

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

31

pursue subjects and careers in an area of science, technology, and engineering (DST, n.d.). Furthermore, in HE, a premier HEI in the area of engineering and technology subjects launched an outreach activity for high school girls (IIT Delhi, 2021) with the aim to improve the representation of women in technology and engineering fields in HE. It is a pre-access pipeline programme implemented in collaboration with schools and involves mentoring activities by FMs of the HEI with schools and its young women students studying in class 11. These mentoring activities address young women students studying at the higher secondary level undertaking project-based work and interactive lectures and discussions with the mentor HE FMs and their research scholars in the areas of science and technology. Thus, there is some precedent for involving teachers and the wider community in improving educational outcomes, but these initiatives remain restricted mainly to the realm of secondary education and in limited subject areas.

HEIs are, therefore, key but under-acknowledged institutional actors in widening access to HE in India. In many countries (see Section 3.1), HEIs are involved in developing and implementing policies to increase access to HE of marginalised groups. This includes visiting schools and communities to explain the purpose and processes of applying for HE, and also hosting school groups and families on campus to showcase campus life and HE learning experiences. In India, this institutional culture of HE outreach is relatively new and dispersed and is often the preserve of wealthier private HEIs that are building their reputations in a crowded sector. State-funded institutions do not tend to have the resources to operate a flourishing HE outreach culture (Henderson et al., 2021). However, since NEP 2020 suggests that HE outreach is expected from HEIs (MHRD, 2020, p. 41), outreach obligations may become a priority activity for public HEIs. The State-funded institutions have largely relied on reservations and scholarship policies to ensure that the social justice mission of HE is met, with overall a limited marketing, advertising and HE outreach culture (Henderson et al., 2021). At the same time, as found during field visits for the 'Fair Chance for Education' project, HEIs are engaging in many informal and occasional initiatives that are not formally recognised as 'HE outreach'. For instance, FMs on their own personal volition are actively mentoring members of their communities to progress through the HE admissions process.

In this section, we touch on the evidence of faculty member involvement in HE outreach, which emerged from the 'Fair Chance for Education' project. College teachers were identified in the Phase 1 study (Henderson et al., 2021) as being one of the groups having the least influence on young people's HE choices. This is expected

due to the lack of impetus for HEIs to engage directly with potential HE applicants but represents unfulfilled potential due to the dearth of reliable guidance about HE options in the rural and semi-urban areas where the colleges were situated. Only 10.1 per cent (N=33) of the survey respondents ticked that college teacher/s had influenced them to apply to HE and/or helped them to find out about the college, as opposed to, for example, 79.1 per cent (N=258) of the respondents indicating that their father had influenced them to apply, 69.6 per cent (N=227) indicating their mother had influenced them, and 35.6 per cent (N=116) indicating that schoolteachers had influenced them. The rural sampled college in Sirsa district (college pseudonym: SiDC) showed the highest proportion of students having been assisted by FMs (37.2 per cent) as compared to the other two colleges, which were more urban (Mahendragarh: MDC 14 per cent; Sonipat: SDC 25.6 per cent- both college pseudonyms). More women students in our survey had been assisted by FMs than men students (21 women – 16 per cent, 10 men – 5.6 per cent, two respondents with gender unknown). In terms of caste group, 12 students from the General caste groups and 15 from the SC groups had been assisted by FMs. Proportionally, a higher proportion of SC students had been assisted (20 per cent) than General (10.7 per cent) students. The BC groups had lower proportions (BCB 1 – 1.6 per cent, BCA 5 – 8.1 per cent).

The study revealed accounts wherein college FMs had provided informal mentoring and support for students to apply to HE and to choose their college and course. For instance, a survey respondent (MDC:8086) stated in response to a question on how he came to enrol in his chosen college: 'Recommended by my neighbourhood professor. Amazing sir'. This respondent also ticked 'yes' to indicate that college teacher/s were involved in his finding out about the college too. One of the interview participants, a woman student (MDC F1), described that her cousin was a faculty member at a state university, and that she was daunted by her cousin's life, but also inspired to emulate it. A survey respondent reflected on the lack of HE outreach. While discussing the possible reasons as to why others were not attending HE, the respondent noted, 'The teachers here [at this college] do not tell others about this college' (SiDC:7060). Thus, FMs are positioned as crucial actors by students in enabling HE access and choices.

HE outreach may involve an indirect form of support, where FMs request current students to encourage other young people in their communities to apply for HE; a senior member of the academic staff stated, 'We ask them [current students] to motivate their younger ones to come to the college, to join our college' (MDC College Rep). On the other hand, the same FM stated that FMs do not go themselves to

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

33

persuade young people to consider attending HE: 'No, we don't go the village'. Not going to the village in such a context could be read in two ways. First, FMs not going themselves reflects the lack of HE outreach in their job role expectations. Second, the call for admissions to government colleges is advertised through local newspapers and other public means of communication. Many colleges, by virtue of being government colleges, are oversubscribed for admissions. In such a scenario where colleges meet the maximum intake capacity, involvement in HE outreach strategies for enabling HE access may not be seen as a priority by the HEI.

The research team saw plenty of evidence of informal HE outreach during field visits to villages in Haryana during the 'Fair Chance for Education' project. For instance, one of the college teachers (at SiDC) was well known in the area for influencing families to enrol their children in HE. It is, therefore, highly possible that many more informal HE outreach activities could be identified and formalised. We, therefore, argue that rural-serving state university FMs and college teachers in rural/semi-urban areas have the potential to become HE outreach experts in their communities, champions for change, to widen the opportunities of young people from disadvantaged groups.

Summary

This section began with varied implications of the term 'outreach'. The increasing global concern and mechanisms of HE outreach are shaped by expansion, diversification, and increased representation of historically under-represented communities in HE. Internationally, the outreach mechanisms target inclusion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, first-generation learners, disabled students, racial and ethnic minorities, mature students, and part-time learners. Various mechanisms such as earmarking seats in HEIs and affirmative action to collaborative programmes have been established to promote inclusivity in HE. Varied forms of outreach such as taster sessions, comprehensive programmes, outreach funding schemes offered to HEIs, and pre-degree courses, are in place for enabling informed HE access and choice.

Similarly in India, access to HE for the disadvantaged communities has been mandated by the Constitution, national policies, and large-scale schemes funded at the international, national, and state levels. However, outreach activities enabling HE access and choices are sparse and often informal in nature. Learning from evidence of informal mentoring and support by rural serving FMs, we argue that the rural-serving HEIs and FMs have the potential to enable informed HE access and choices.

Exploring the Role of Faculty Members in HE Outreach

International Perspectives

What is the Role of Faculty Members in HE Outreach?

