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## Equity in higher education: Identifying critical gender concerns

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# Equity in Higher Education:

Identifying critical gender concerns



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## I. Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief is an effort to highlight key policy recommendations to address critical gender concerns in the higher education sector. Equity in Higher Education is arguably one of the most significant and urgent issues facing India today; given that it is among the most unequal societies in the world. Gender inequalities do not stand alone but work through their interlocking effects with other dimensions of inequality. Though the Eleventh Five Year Plan marks a watershed in the history of Indian Planning in terms of increased outlays to education overall and especially to higher education, very little measurable change, by way of reducing inequalities between groups, is discernible. Only modest variation has occurred and there is considerable tokenism in the nature of the schemes available that explicitly address equity issues. Therefore, the Twelfth Plan offers the opportunity for taking stock of the progress made so far, the nature of the problem and the way forward.

The explicit focus of this policy brief is to examine the policy options undertaken during the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) as well as those under consideration for the Twelfth Five Year Plan. It is very important not to minimize the efforts of the Eleventh Plan to provide a major push to education overall, and to higher education in particular, visible in the huge outlays provided to this sector, and specifically a nine-fold increase in outlays to higher education.

This policy brief argues that a two-fold strategy is needed: on the one hand, to identify specific schemes and strategies to address particular

groups and regions that are overwhelmingly excluded from higher education; and on the other, to consciously implement an intersectional approach (by combining more than one dimension of inequality)<sup>2</sup>.

## II. The Context

The recognition and redressal of inequalities in higher education has become a matter of considerable urgency in contemporary India. Recent global data, comparing inequalities in educational attainment, places India at the very top of the list, easily overtaking countries such as China and Brazil. Access to higher education opportunities continues to bear the stamp of multiple dimensions of inequalities – gender, caste, religion, class, locality and disability – that characterize our society. Arguably, education is the principal channel in contemporary India for transferring inequalities based on accident of birth from one generation to the next. The nature of extent of these inequalities, often compounded by mutual interaction, violates the constitutional promise of equitable opportunity. Given the limited possibilities of redistributing economic resources like land or capital, higher and technical education is perhaps the only productive resource that the state can in fact hope to redistribute. Studies among first generation entrants into higher education from among the most deprived groups such as women from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have shown that it is precisely their capacity to go beyond schooling that has enabled them to break the cycle of exclusion<sup>3</sup>. Another study on Muslims in the wake of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee Report also places critical emphasis on access to higher education for

<sup>1</sup>This policy brief draws on valuable inputs provided at a Centre for Women's Development Studies and UN Women organised national consultation on "Equity in Higher Education" held in New Delhi on March 3, 2012. It brought to the table eminent educationists, women's studies scholars, and others along with representatives from the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Planning Commission.

<sup>2</sup>Yogendra Yadav. Equity and Higher Education; presentation made at the Consultation, 2012.

<sup>3</sup>A. Namala, S. Kumar, R. Kurian, (n.d.) "Quest for Equity: Urban Dalit Women Employees and Entrepreneurs" was supported by Justitia et Pax, Netherlands and completed in 2010; presentation made at Consultation, 2012.



Muslim women<sup>4</sup>. That is why higher education is the crucial site of contests over social mobility. It is also the reason why policy interventions for equalising access to quality higher education are a vital prerequisite for realizing the Fundamental Right to Equality enshrined in the Constitution of India.

However, these ethical, constitutional and sociological imperatives are hard to translate into a set of policies for a number of reasons. First, higher education, especially the highest kind that carries assurance of excellence, is by definition exclusionary and requires selection. Successive selections increase the possibility of social advantages being masked as educational advantages and make it harder to give operational meaning to the ideal of equality of opportunity in this sector. Secondly, higher education is the downstream recipient of the effects of social selection in school education, which often take the form of self-exclusion of the disadvantaged. Wide variations in the rates of 'educational mortality', or drop-out rates, for different social groups ensure that the small pool that survives to enter higher and technical education is already skewed. It is hard to separate the effects of this pre-selection from the inequalities generated and sustained by practices within the higher educational system, and harder still to think of effective ways of neutralizing these. Finally, the limitation of the available data makes it difficult to formulate evidence-based policies and fine-tune these in a rapidly changing context.

More and more women are accessing higher education than ever before, and this constitutes a veritable silent revolution in our country. Thus, according to figures of the University Grants Commission, whereas the proportion of women in higher education stood at a bare 10 per cent at the time of independence, it has jumped to 42 per cent as of 2010-11. Compare this figure

with, say, gender indicators in work participation rates, electoral politics, or even health status.

