

Disability Inclusion In Higher Education: An Institutional Study Of Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla

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Abstract— Disability inclusion has become a central concern in contemporary higher education discourse, particularly in the context of equity, accessibility and social justice. In India, higher education institutions are legally and morally obligated to ensure inclusive educational environments for persons with disabilities under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The present study examines disability inclusion in higher education from an institutional perspective, with specific reference to Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), Shimla. The study seeks to analyse institutional preparedness for disability inclusion by examining awareness of educational rights among students with disabilities, accessibility of infrastructure and learning resources, availability of support services and prevailing institutional attitudes. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, involving 80 students with disabilities selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and supported by in-depth interviews and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that while a majority of students possess general awareness of disability-related rights, significant institutional gaps persist in infrastructural accessibility, support services and inclusive academic practices. The study concludes that disability inclusion in higher education requires not only awareness of rights but also sustained institutional commitment, systematic implementation of policies and transformation of institutional culture. The findings offer important implications for university administrators, policymakers and educators working towards inclusive higher education.

Index Terms— Disability Inclusion, Higher Education, Institutional Accessibility, Educational Rights, RPWD Act 2016, NEP 2020, Himachal Pradesh University.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right and an essential component of democratic and equitable societies. The concept of inclusion in higher education extends beyond mere access or enrolment of students with disabilities; it encompasses the creation of learning environments that enable full participation, academic success and social integration of all learners, irrespective of physical, sensory, cognitive, or psychosocial impairments. Disability inclusion in higher education therefore requires the removal of physical, academic, social and attitudinal barriers within institutions. In the Indian context, the legal and policy framework for disability inclusion has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 marked the first comprehensive legislative attempt to recognise and safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities. This was further strengthened by the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, which expanded the recognised categories of disability from seven to twenty-one and emphasised principles of non-discrimination, accessibility, reasonable accommodation and equal participation in education, employment and public life. Complementing this legislative framework, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places strong emphasis on equity and inclusion across all levels of education. The policy explicitly calls for higher education institutions to adopt inclusive pedagogical approaches, develop barrier-free infrastructure, provide assistive technologies and establish adequate support systems for students with disabilities. Together, these frameworks underline the responsibility of universities to move beyond symbolic compliance and actively institutionalize inclusive practices.

Despite these progressive provisions, the lived realities of students with disabilities in higher education often reveal a significant gap between policy intent and institutional practice. Studies have consistently shown that students with disabilities continue to face challenges such as inaccessible campuses, lack of assistive learning materials, insufficient support services and negative attitudes from faculty and administrators. These challenges point towards the need for institution-level analyses that examine how inclusion is conceptualized and implemented within universities. Himachal Pradesh University (HPU), located in Shimla, is one of the oldest and most prominent state universities in Himachal Pradesh. Given the state's hilly terrain and infrastructural constraints, ensuring accessibility and inclusion poses additional challenges. However, limited empirical research has examined disability inclusion at HPU from an institutional perspective. The present study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which HPU is inclusive of students with disabilities, focusing on awareness of educational rights, institutional infrastructure, support services and inclusive practices.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A review of existing literature indicates that much of the research on disability and education in India has focused on awareness of disability rights among specific stakeholder groups. The National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP, 2019) conducted a nationwide study titled *Access to Rights*, which revealed that both persons with disabilities and the general population possessed limited awareness of the provisions of the RPWD Act, 2016. The study emphasised the need for widespread dissemination of information to ensure effective realisation of disability rights.

Similarly, Elango et al. (2021), in a community-based study conducted in Tamil Nadu, found that although general awareness of disability rights existed among the public, detailed knowledge of specific provisions and entitlements under the RPWD Act was inadequate. The authors recommended targeted awareness programmes to bridge this knowledge gap.

Research focusing on educators and administrators has also highlighted institutional limitations. Sreedevi and Prasanna (2018) reported that teachers and administrators in special schools in Kerala were moderately aware of the RPWD Act but lacked adequate training and institutional support to implement inclusive education effectively. Srivastava (2020), in a study conducted in Uttar Pradesh, observed that awareness among persons with disabilities did not necessarily translate into effective utilisation of rights due to systemic and institutional barriers.