This paper specifically seeks to explore the role of HEIs in enhancing HE access and choice for disadvantaged groups, using a gender-sensitive, socially just HE outreach approach. The key to any HE outreach is the personnel involved. In Indian HEIs, where there is a limited history of employing staff members with a specific HE outreach role, any tasks would initially fall on the FMs and institutional leaders. This section, therefore, examines the role of FMs in widening access to HE by acting as sources of knowledge and guidance for the communities that surround HEIs, and identifies and reviews the available literature on this aspect of HE outreach. This section also identifies the issues and challenges for FMs, and the intersecting inequalities that affect FMs. Importantly, this section reveals that HEIs function as social organisations, and the institutional culture is instrumental in setting the approach to HE outreach.

In relation to HE outreach, FMs are often discussed along with other actors, where, for instance, a faculty member delivers a taster lecture that has been set up and organised by a WP officer. In the UK and the US, from whence much of the scholarly research on HE outreach emanates, HEIs often have specific members of staff who are employed to implement WP policies and initiatives (Briggs et al., 2012; Harris and Ridealgh, 2016; Nel et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2007), with FMs representing sources of subject knowledge and expertise within these schemes. Often, there are institutional structures wherein a designated faculty member from a department works with a WP officer, as their recognised administrative role. For example, some FMs in the UK are making innovative contributions to outreach initiatives such as organising university events and giving talks in public spaces outside campus. The aim of these activities is to share findings and the research process with the general public (Johnson et al., 2019). Another UK university created specific outreach-related faculty posts (Harris and Ridealgh, 2016). There is arguably an advantage in including FMs in outreach, as noted by McLellan et al. (2016). These authors argue that WP challenges can be addressed by drawing from the expertise available within HEIs, particularly from FMs who may be able to 'reclaim autonomy in central aspects of university administration' (McLellan et al., 2016, p. 54).

One way in which FMs are involved in outreach activities is by assisting with programmes where they represent some of the realities of HE and also build students' understanding of how to relate to and interact with FMs. This is because the transition

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

35

period (that is, the period from higher secondary school to making post-schooling decisions to potentially enrolling in HE) is widely acknowledged as a complex and tumultuous process, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This transition is filled with challenges and deep academic changes for the students who undertake this endeavour. Transition programmes can occur at different points, from the final stages of high school to the early days of HE, and there may or may not be a strict expectation for students involved in transition programmes to enrol in a particular HEI. The specific transition periods between admission and enrolment, and then the initial stage of HE, are attrition points that are often targeted by transition programmes. Here, we illustrate some examples of transition programmes which can be embedded in longer-term outreach initiatives to guide students through until they are settled in HE. The specific question to be addressed for this project is whether early-stage transition activities can be organised by HEIs to facilitate HE access and choice for students from disadvantaged groups.

In the Netherlands, Van Herpen et al. (2020) examined the effects of an intervention designed to support students during the transition into HE, taking the final stage before the formal HE course began as the locus of intervention (that is, post enrolment but before studies commenced). This intervention 'aimed to enhance students' formal and informal interaction with peers and faculty, their sense of belonging in HE, and their first-year academic performance' (p. 871). The authors conducted a quasi-experimental study at a law school at a large state university in the Netherlands during the academic year 2013-2014. In this programme, 58 students (the experimental group), in addition to more than 200 first-year students who were not part of the initiative (control group), participated.

The programme consisted of a four-day intervention designed to challenge 'students' perception of effective learning behaviour to increase their sense of belonging and academic performance' (p. 866). According to Van Herpen et al. (2020), 'next to student-peer interaction, research clearly shows the importance of student-faculty interaction in HE. Formal interactions of students with FMs focused on academic development and performance seem most beneficial for students (p. 864), which is why the intervention intended 'to enhance students' formal and informal interaction with peers and faculty' (p. 871). They reported that the programme not only promoted more peer interactions but that the students also reported more formal interactions with FMs than their non-participant counterparts. They stated that the intervention 'had a positive effect on the contact between students and their teachers on course-related matters' (p. 872). However, there was no significant difference between both

groups regarding informal interaction with faculty. While this particular intervention focused on a late stage of transition to HE, there are essential considerations with regard to the role of FMs in earlier stages of accessing HE, such as the importance of demystifying contact with FMs for students before arriving in the HE classroom.

A study that reinforces the necessity of early contact with FMs is by Atherton (2014). This study examines whether objective and subjective measures of academic preparedness in the United States are influenced by students' first-generation status. In other words, their study sought to explore whether first-generation status affected students' self-perception of academic preparation. Through a survey conducted between 1999 and 2009, and including a sample of more than 6,000 students, the author measured objective (SAT: Scholastic Assessment Test scores and GPAs: Grade Point Average) and subjective (students' self-perceptions of their academic preparedness) measures. The findings indicate that first-generation students have a lower academic preparation regarding standardised testing (objective measure). Still, their self-perception of academic preparedness does not differ in relation to their peers who are not first-generation students. This, in turn, may indicate that first-generation students do not possess the social capital that enables them to have a realistic perspective of university work (that is, they are less prepared than their more privileged peers, but do not realise this). On this subject, the author suggests that pre-university programmes play a critical role in closing the social gaps faced by first-generation students when accessing HE. Specifically, Atherton emphasises that these interventions facilitate the exposure to university-level work as well as the creation of relationships with faculty, which has been proved to enhance students' confidence to succeed academically.

On a similar note, Briggs et al. (2012) explored the challenges in enabling successful transitions from secondary to postsecondary education in England. They argued that, despite the critical importance of this process, transition to HE has been under-conceptualised and that further attention needs to be paid to potential liaisons between schools and universities. In their study, the authors analysed international literature in addition to student and staff data from an English university in order to conceptualise a transition model. They aimed to provide institutional guidelines for university staff interested in pursuing 'optimal conditions for effective transition and learner success' (p. 4) and in adopting 'integrated systems' (p. 1). In their examination of transition interventions, they highlighted that establishing contact with university staff influences students' aspirations positively. They argue that 'programmes that are designed to raise aspiration, enabling learners to visualise themselves as future

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly
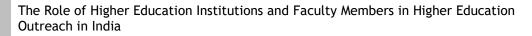
37

university students, include visits to schools by university students and staff' (p. 10). Along the same lines, they state that the interaction with college and university staff 'cannot be underestimated' (p. 12), since it enables students to see themselves as university students, strengthening their self-confidence and ambitions. This, in turn, may help them overcome obstacles during the transition period.