We need to disaggregate this trend, for gender is a complex category especially in the context of higher education and should not only be reduced to 'women'. This means that 42 per cent is a somewhat misleading figure, once we disaggregate by region, rural-urban, caste, class and religion. For instance, urban upper-caste women may have 'caught up' with their male counterparts as far as gross enrolments in higher education are concerned (though this does not tell us what fields, disciplines or type of institution we are dealing with). On the other hand, there are huge gender gaps for rural women, OBC, SC/ST women and Muslim women<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, the interlocking effects of gender with other parameters of discrimination are so enormous that it is imperative to recognize gender as a category that cross-cuts all the other categories. Indeed, the gap amongst women across different social groups and regions is greater than the equivalent gap for men<sup>6</sup>.

Going by existing data provided by the government as well as the National Sample Survey (NSS), on increasing access measured through Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER), though there have been increases over time, the gap between the privileged and under-privileged have not reduced. It is no small matter to overcome the accumulated burden of multiple social inequalities within the period of a Five Year Plan. Most of the schemes only made very small progress over the course of the Plan. The educational data of the most recent round of the NSS for which data is available, namely 2009-10, has been somewhat disputed. Hence, the data sources used are for the previous rounds of 2004-05 and 2007-08. As the Working Group on Higher Education's draft report itself pointed out, according to the NSS Round (2007-08), GER

in the age group 18-22 years stood at an average of 17 per cent, up from 14 per cent in 2004-05. However, within this average, Scheduled Tribe men are 8.7 per cent compared to 6.4 per cent ST women; rural men are 9 per cent compared to 5.6 per cent women; Muslim men are 9 per cent compared to just 6 per cent for Muslim women. Compare these figures with 38.7 per cent GERs for urban upper caste men and 37.7 per cent urban upper caste women!

### III. Critique of Policy Option(s)

During the Eleventh Five Year Plan, a number of initiatives were undertaken with a view to reducing regional and social group imbalance. Some of the pre-existing schemes were merged and some new schemes launched. Most of the focus was on measures to reduce regional inequalities by setting up model colleges, universities and colleges in backward districts; special development grants for old and young institutions; embarking on schemes for student loans; and also attempts to address specific inequalities for women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, minorities and the disabled. Given the recentness and slow pace of the launching of these schemes, a review of these schemes has not yet been undertaken. It would therefore be a priority to conduct such reviews at the earliest.

Redressing these identifiable inequalities in order to move towards the Constitutional ideal of equality of opportunity in higher education should be a key objective of the Twelfth Plan. Seriousness towards this would require that we move beyond the tokenism that often characterizes such schemes. Most importantly, instead of following a uniform strategy for all the disadvantaged groups, it is useful to evolve differentiated strategies for different groups as well as an intersectional strategy that recognises the inter-related nature of inequality.

This does not imply that there need not be any targeted strategies for a particular group. Taking the case of women, for instance, the Twelfth Plan Working Group Report suggests women's studies centres, women's hostels, women's universities, and scholarships as special schemes. Of these, the need today of women's universities can surely be questioned, given the data. Women's hostels are an acute need, but there is every reason to consider a diversity index to enable rural, minority, lower caste, and disabled women, who are currently the most excluded, to gain access.

On the other hand, there are schemes that only target minority groups, backward regions, and disabled groups. While there is no doubt that special schemes are required for those communities (such as denotified tribes, manual scavengers and so on) who are overwhelmingly excluded from higher education, equal emphasis needs to be placed on those schemes that can address more than one dimension of inequality. Gender is particularly critical here, since it does not stand alone but acts together with dimensions such as class, caste, minority status, disability and so on<sup>7</sup>.

### Budgetary Allocations for Higher Education

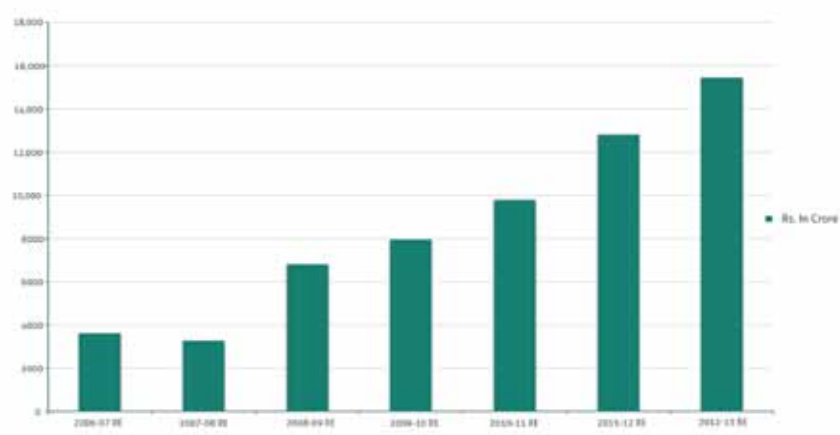
The Eleventh Plan had set ambitious targets for promoting higher education by enhancing public spending; encouraging private engagement; and initiating institutional and policy reforms. Inclusion was an essential thrust of the Eleventh Plan. Various schemes along with a special plan were envisaged for higher education in the Eleventh Plan.