While these studies provide valuable insights into awareness and attitudes, there remains a paucity of research examining disability inclusion from an institutional perspective in higher education, particularly in state universities. The present study builds upon existing literature by shifting the analytical focus from individual awareness to institutional readiness and practices related to disability inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is significant for several reasons. First, it focuses on Himachal Pradesh, a hill state, where geographical and infrastructural challenges further complicate access and inclusion for persons with disabilities. Second, by adopting an institutional perspective, the study moves beyond individual-level awareness to examine systemic factors influencing disability inclusion in higher education. Third, the findings provide empirical evidence that can inform institutional planning, policy implementation and monitoring in line with the RPWD Act, 2016 and NEP 2020. Finally, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive higher education in India and offers insights for university administrators, policymakers and educators seeking to strengthen inclusive practices.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To examine the status of education for persons with disabilities at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.
2. To examine disability inclusion in higher education at Himachal Pradesh University from an institutional perspective.
3. To assess the awareness of educational rights and inclusive provisions among students with disabilities at Himachal Pradesh University.
4. To analyse the adequacy of institutional infrastructure, learning resources and support services available for students with disabilities.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was delimited as follows:

1. The investigation was confined to Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla; therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other universities.
2. The study focused exclusively on students with disabilities enrolled at the university.
3. The scope of the study was limited to selected institutional dimensions of disability inclusion such as awareness, accessibility, support services and attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the present study is explained as below:

Research Design

A descriptive survey research design was adopted to examine disability inclusion in higher education from an institutional perspective.

Sample

The sample consisted of 80 students with disabilities enrolled in various departments of Himachal Pradesh University. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria.

Tools for Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by Kumar (2019), comprising both closed-ended and open-ended items related to awareness of rights, accessibility, institutional attitudes and support services. In-depth interviews were conducted with a subsample of respondents to gain deeper insights into their institutional experiences.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, while qualitative responses from interviews were thematically analysed to supplement and enrich the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was ensured and the research was approved by the institutional ethics committee.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Analysis and interpretation of the responses obtained from the sample of the study is presented as under:

Status of Education for Persons with Disabilities at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

The status of education for persons with disabilities at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla indicates gradual progress alongside persistent structural challenges. Although the University has emerged as a pioneer in northern India by providing free education and implementing judicially mandated 5% reservation in admissions, participation of students with disabilities remains limited and uneven across departments. The presence of approximately 140 students with disabilities across the campus reflects increased access; however, the absence of disabled students in several departments highlights continuing academic and infrastructural barriers. While landmark judicial interventions have strengthened legal protection, incomplete implementation in research programmes, hostels, transportation and examinations suggests that the educational status of students with disabilities remains legally enabled but institutionally constrained.

Institutional Dimensions of Disability Inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University

The percentage responses of disabled students regarding Institutional Dimensions of Disability Inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University are given in below table 1.1.

Sr. No.	Dimension	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.	Awareness of disability rights	85	15
2.	Accessibility of infrastructure	45	55
3.	Accessibility of learning materials	72	28
4.	Positive institutional attitudes	58	42
5.	Availability of support services	48	52

It is evident from the table 1.1 that while a majority of students demonstrated general awareness of their educational rights (85%), institutional preparedness for disability inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University remains limited. Similar patterns of partial awareness have been reported in earlier studies conducted in different Indian contexts (NCPEDP, 2019; Elango et al., 2021), suggesting that awareness alone does not ensure effective inclusion.

Infrastructural accessibility emerged as a major concern, with more than half of the respondents (55%) reporting physical barriers within the campus environment. This finding aligns with the observations of Mishra and Singh (2017), who highlighted that inaccessible physical infrastructure remains one of the most persistent barriers for students with disabilities in Indian higher education institutions, particularly in geographically challenging regions.

Although a relatively higher proportion of respondents (72%) reported access to learning materials, qualitative responses revealed that many of these resources were not available in fully accessible formats, thereby limiting their academic usefulness. Nevertheless, Himachal Pradesh University has taken a significant institutional step by establishing an Accessible Library exclusively for persons with disabilities, equipped with assistive technologies such as screen-reading software (e.g., JAWS, KEBO) and other supportive digital tools to facilitate independent learning, particularly for students with visual impairments. This initiative aligns with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which mandates equal access to educational resources and reasonable accommodation, as well as with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes inclusive education and the use of assistive technologies to ensure equitable participation of learners with disabilities. Furthermore, the provision of

accessible learning resources is consistent with UGC guidelines on disability inclusion in higher education institutions. However, despite these policy-aligned efforts, gaps persist in the regular updating, scalability, and integration of accessible materials across departments. Similar concerns regarding the limited availability and effective utilization of accessible learning resources and assistive technologies in higher education have been reported by Kumari (2018) and Garg et al. (2019).