This section has demonstrated the role played by FMs in HE outreach. The literature reviewed shows that contact with FMs is valuable for students from disadvantaged groups applying for HE. At the same time, there are challenges for faculty member involvement stemming from the competing priorities of the profession and issues relating to institutional culture and priorities. The issue of intersecting identities of FMs is identified as an area worthy of further exploration. Missing from or neglected in the literature, in general, are discussions of the following: (i) how HE policy on both HE outreach and the academic profession shapes faculty involvement in HE outreach, (ii) how location of HEI (for example, rural-based) may lead to different types of faculty member involvement, (iii) how FMs feel about their involvement in HE outreach, (iv) what students expect from FMs in HE outreach, (v) how FMs are trained in HE outreach, and (vi) whether HE outreach is operating in a gender-sensitive, socially just manner. This paper seeks to extend the existing knowledge in relation to these topics.

How is HE outreach involvement influenced by the structure of the academic profession?

It has been identified that the participation of FMs in HE outreach is not necessarily straightforward, as shown by Johnson et al. (2019). In their paper, a group of 25 academics from different fields and institutions in the UK shared their collective experiences of the challenges they identified as restricting FMs from engaging in outreach activities. Some of the challenges addressed are challenges of institutional culture such as academic workloads and distribution of tasks, nurturing collaborative networks, allocation of financial resources, and capacity building, among others. The authors argue that a new conceptualisation of what 'outreach' entails is needed since, in the UK at least, it has arguably become less of a practice of public engagement but rather an attempt to recruit more students due to the increasing trend of marketisation of HE. The authors assert that this reconceptualisation exercise would, in turn, emphasise the civic role that academics as well as HEIs play within society. This study, while based in the UK, is of importance in other areas countries too, as these institutional culture factors—workload, resourcing, capacity building—can potentially be applied to a nascent Indian HE outreach culture. Moreover, the study reinforces the importance of the framing adopted in the present paper, where outreach is situated within the wider values of the public good mission of HE. Burke (2013) also cautions

about the potential for WP to be enacted without attention to the civic mission, due to the competing pressures to implement government policies.

The involvement of FMs in HE outreach is situated in a wider landscape of community and civic engagement. In this sense, HE outreach shares some characteristics with other forms of engagement in that it is a blurred and indistinct part of the FMs' roles. In discussing FMs' involvement in wider community outreach in the US, Demb and Wade (2012) found that time pressure may affect involvement: 'faculty choice about the type of outreach and engagement activity may be strongly related to the time commitment associated with each' (p. 356). They also discovered gender differences in participation in outreach activities, with men and women FMs participating in different types of outreach. Notably, they also identified career stage to be a factor in outreach participation. Importantly, among other significant findings, the FMs expressed 'conflicting opinions about the importance of outreach and engagement at the institution' (p. 358) due to the lack of systems of promotion and tenure criteria based on these activities. While the present project focuses specifically on the role of faculty members in HE outreach, these wider findings from the Demb and Wade (2012) study provide useful considerations, such as exploring the role of the following: competing pressures, intersecting identity and professional characteristics, and the variance in opinions on the importance of HE outreach. In the critical study referenced above, Burke also refers to the fact that 'the processes of securing available funds and resources [for outreach]' are enmeshed in institutional politics (Burke, 2013, p. 123).

Indian Perspectives

What is the Role of Faculty Members in HE Outreach?

As indicated in Section 1, a pilot study was conducted in one college to gather empirical evidence as part of ongoing research on Widening Access to Higher Education in India \ (WAHEI: www.warwick.ac.uk/wahei). The study indicates that FMs engage in HE outreach informally but actively. According to the results, 93.3 per cent of the FMs who participated in the survey said that they guided prospective undergraduate students on their HE-related choices.

The advice and guidance provided by FMs ranged from assisting students in deciding whether to opt for HE for further studies, choosing the right college, course or subject, and guiding them through the admission process. The FMs also accompanied students for a visit to the college where they worked. Figure 1 shows that

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

39

the FMs provided HE advice and guidance to those in the extended family, neighbours, their domestic staff, and those in their local community.
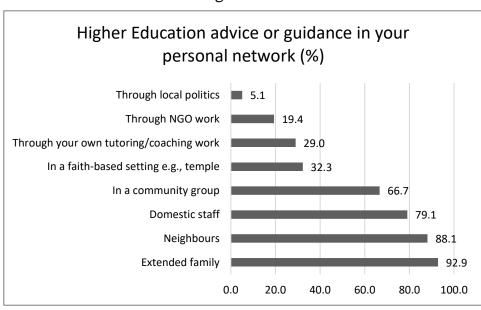
Figure 1

Higher Education advice or guidance in your personal network (%)

Category	Value
Through local politics	5.1
Through NGO work	19.4
Through your own tutoring/coaching work	29.0
In a faith-based setting e.g., temple	32.3
In a community group	66.7
Domestic staff	79.1
Neighbours	88.1
Extended family	92.9

Source: Pilot Study.

The diary entries from the solicited diary study with FMs indicate that the motivation of FMs in providing HE outreach to students was mainly because they felt that it was their professional and social responsibility. These entries also suggest that, beyond providing HE information and advice to students who were within their personal networks, the motivation of FMs in engaging in HE outreach included providing higher education information from a place of concern of how students would navigate the complex landscape of college admissions, academic programmes, and career pathways confidently.

Overall, the analysis suggests that, even without a formalised HE outreach culture in public HEIs in India, FMs are fulfilling the social responsibility assigned to colleges and universities, which is to serve the needs of their local communities and promote social justice and equity. By actively supporting disadvantaged students in their pursuit of higher education, FMs have the potential to fulfil their social responsibility and contribute to the common good of the local community.

How is HE Outreach Involvement Influenced by the Structure of the Academic Profession?

It is impossible to mandate FMs to take on the additional social responsibility alongside their existing duties, without taking into consideration the policy context of

the academic profession in India. This section delineates the nature and structure of the profession, taking into account relevant policies.

Since HE outreach has been accorded limited consideration in HE policy (as discussed above), it follows that FMs, unlike schoolteachers, are not expected to interact directly with community members or form relationships with them in relation to HE outreach. The main responsibilities of the FMs are considered to be pedagogy and research, and policy reports have repeatedly provided guidelines to improve existing standards (GoI, 1985; MoE, 1962; MHRD, 1986; NCERT, 1970). NEP 2020 (MHRD, 2020) also notes in Section 13 that faculty motivation is 'far lower than the desired level' (p. 40, Section 13.1). A combination of inadequate material rewards to teachers and ineffective/insufficient training have been held responsible for this situation, but important structural factors also influence faculty motivation and their ability/desire to engage in HE outreach activities, as discussed below.