If we look at the trend in Central Plan Outlay for Higher Education over the last 5-6 years, it has increased significantly (as shown in Figure 1).

<sup>4</sup>Sudhanshu Bhushan. Participation of Muslims in Higher Education, Draft Report, National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 2011; presentation made at Consultation, 2012.  
<sup>5</sup>University Grants Commission, 2008; Select Educational Statistics 2010-11; John, 2012.  
<sup>6</sup>Mary E. John. "Gender and Higher Education in the Time of Reforms", Contemporary Education Dialogue, 9 (2), July 2012.

<sup>7</sup>See Bhattacharya, 2012, Niranjana, 2012; See for special study of Muslims, Bhushan, 2011.

Figure 1: Central Plan Outlay for Higher Education



Source: Budget at a Glance, Union Budget, 2007-08 to 2012-13

Notes: BE-Budget Estimates; RE –Revised Estimates

Table 1: Status of the initiatives envisaged in the Eleventh Five Year Plan

	(Rs. in Crore)					
	2007-08 RE	2008-09 RE	2009-10 RE	2010-11 RE	2011-12 RE	2012-13 BE
Setting up a Refinance Corporation/ Students Loan Scheme	2.5	-	-	-	-	-
Education Loan Interest Subsidy	-	0.01	0.10	500	640	800
National Mission in Education through ICT	-	368.44	280	450	765	765
Assistance to State Governments for Degree Colleges	-	-	-	-	10	10
Incentivising States for Expansion, Inclusion and Excellence	-	-	-	-	-	0.9
Establishment of Tribunals, Accreditation Authority, NCHER and National Finance Corporation	-	-	-	-	-	2
Scholarship for College and University Students for Distance Learning	12.6	30	63	108	162	225
Scholarship to Students from Non- Hindi speaking States/UTs and other scholarships	2.61	2.42	2.5	2.41	2.41	2.41

Source: Expenditure Budget Volume II, Department of Higher Education, Union Budget 2008-09 to 2012-13,

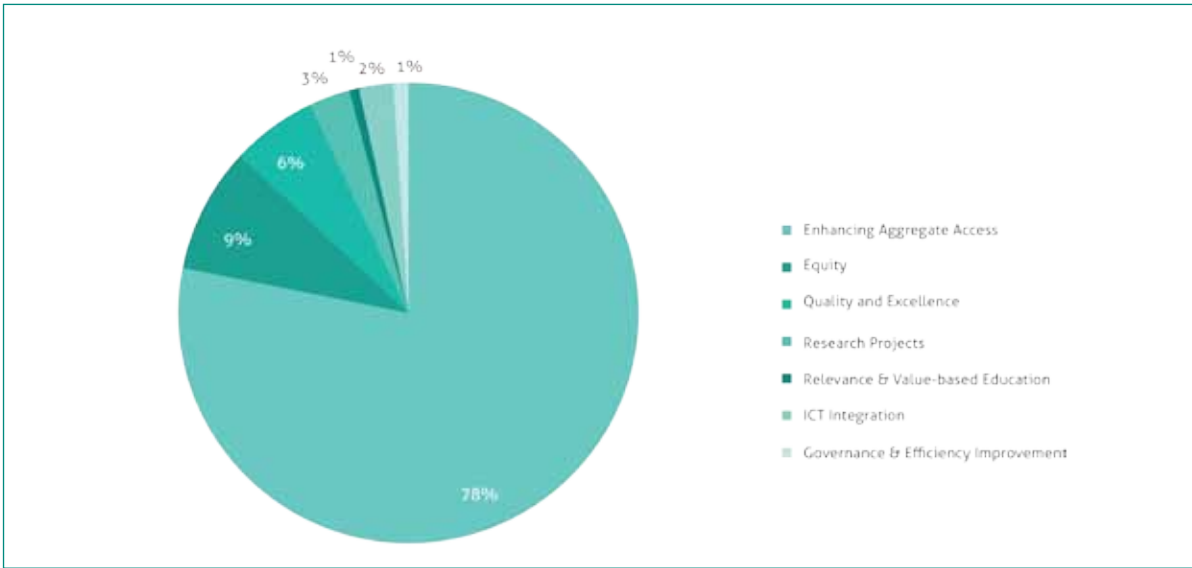
Notes: BE-Budget Estimates; RE –Revised Estimates