Institutional attitudes also emerged as a critical factor influencing the educational experiences of students with disabilities. A considerable proportion of respondents (42%) perceived negative or indifferent attitudes among faculty and administrative staff. This finding is consistent with the work of Sreedevi and Prasanna (2018) and Singh and Mishra (2017), who emphasized that unfavorable institutional attitudes significantly undermine inclusive education efforts.

Finally, the inadequacy of institutional support services, reported by 52% of respondents, reflects systemic gaps in counselling, academic accommodations, and disability-specific support mechanisms. Srivastava (2020) similarly observed that even when students with disabilities are aware of their rights, lack of institutional support often prevents effective utilization of available provisions, thereby adversely affecting their academic progress. Figure 1.1 showed the percentage distribution of disabled students' responses regarding institutional dimensions of disability inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University.

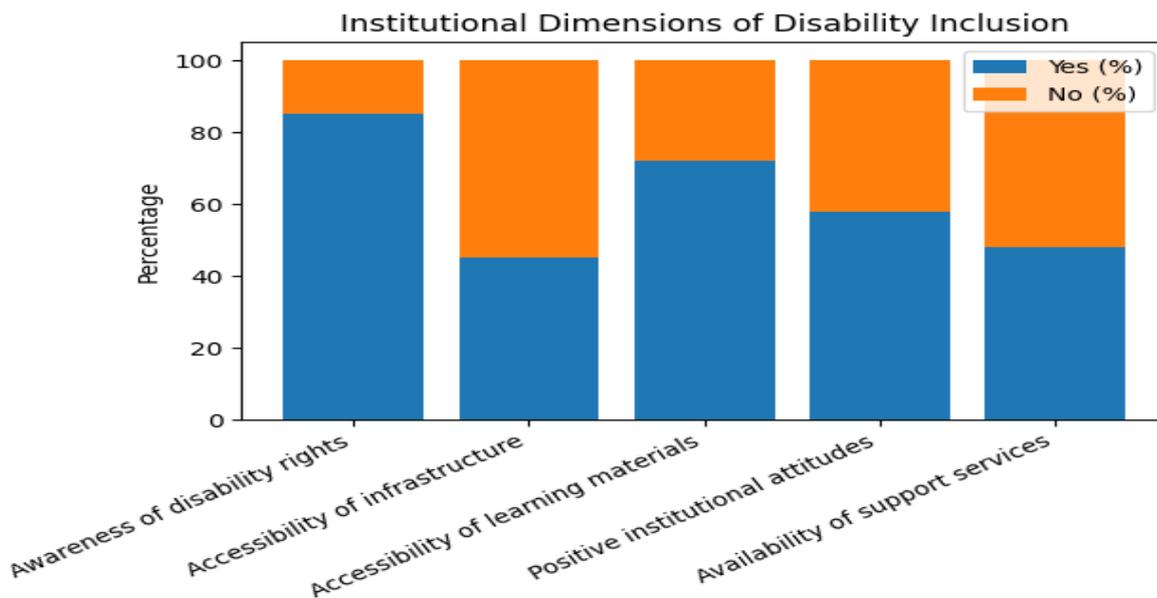


Figure 1.1: Institutional Dimensions of Disability Inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University

Institutional Readiness for Disability Inclusion

The overall findings suggested that disability inclusion at Himachal Pradesh University is at a transitional stage. Although awareness of disability rights and policy frameworks exists, institutional mechanisms necessary for effective inclusion remain underdeveloped. Limited infrastructural accessibility, insufficient support services, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices highlight the need for comprehensive institutional reforms. Addressing attitudinal barriers among faculty and administrators is equally important for fostering an inclusive institutional culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Institutional Capacity Building:** Regular training programmes should be organized for faculty and administrative staff to strengthen understanding of disability inclusion and inclusive pedagogical practices.
- Infrastructure Development:** The university should prioritize the development of barrier-free infrastructure, including ramps, lifts, accessible classrooms and signage.
- Strengthening Support Services:** Dedicated disability support units should be strengthened to provide academic accommodations, counselling, and assistive services.
- Accessible Learning Resources:** Provision of accessible digital and print learning materials, along with assistive technologies, should be ensured.
- Policy Implementation and Monitoring:** Effective implementation of the RPWD Act, 2016 and NEP 2020 should be regularly monitored at the institutional level.

CONCLUSION

The study highlighted that disability inclusion in higher education requires more than awareness of rights; it demands sustained institutional commitment and systemic reform. Although Himachal Pradesh University demonstrates initial progress towards inclusion, significant gaps persist in infrastructure, support services and institutional practices. Strengthening institutional readiness for disability inclusion is essential for ensuring equitable access, participation, and academic success of students with disabilities in higher education.

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