Disidentification with Local Community: Currently, in many Indian states, there is a system of deploying early career FMs to government colleges within their state of residence (for example, Higher Education Department Haryana, 2020; Higher Education Department West Bengal, 2017). Informal conversations with FMs during the fieldwork for the 'Fair Chance for Education' project in Haryana revealed that this system was considered a major factor in faculty demotivation. Under this system, FMs are deployed in a particular HEI, with limited scope for choosing the location of the HEI. After a period of service, FMs may be permitted to apply for a transfer to another college in an area of their preference, though relocation is not guaranteed. Since FMs are deployed in locations that are often unfamiliar to them (despite being in their state of residence) and are often employed in rural institutions when they may originate from urban areas, FMs do not necessarily have local knowledge or a connection with local communities. During field visits for the 'Fair Chance for Education' project, the team interacted with some FMs who expressed disinterest for the communities they were working in. Moreover, FMs with rural college postings may also be planning to move on as quickly as possible, to urban or more prestigious institutions, so they may not have a strong investment in community engagement. This system is under review through NEP 2020 primarily to promote connections of FMs with their institutions and with the surrounding community (MHRD, 2020, p. 40, Section 13.3).

Inequalities in the Academic Profession: The academic profession in India is dominated by privileged groups, despite the reservations policy which stipulates reservation of 7.5 per cent, 15 per cent, and 27 per cent of teaching positions for ST, SC, and OBC social groups, respectively. Many reserved posts remain unfulfilled (Sabharwal, Henderson,

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

41

and Joseph, 2020), pointing to the challenges in recruiting FMs from disadvantaged social groups. As such, FMs working in HEIs in rural/semi-urban areas may belong to privileged groups with little connection to the marginalised groups living in proximity to the college, who would be the target beneficiaries of HE outreach activities. The profession is also divided between FMs on permanent contracts and those on temporary contracts (Varghese, Malik and Gautam, 2017), with greater entitlements accruing to those on permanent contracts, such as being eligible to avail institutional resources to participate in conferences, and those on temporary contracts carrying more of the burden of teaching and administration. Within this somewhat fraught professional landscape, the following questions may be posed: Who should implement HE outreach? Why? and How?

Continuing Professional Learning Landscape: Given the policy concern about the quality of teaching and research in HEIs, the provision of training opportunities for teaching staff has been given significant attention, with orientation programmes, refresher courses, and seminars, conferences and exchange programmes being some of the most favoured mechanisms for enhancing standards. In fact, the Scheme of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Training, 2015 (MHRD, 2015), envisioned an elaborate structure of 87 new institutions, comprising 30 schools of education, 50 centres of excellence for curriculum and pedagogy, 5 institutes of academic leadership and education management, and 2 inter-university centres for teachers' education in order to provide thorough training in pedagogical skills, as well as undertake research in different aspects of teaching such as curriculum development and evaluation methods. Presently, there are 116 institutions involved (PMMMNMTT, n.d.), highlighting a growing focus on increasing access to training opportunities for faculty members. These include 30 Schools of Education in Central, State, and Deemed Universities (SoE), 50 Centres of Excellence for Curriculum and Pedagogy: 5 Centres of Excellence in Science and Mathematics Education (CESME), 25 Teaching Learning Centres (TLC), 20 Faculty Development Centres (FDC), 2 Inter-University Centres for Teachers Education (IUCTE), 1 National Resource Centre for Education (NRCE), 5 Centres of Academic Leadership and Education Management (CALEM), as well as various other initiatives such as Innovations, Awards and Teaching Resource Grants (IATRG), Subject Networks for Curricular Renewal and Reforms (SBN), Leadership Development for senior functionaries in higher education institutions, Induction Training for newly recruited faculty, 75 National Resource Centres, and 15 Leadership for Academic Programme (LEAP) (PMMMNMTT, n.d.).

NEP 2020 (MHRD, 2020) points out in Section 13 (pp. 40-41) that even more efforts are needed at the institutional level to strategically plan for continuing professional learning (CPL) of FMs (Section 13.6). Currently, each state includes universities with designated human resource development centres (HRDCs) (Narendar, 2022), which are named as such by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). These centres deliver CPL training courses for FMs, which are essential for accruing Academic Performance Indicator points (see below), but the opportunities to attend these are unequally distributed between more and less privileged FMs (in terms of gender, social group status, and contract type). For example, some academics with caring responsibilities face greater obstacles when attending these courses since they may have family members who cannot be left unattended (Menon, 2020). Training is mandatory for new permanent FMs, and a refresher course is also mandated (ibid.). Specifically, orientation programmes are designed for newly appointed Assistant Professors and are aimed at enhancing teaching and researching skills. The course duration is more than 140 hours across four weeks. On the other hand, Refresher Courses are delivered by the Academic Staff Colleges for serving teachers. The goals of these courses are to enrich the knowledge and skills of academics, as well as to inspire them through the exposure of innovative teaching methodologies and discussions among colleagues. The duration of the course is three weeks and consists of approximately 100 training hours (Narendar, 2022). Participation in the orientation programmes is a pre-requisite for admission to the refresher courses. Within this landscape of CPL, there are questions as to how training for HE outreach can and should be integrated into the existing modalities of training for academic staff.

Academic Performance Indicator (API): Efforts have also been made to link career progression with CPL in order to incentivise faculty to avail of the training opportunities available. The Academic Performance Indicator (API) was established in 1956 with a view to regulate and improve processes of selection and promotion of academic staff. Later revisions of the policy were implemented in 2000, 2008, 2013, and 2016 (Gupta, 2018; Tilak and Mathew, 2016; Baroniya et al., 2014). The API assigns numerical values to academic activities such as teaching, publication, and presentations, which are then used for promotion and recruitment purposes. Specifically, three different categories are used to regulate these issues. The first category focuses on activities related to teaching, learning, and evaluation, such as the implementation of innovative methodologies in the classroom, providing additional resources to students, and updating the subject content, to mention a few. The second category assesses co-curricular, extension, and CPL-related activities such as leading field trips and educational tours, delivering lectures across campus, and participating in campus

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

43

activities, among others. The third category evaluates research and academic contributions such as article writing, book publications, delivery of workshops, conference presentations and being invited to lectures, among others. Arguably, for HE outreach to succeed as a formalised aspect of the academic profession in India, activities would need to be recognised in the API.

This section has laid out specific aspects of the organisation of the academic profession in India which interconnect with FMs' potential involvement in HE outreach. The potential challenges include disidentification with local communities (due to required deployment) and inequalities in the profession. The CPL landscape provides opportunities, which are as yet untapped, to ensure that FMs have access to knowledge and training on HE outreach. However, evidently, training activities and career progression are both oriented towards improving FMs' twin 'legitimate duties' (MoE, 1962, p. 60) of teaching and research. Neither the training infrastructure nor the API includes any reference to specific HE outreach activities (though the API does refer to community engagement, but not in relation to HE outreach), implying that there is no opportunity or incentive to engage in HE-access outreach for ambitious FMs. The existing CPL courses are undeniably important vehicles for disseminating core knowledge to the academic profession in terms of values, the purpose of HE as well as specific pedagogical and leadership strategies. In sum, this paper acknowledges the policy context shaping the academic profession and argues that this needs to be taken into account in order to understand how FMs may be motivated, trained, supported, and rewarded to contribute to HE outreach in their local communities.