However, as the table below shows, in most cases, many schemes haven’t taken off as planned. Even in cases where schemes have been introduced, utilisation remains a concern. Also, while the Eleventh Plan committed to set up several newer institutions, at the same time it is necessary to upgrade and maintain existing government colleges and higher education institutions.

The Working Group on Higher Education for the Twelfth Five Year Plan has made projections for various interventions under Higher Education. As the figure below shows, 9 per cent of the total projections have been made to ensure

equity in higher education, which includes interventions to ensure gender equity and equity across social groups. It is important that these projections are realized in the Twelfth Plan period.

Figure 2: Component wise Proposed Budgetary Provisions in Higher Education for Twelfth Five Year Plan



Source: Working Group on Higher Education for the Twelfth Five Year Plan

IV. Policy Recommendations

Many concrete proposals for improving existing schemes as well as planning for new interventions were discussed at the Consultation. Here are some of the policy recommendations:

- Much of the resource investment on equal access to quality education needs to be utilized through a quantum jump in the volume, range and amount of student support measures like scholarship, stipend, assistantship and loans for disadvantaged students. There are a number of problems with current budgetary allocations. Firstly, when it comes to equity considerations, there is a divide between ‘gender’ budgets which

exclusively target ‘women’, and ‘social group’ equity budgets, where gender is absent as a criterion. Secondly, the allocations for scholarships for various marginal social groups as suggested in the Twelfth Plan Working Group Report are of the order of Rs. 200 Crore per group in an overall budget that is almost Rs. 2 Lakh Crore, and is therefore clearly inadequate.

- There is a need for mechanisms such as Diversity Index<sup>8</sup> to monitor equity performance of institutions and to link it with monetary incentives.
- Enhancing the density of higher education institutions in the backward states and a

<sup>8</sup>Amitabh Kundu; Satish Deshpande; presentation made at the Consultation, 2012.

substantial boost to enrollment in the Eastern states. However, this emphasis needs to be approached with considerable care and a review of some of the new central universities that have been set up in the Eleventh Plan period is urgent<sup>9</sup>. While the idea of setting up a university in a remote area may be well intentioned, the question of its feasibility has to be addressed in order to ensure that quality faculty will be willing to work in such areas.

- A substantial increase in the presence of rural students in general, in a similar vein to the point made above, it may be wiser to tackle the huge urban-rural disparities in access to higher education by building institutions in urban areas that cater to the needs of rural students rather than setting up universities in remote rural areas.
- Closing the gender gap in urban India and a substantial reduction in the gender gaps for girl students from rural areas, poorer families and deprived social communities is of utmost importance.
- Increasing the participation of SC, ST and Muslim students must be a priority.
- Special boosts to most deprived SC communities, Specially Vulnerable Tribal Groups, most backward Social and Educationally Backward Communities, Denotified Tribes, other nomadic communities and the *dalits* among Muslims and Christians must also be provided.
- It is crucial to provide a level playing ground to students from poorer families,

especially in rural areas, so that those who reach the entry point of higher education are no longer constrained by lack of resources.

- Ensuring a qualitative change in the availability of institutional infrastructure and personal aids and opportunities available to the disabled students must be stressed upon in all policy action.

V. Conclusion

These are modest aims for any country that wishestomovetowardsequalityofopportunity. Yet,given the existing levels of inequalities and the record of schemes so far, achieving these goals would be a stiff challenge. This calls for a break with the approach followed so far. There is a need to move beyond token scheme-based approaches to an integral view of the existing inequalities to find the way forward. This would require umbrella initiatives, building capacity and improvement of infrastructure, providing proactive measures through proper implementation of reservation, increasing incentives to differently-abled and other marginalised students, and so on. Given that a part of the gap that is observed between social groups and gender at the level of higher education is due to lower numbers and quality of pass-outs from the school system due to high drop-out rate and segmented quality, there is a need to improve the quality of schooling and retention of students from the marginalised sections through enhancing the performance of the schooling cycle.

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<sup>9</sup>See articles in *Seminar* issue 624, August 2011

## Notes

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