Summary

The role of FMs in HE outreach is vital and contextually varied across the globe. Countries in the Global North such as the US, UK, and Netherlands engage university professionals in collaboration with FMs with expertise on WP to facilitate HE outreach. Varied mechanisms of HE outreach such as formal and informal interaction with FMs and peers, establishing early contacts, and pre-university programmes for addressing social gaps are crucial for ensuring HE participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Factors such as time pressures, importance of HE outreach for career progression, gendered differences, career stages, and fund-raising capabilities were identified as factors for determining the participation of FMs in HE outreach.

In the context of India, while some private Indian universities are establishing WP specialist teams, the resources needed for a full-time HE outreach team are beyond the capacities of most state universities and small-scale, localised government colleges in India. As such, the work required for organising outreach activities logically falls to the

FMs, as the 'Fair Chance for Education' project found when working with government colleges in Haryana to organise taster days for high school students (Samanta et al., 2022).

FMs' involvement in HE outreach activities is influenced by the structure of the academic profession which does not recognise HE outreach as the responsibility of HEIs, institutional leaders, or FMs. In such circumstances, FMs engage in HE outreach out of their personal motivations and perceived obligation towards their profession.

The potential for Faculty Members to be Involved in HE Outreach – Findings from 'Fair Chance for Education' Project

Introduction

The 'Fair Chance for Education' project focused on gender and access to HE in Haryana and sought to understand the sources of guidance and support that were present for young people when decisions about HE were taken (see Section 1.4). As such, FMs only represented a minor slice of the data, especially as very few of the students in the study had been assisted by FMs in their choices about college. However, when we re-read the data for the purposes of this paper, we found that FMs were frequently mentioned in the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), mostly in relation to the students' experiences of studying once they had enrolled in college. There were 21 excerpts from the FGDs and 23 from the interviews. The FMs were also mentioned several times in the free-text questions of the survey (30 respondents). We conducted thematic coding of the data, which provided useful initial insights on several factors and attributes that pertain to the FMs' potential to develop and engage in outreach practices.

The thematic analysis revealed two major themes, which are presented below. The first is the role of policy developments and/or issues in the HE sector in shaping the FMs' enactment of their profession. The second pertains to the attributes which, likewise, shape the way in which FMs conduct their work. The two themes are interlinked, especially due to the nature of the data, where we are accessing students' portrayals of FMs, implying that we access the impression rather than the FMs' analysis of their own performance. Indeed, when exploring data which include evaluative judgements about the FMs, it is important to bear in mind that the data do not reveal an objective truth, but are rather filtered through the individual participants' perceptions. Perceptions are built on the ideals of what HE means and should resemble, and expectations of what the FMs should do and how they should behave. These ideals are assembled from multiple sources over a participant's life course to date, including

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

45

media and discussions of HE with family members, relatives, friends, schoolteachers, and others in the community. We could see evidence of different voices in our data, including participants referring to perceptions of FMs from college alumni and siblings, for example:

> My brother himself says that the staff in [MDC] is very good. (MDC Interview, woman student 1)

> I had heard from my friend that [MDC] has a good staff. (MDC Interview, woman student 2)

> Those who studied at this place [MDC] say that the staff is good here. (MDC FGD, woman student 3)

There was also one unique example wherein a student mentioned that her cousin was an FM, and how this influenced her perceptions of the profession as an attractive career option:

> My sister is a professor, my uncle's daughter, so whenever I see her, when I think 'No, I can't do it, it's a lot of work', sometimes I feel like I have lost, but when I go to her house, she lives in [another location in Haryana]… I have seen her life, and I get encouraged… she just shows that she is happy in her life. (MDC Interview, woman student 1)

The following analysis should be understood as seen through students' eyes, which in a sense is all the more important, given that we are discussing the extent to which FMs have the potential to support students with their HE decision-making process.

Policy-Related and Sector-Related Issues

While students may not be aware of many issues relating to policy or to trends in the sector, they did identify issues which we can ascribe to policy and/or the sector. Many students across all the three sampled colleges referred to a shortage of FMs in their colleges (17 excerpts). The issue of teacher shortage has been acknowledged in HE, particularly in government colleges in non-metropolitan areas (Kisana and Arora, 2023). In the survey, students were asked to give reasons for why some young people do not enrol in college, and several students mentioned that young people were deterred from applying for their college due to the shortage of teachers. This issue was also discussed in the FGDs and interviews. For example:

There are also many vacancies in teaching roles. (MDC FGD, woman student 1)

There are no teachers for BCom here. In this college, lectures happen for only one out of six subjects, and we have to study the other subjects through tuition. (SiDC, survey respondent ID 7043)

Initially we did not have teachers for our classes. (SDC Interview, woman student 2)

In addition to the shortage of teachers, the phenomenon of teacher absenteeism was also mentioned, which is another known issue in the sector (Kisana and Arora, 2023). Students referred to the fact that 'classes do not happen regularly' (MDC FGD, woman student 5), and one participant noted that some of his friends had dropped out of college citing 'classes are not held' as one of the reasons (MDC Interview, man student 1). A student at SDC noted, 'Sometimes it happens that the class does not happen' (SDC Interview, woman student 1).

One student brought up the issue of violence against FMs. Although only one participant referred to this phenomenon, it is worth noting as a phenomenon that which may be more widespread in the sector (Sundar, 2018). The student recounted:

The boys threaten the teachers, threaten them from outside. Sometimes they threaten that, 'You can do what you want inside, but come outside then we'll see.'… They [the FMs] get scared. Now here there was a Principal, Mr [surname], I have heard that boys beat him up since he talked about several rules and regulations; the boys did a little too much. (MDC Interview, woman student 1).

Finally, there was a discussion in one of the FGDs of the differences between FMs in the private and government colleges:

Student 3: If we had enrolled in private (college) the fees would have been more. But here, the education and the fees are less, but… the education is a little less in government college and the better faculty and teachers are in the private sector…

Student 2: Sir, as you can see, the faculty is less in government institutions in comparison to the private sector…

Student 4: My other friends told me that in private institutions, the faculty is better because of which the fees are higher. (MDC FGD, men students)

Here, we see an awareness of the growing privatisation of HE in India and students comparing the quality of staff between the two types of colleges.

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra,
Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

47

Faculty Member Attributes

Based on the students' perceptions of FMs, we established attributes that would support the potential for the involvement of FMs in outreach, and those which would raise concerns. The attributes are displayed in Table 1 in a simplified visual format.

Table 1: Faculty Member Attribute types and Potential for Outreach Involvement

Type of attribute	Potential for outreach	Concern for outreach
Professional	Doing the job well, doing more than expected	Not doing the job well, doing less than expected
Pedagogical	'Good' teacher	'Not good' teacher
Values-related	Principled, advocate for students	Unethical, unprofessional
Personal/character	Supportive, approachable, friendly	Unsupportive, unapproachable, aloof

Source: Authors.

Professional attributes: Students referred to the FMs who were fulfilling their duties or even exceeding the expected duties, and to others who were not fulfilling their basic duties. Two examples are illustrative about the FMs who were seen to be going beyond expectations. Firstly, a SDC student referred to the fact that one of the FMs served as the sports trainer for the college, in the absence of a formally appointed trainer, on top of 'his own work' (SDC interview, man student 2). Secondly, a student from SDC averred that the FMs impart additional knowledge to the students beyond the subject curriculum out of class time; the student gave the example of a teacher explaining the history of Valentine's day to the students (SDC FGD, woman student 3). At the same time, several students discussed ways in which the FMs were not fulfilling the students' expectations. A general expectation was that the FMs would do more than merely deliver classes, but that they would motivate the young people to learn. Students pointed out that FMs were not doing this, as evident from the following statements from two of the students:

> They do not guide at all, but just come and spend the time that they have to spend and then go back. They do the formalities and go back, they do not actually encourage you to study or share problems and provide solutions to your questions. (MDC interview, man student 2)

> The teacher is only looking at when the time is getting over, when they can get out…A lot of times the teachers do not feel like teaching. Because of some problem they have a headache, a lot of times they have come after fighting with their family. (SDC interview, woman student 1)

A student also referred to the practice wherein teachers 'do not give lectures daily but mark these things anyway [that is, claim to have delivered the lectures]' (College redacted FGD, man student 2). Finally, a student at MDC referred to the fact that 'the FMs do not encourage students to practise their English, in comparison with the other HEIs' (MDC FGD, woman student 3).

Pedagogical attributes. Students categorized the FMs as 'good' teachers, and others who were 'not good' teachers. However, it was difficult to ascertain from the comments what students understood by 'good', as this was never unpacked in detail, as indicated by the following statements from the students:

> The teachers here are good. In most colleges teachers are not good. In this college the teachers teach well and behave well. (SDC FGD, man student 3)

> Good male and female teachers. (SiDC survey respondent ID 7062)

> Good college staff and disciplined way of education happens. (SiDC Survey respondent ID 7068)

> This college has a good academic quality and teachers. (SDC Survey respondent ID 9073)

One student specified that, in order to obtain a government posting as an FM, the teachers had to be 'good lecturers with good education' (SDC Interview, man student 1). Another student, who specified that teachers at the college were well qualified, noted:

> … and teachers are good here only. They must be good here because the sirs [teachers] who take the HPS test [HPSC: Haryana Public Service Commission[2]] and get qualified come here. (SDC FGD, man student 3).

There were also perceptions of teaching quality being poor. One student referred to a 'lack of good teachers' at the college (SiDC survey respondent 7058); another stated, 'after coming here I've got to know that there are some limitations with the faculty' (MDC interview, man student 1).

Values-related attributes. Students referred to FMs who were principled, and who acted as advocates for students, and others who were behaving in unethical and unprofessional ways. One student hinted at having principled FMs, stating, 'In this

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2   The Haryana Public Service Commission (HPSC) is the state level statutory body of Haryana, which was established in 1966 to advise the State Government on issues relating to recruitment and conduct of selection examinations for civil services and other government posts, including appointment of faculty members for state-governed HEIs.

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

49

college the teachers teach well *and behave well*' (SDC FGD, man student 3, emphasis added). Another student recounted the following anecdote about the principal of her college acting as an advocate for her when her parents began to plan her wedding:

> So I told the Principal that this issue is there, my father is doing this. She asked me to bring them to her and she will talk to them. So, I brought my father. She then explained to my father that his daughter is exceptional and not to get her married. 'If you can't do it, give her to me, I will educate her'. She said that, 'Everyone does not get girls like this, only lucky people do'. After that day, my father has reduced [the pressure] a bit (SDC Interview, woman student 1).

Unfortunately, there were several ways in which the FMs appeared to be behaving in unethical and unprofessional ways. One student, who revealed that the teachers mocked students in the classroom, said, 'Those who ask questions are made fun of and asked to sit down' (MDC Interview, man student 2). Another student referred to students who are given admission to college despite their lower grades, as they have personal connections with the FMs (College redacted, FGD men students 2 and 4). Yet another student described how she could sing well, and an FM offered to mark relevant parts of the textbook that would come up in the exams if she sang for him (College redacted, interview woman student 1). Students in the women's FGD at MDC complained that the FMs were maintaining strict gender segregation. One student noted, 'If a teacher sees a boy and a girl speaking with each other, they also regard it as wrong, even though there is nothing wrong with it' (MDC FGD, woman participant 5). The following are the statements of the students in the FGD:

> Student 4: The teachers are mature but still they scold us if they see us talking to a boy. This happened before; if he is not my brother, he could just be a friend. Girls can be friends, so why can't boys? There shouldn't be a problem.
>
> Student 3: They always think negatively.
>
> Student 4: So the teachers need to be made to understand, they're mature and yet they don't understand.

Finally, caste issues were also mentioned, as for example, an FM was said to be practising untouchability in the presence of the students in the college, as per the following statements from some of the students:

> Student 3: So we were sitting on the other side of the campus…and a boy from the canteen came there who was very little, whose caste

> might be like that [that is, from a marginalised caste group], like some children from Bihar who come to work [Student 5, at the same time: he was a child labourer]. He was holding the cup in a certain way and the teacher scolded him for touching the teacup and asked him to hold it with a cloth so that he is not directly touching the cup. I felt very bad about this.

The same student went on to say, 'This untouchability is still there.'

Personal/character-related attributes. Students described FMs who were supportive, approachable, and friendly, and others who exhibited attributes that were the opposite of these. Students said that they were able to report problems they faced with senior students to teachers, who reassured them, 'We told all this to our teachers and they said that this will be solved' (MDC interview, woman student 2). Students also stated that the FMs were 'helpful', but as with the description 'good', it was often unclear in which ways they helped. For instance, one student reported, 'The college staff is very good and is helpful' (SiDC survey respondent ID 7057); another stated, 'Teachers help us do the work easily' (SDC survey respondent ID 9039). Two students referred to the approachable and friendly nature of the FMs, as follows:

> 'In school we were not able to speak as we are able to speak to you [the interviewer] or the teachers in college. Here we can speak openly' (SDC FGD, woman student 4).

> The teachers here are their best and their behaviour is like that of friends (SDC survey respondent ID 9005).

On the other hand, the FMs were also referred to as being less supportive. One student stated, 'Teachers don't motivate students for their future' (MDC survey respondent ID 8025); another referred to the FMs having 'some attitude problems with us' (SDC Interview, woman student 2). Finally, a student referred to the influx of new FMs who had been employed in a recent recruitment round in Haryana, citing a mismatch between the new FMs and the students, as follows: 'those teachers who come from a good background have not been able to understand how to tell children to manage their studies well' (SDC FGD, man student 3).

Summary of Findings

To summarise, contradictory perceptions of the FMs occurred in the data, as one may expect. From the excerpts, we can deduce that in cases of faculty member shortage, where the basic staff of an institution is not in place, the FMs may be under

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

51

high pressure and may not have the capacity for outreach activities. Moreover, if a culture of teacher absenteeism is prevalent, again the basics of educational provision are not in place, and it is unlikely that outreach activities would be feasible. Thirdly, if there is violence against FMs outside of the college grounds, the fear of this may deter FMs from entering into the community for outreach purposes. Finally, if a triage of FMs is occurring due to differential conditions in private and government colleges, it is possible that the FMs working at government colleges may be less likely to be persuaded to engage in outreach activities.

In terms of professional attributes, there was some evidence of FMs who were 'going beyond the call of duty', for instance, by providing sports services that the college could not afford, or by educating students outside of class time. Initiating outreach activities requires an enthusiasm of this kind, especially outside of a formal outreach culture. On the other hand, students suggested that the FMs were 'clock watching' and not motivated to teach, including claiming to have taught lessons that they had not delivered. Since the outreach activities require a relatively high level of motivation, this would be a concern in building an outreach culture. Pedagogical attributes were more difficult to pin down due to the students' unspecified value judgements, such as 'good' or 'limitations', for instance. The value-related attributes included 'behave well', also advocating for students who are experiencing issues at home. Principled and scrupulous FMs who advocate for their students would make for ideal outreach coordinators.

Unfortunately, there was also evidence of FMs behaving in ways that would have the potential to subvert outreach practices, and to potentially perpetuate discrimination and prejudice. This included mocking students, cheating in admission on the basis of personal relations and examination based on sexualised favours, perpetuating strict gender segregation based on sexist principles, and practising untouchability on college premises. Needless to say, outreach can only work productively if the FMs involved are operating within a social justice frame. Finally, in relation to personal/character-related attributes, students reported that the FMs were supportive and friendly, but also portrayed FMs as not being motivating and having attitude issues with students. Again, though these attributes are only perceptions, the prospective students would need to establish a positive rapport with the FMs during outreach activities. So, it is important to consider these attributes when considering the potential for FMs to successfully engage in outreach activities.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

Higher education (HE) in India is currently in the massification stage, allowing many young people from families and communities with historically low educational attainment to consider applying for HE. While enrolment has increased, social disparities in HE access persist, and there are social variations in the choice of courses and institutions. It is crucial to address the issue of HE choice, in addition to HE access, as many inequalities are known to occur during the choice phase. The existing affirmative action policies, such as the quota system, aim to facilitate entry to HE for the socially and economically disadvantaged groups, including SCs, STs, OBCs, economically weaker sections of society, and women from marginalised groups. However, these groups are less likely to succeed in gaining admission, survive, or thrive during their HE experiences.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (MHRD, 2020) focuses on increasing access to higher education for the socially excluded groups. It recognises that students from the socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers when accessing higher education, and may lack knowledge about the college application process and making informed choices. HEIs play a crucial role in outreach and widening participation in higher education, but this role is often overlooked. In this paper, 'HE outreach' refers to specific practices aimed at ensuring that the potential applicants to higher education are aware of their options and understand the application processes.

The concept of HE outreach is part of the international agenda called Widening Participation (WP). The goal of this agenda is to make HE accessible to individuals who have historically faced barriers in accessing or fully participating in HE. While this aligns with the public good mission of HEIs, the specific aim of HE outreach is to encourage young community members to consider enrolling in HE or to support their children in doing so.

This paper emphasises the different contexts of students from disadvantaged groups and the outreach efforts being made within these contexts. The increasing global concern and mechanisms for HE outreach are influenced by the expansion, diversification, and increased representation of historically under-represented communities in HE. Internationally, outreach mechanisms aim to include students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, first-generation learners, disabled students, racial and ethnic minorities, mature students, and part-time learners. Various mechanisms, such as reserving seats in HEIs and implementing affirmative action and collaborative programmes, have been established to promote inclusivity in higher education.

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary and Arushi Painuly

53

Several HE outreach programmes at the institutional level discussed in this paper are driven by national government policies to expand educational access, promote diversity, and address social inequities. Some of the notable examples are from countries such as Australia, Brazil, the UK, the USA, and South Africa. The national frameworks discussed earlier in the paper have the potential to significantly enhance educational access and equity by fostering collaborative outreach efforts and ensuring increased financial support for universities.

Technology can play a crucial role in enhancing outreach activities for students from disadvantaged groups by making educational resources more accessible and engaging. The use of technology can enable students to access information about various colleges and universities without the need for travel, helping them make informed decisions about their HE options. Technology can be utilised in outreach activities by developing platforms on college websites that can host virtual events wherein students can interact with college representatives, attend webinars, and explore virtual campus tours. Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality technologies can provide immersive learning experiences, such as virtual campus tours and interactive simulations. These technologies make learning more engaging and interactive, helping students visualise and understand complex concepts. Virtual campus tours can also inspire students to pursue HE by giving them a feel of the college environment.

Digital Outreach Campaigns such as text messaging campaigns, email newsletters, and online communities can also be effective. Institutions can use targeted digital communication strategies to reach out to prospective students with information about application deadlines, scholarship opportunities, and campus events. These strategies can ensure that disadvantaged students receive timely and relevant information, helping them stay informed about and engaged with the college application process.

The role of FMs in HE outreach is essential and varies across different contexts globally. Countries in the Global North, such as the US, UK, and Netherlands, involve university professionals in collaboration with the FMs who have expertise in WP to facilitate HE outreach. Various mechanisms of HE outreach, such as formal and informal interaction with the FMs and peers, establishing early contacts, and pre-university programmes to address social gaps, are crucial for ensuring the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE.

The involvement of FMs in HE outreach encompasses various activities that depend on the goals of each HEI and their respective WP agenda. These activities include taster sessions, pre-degree courses, vacation outreach sessions, and outreach sessions delivered throughout the academic year. FMs play a crucial role in providing informed

access to and choice of HE. This paper has discussed in detail various outreach programmes that involve FMs.

In India, the Constitution and national policies have mandated access to HE for the disadvantaged communities, and large-scale schemes are being funded at the international, national, and state levels to support this. However, there are limited outreach activities enabling access to higher education, particularly in the rural and semi-urban areas. This paper argues for the need for HEIs to lead outreach efforts, especially in terms of helping individuals in rural and semi-urban areas to make informed decisions about their HE options. Access to and the choice of HE in these locations is in line with international research studies on first-generation and indigenous students, who face various challenges in making choices and accessing HE.

In the Indian context, access to and choice of HE are further limited due to compounded disadvantages related to gender, caste, religion, and rurality. As a result, decisions about HE are often influenced by traditional roles and constraints related to gender, caste, religion, abilities, and rural living rather than the opportunities that HE can provide. Given this, it is argued that the HEIs serving rural areas have the potential to help young people make more informed decisions about accessing HE.

The underlying concept of HE outreach in the context of India is based on the understanding that many young people are considering attending HE without access to reliable and accurate information. This is often due to the fact that they are among the first generation in their families and communities to have the opportunity to apply for HE. HE outreach activities involve opening the doors of the HEI for prospective students and their families to visit and gain a better understanding of what HE entails. Additionally, these activities involve students and/or staff members from the HEIs visiting community settings such as schools or community groups to explain HE options and processes. The concept of HE outreach recognises the potential role that HEIs can play in promoting equitable access to HE by providing information about HE to communities.

Moreover, based on the empirical evidence from India, presented in this paper, on informal mentoring and support by rural-serving FMs, it is argued that rural-serving HEIs and FMs have the potential to facilitate informed access to and choices of HE. FMs play a crucial role in providing college guidance in rural and semi-urban areas, but their potential is not fully utilised in these settings. There is also a lack of international research on the impact of FMs in promoting HE outreach. Recent evidence suggests that early contact with FMs is beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it helps them access and transition into HE. However, factors such as time

constraints, the importance of involvement in HE outreach activities for career advancement, gender differences and career stages, influence the FMs' participation in HE outreach. The involvement of FMs in HE outreach activities is influenced by the structure of the academic profession, which does not recognise HE outreach as the responsibility of HEIs, institutional leaders, or faculty members. In such circumstances, FMs engage in HE outreach out of their personal motivations and feel an obligation towards their profession.

We argue for recognising the potential role of rural-serving state universities and government colleges based in rural and semi-urban areas as HE knowledge hubs and strengthening their efforts in delivering on the equity and social justice agenda for HE in India. The role of HEIs as 'HE knowledge hubs' implies that FMs interact with communities in rural and semi-urban areas surrounding HEIs to improve the communities' knowledge about HE options. This is critical, as there is often little direct knowledge and experience of HE in these communities from previous generations. Thus, choices about HE are often made based on hearsay and informal connections, which benefit those with a history of HE in their families or networks. In order to develop HEIs as HE knowledge hubs, the paper suggests that the institutional culture and functioning of HEIs and national/state policy contexts regulating the approach of FMs and institutional leaders to HE outreach are influential and must be considered. The paper argues that for this to happen, HEIs must approach the task of outreach and recruitment towards the disadvantaged demographic as a service for the public good.

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S. Arokia Mary, Doctoral Scholar, ESRC-UKRI (1+3) years funded PhD at the Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, UK. Arokia has been actively contributing to the Widening Access to Higher Education in India: Institutional Approaches Research Project, as a research assistant. She is an Assistant Professor at School of Education, Central University of Kashmir since 2017, where she offered courses on gender and education, pedagogy of English language and other courses related to pedagogy and aspects related to education at undergraduate and postgraduate level students in Kashmir and India. She is a research methodology enthusiast and initiated a web-lecture series on Qualitative methods spanned out

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Denisse Lillo, Doctoral candidate, Department of Education Studies at the University of Warwick (UK). She holds an MA in Educational Leadership, Politics and Advocacy from New York University (NYU, US) and a BA in English Linguistics and Literature from Universidad de Chile (Chile). Her doctoral studies are fully funded by the Chilean National Agency of Research and Development (ANID in Spanish). Her doctoral research explores the transition of prospective first-generation university students from secondary education to higher education in Chile. She has contributed to several research projects focused on widening participation ('WAHEI' - 'Widening Access to Higher Education in India, Institutional Approaches'), policy research, and loss of funding in UK universities.

Ragini Khurana is a sociologist specializing in social identification in contexts of superdiversity. Her research work lies at the intersection of urban sociology, cultural studies and social psychology, and she also draws heavily on work originating in the sociology of emotions and urban geography. Through her doctoral research, she is investigating the changing nature of group/social identities in metropolises by studying and comparing people's relationships to everyday places. Prior to starting her PhD, she worked with several research centres, think-tanks and international organisations, including the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, COMPAS, Chatham House, the International Crisis Group and UNICEF. She completed her BA with a major in international constitutional law at Sciences Po Paris cum laude, and her MSc in Sociology at the University of Oxford with a distinction.

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➲ About the paper

This paper explores the outreach role of higher education institutions (HEIs) and faculty members in promoting equitable access to higher education (HE) in India, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where informed HE access is often limited. HE outreach refers to a specific set of practices which are defined by the shared aim of ensuring that the potential applicants to HE are aware of the options available to them and the processes they need to follow. The paper advocates developing HEIs as knowledge hubs, particularly in rural areas and semi-urban areas, to facilitate informed decision-making about HE among prospective students and their families. It underscores the importance of collaboration between institutions, faculty, and communities to create a sustainable outreach culture. It situates HE outreach within the broader international and national agendas of widening participation, emphasising the importance of outreach in addressing socio-economic disadvantages and promoting equitable access to HE in India.

➲ About the first author

Nidhi S. Sabharwal is Associate Professor, CPRHE/NIEPA and holds the position of Honorary Associate Professor in the Department of Education Studies at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. She has previously been In-Charge of the CPRHE/NIEPA and also served as the Director of the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies. She is the recipient of the SRHE Accolade for Contribution to the Field of Higher Education Research, an international award from The Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE). She has conducted extensive research on the development concerns of the poor and students from the socially and economically disadvantaged groups in higher education. She has also studied excluded groups in other countries, such as the Burakumin in Japan. She has published books and articles related to equity and inclusion and presented papers at international conferences. Her current research focuses on access, college readiness, student diversity and equity in Higher Education.

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