Bridging The Gap: Odisha's Initiatives For Diversity And Inclusion In Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of diversity and inclusion in higher education is crucial not only for ensuring equitable access to knowledge and opportunities but also for fostering innovation, creativity, and a vibrant learning environment. Recognizing this, the Odisha government has implemented several initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive and diverse higher education landscape. This article will explore some of these key initiatives and their impact on students, faculty, and the overall higher education ecosystem in Odisha Odisha, a state in Eastern India, has long recognized the need for diversity and inclusion in its higher education system. In recent years, the state government has taken several significant steps to ensure equal access to quality education for students from all backgrounds. The Odisha government has implemented several initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion in higher education. These initiatives aim to make higher education accessible and affordable for students from all backgrounds, including those from disadvantaged groups, and to provide them with the support they need to succeed. This research examines Odisha's proactive measures to enhance diversity and inclusion in higher education. Through a comprehensive analysis of the state's initiatives, policies, and their impact, the study aims to shed light on the effectiveness of these measures in bridging educational disparities. By focusing on Odisha as a case study, this research contributes valuable insights into fostering a more inclusive higher education environment, ultimately paving the way for broader discussions on diversity initiatives in the educational landscape. This research abstract explores Odisha's concerted efforts to address diversity and inclusion in higher education. Investigating the implementation and impact of specific initiatives, the study assesses their effectiveness in narrowing educational disparities. By delving into Odisha's strategies, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how regional interventions contribute to fostering a more inclusive higher education environment. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on advancing diversity and inclusion practices in higher education.

Keywords: Diversity, Higher Education, Odisha, Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Higher education should be a crucible where diverse voices and perspectives blend to create a vibrant, inclusive society. Recognizing this, the Odisha government has taken several commendable initiatives to ensure equitable access and participation for students from all backgrounds in its universities and colleges. This article delves into these initiatives, highlighting their impact and exploring the future path towards a truly inclusive higher education landscape in the state. The Government of Odisha has undertaken several initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion in higher education, ensuring equitable access and opportunity for all students. These initiatives aim to create a welcoming and supportive environment for students from diverse backgrounds, including those belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities, women, and students with disabilities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Rout(2020) published a research paper on the Status of Inclusion in the Higher Education System of Odisha titled "A Case Study". The study revealed that: (i) Differently abled (PH) and minority community (Muslim) students have equal opportunities for admission, but low enrollment among minority community learners is attributed to parental awareness issues. (ii) Academic performance of differently abled (PH) and minority community (Muslim) students is satisfactory, whereas ST category students exhibit lower participation in classroom discussions due to attendance issues. (iii) ST students' irregularity is linked to household responsibilities and livelihood obligations. (iv) Suggestions include providing a conducive campus environment for physically disabled learners, including accessible facilities like toilets, ramps, and advanced audio-visual classrooms.

Behera(2023) published a research paper on the Quality of Higher Education in Odisha titled "Assessment By Students" utilizing a structured questionnaire to compare 209 students from two colleges in Puri district. The findings suggest that higher education in Odisha is deemed average, with the quality hindered by structural and functional aspects such as curriculum design, library and laboratory facilities, and classroom dynamics. The paper proposes potential improvements including teacher and management self-assessment, clear vision, and government support in fostering desired educational skills among teachers, as per students' perspectives.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Higher education serves as a critical engine for social mobility and economic progress, yet it often remains inaccessible to marginalized communities. Studying Odisha's innovative initiatives for diversity and inclusion in higher education is crucial for several reasons:

1. Identifying best practices: Odisha's programs like OHEPEE and the Green Passage Scheme offer valuable insights into effective strategies for increasing access and participation for disadvantaged groups. Analysing their successes and challenges can inform policies in other states and across India as a whole.

2. Understanding impact and sustainability: Evaluating the impact of these initiatives on student enrolment, completion rates, and career outcomes is essential to assess their long-term effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This knowledge can guide future funding decisions and ensure sustainable progress towards inclusive higher education.

3. Promoting inclusivity across institutions: Odisha's diverse landscape of universities and colleges presents a unique opportunity to study how policies translate into practice at the local level. Understanding the challenges and successes of implementation across different institutions can offer valuable lessons for scaling up successful initiatives and promoting inclusivity across the entire higher education system.

4. Contributing to national discourse: India faces significant challenges in ensuring equitable access to quality higher education for all. Studying Odisha's initiatives can contribute to the national discourse on diversity and inclusion, providing concrete examples and data-driven insights to inform policy decisions at the national level. By studying Odisha's bold steps towards inclusive higher education, we can not only learn from their successes and challenges but also contribute to building a more equitable and vibrant educational landscape for all.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Analyse the effectiveness of Odisha's flagship programs like OHEPEE and the Green Passage Scheme in increasing access and participation for marginalized communities in higher education.

2. Evaluate the impact of these initiatives on student enrolment, completion rates, and career outcomes, particularly for students from Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and first-generation learners.

3. Identify the challenges and facilitators in implementing diversity and inclusion policies across different universities and colleges in Odisha.

4. Assess the role of e-governance initiatives like SAMS and SAP in promoting transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity in the higher education system.

5. Examine the effectiveness of efforts to promote Odia and tribal languages in higher education, including curriculum development, faculty training, and dedicated departments.

6. analyse the accessibility of higher education institutions for students with disabilities in Odisha and evaluate the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms.

7. Investigate the role of faculty training and curriculum development in fostering inclusive teaching and learning practices in higher education institutions.

8. Evaluate the impact of cultural exchange programs and initiatives promoting diversity awareness in creating a more inclusive campus environment for all students.

9. Identify best practices and lessons learned from Odisha's initiatives that can be replicated and adapted in other states and across India to promote inclusive higher education.

10. Contribute to the national discourse on diversity and inclusion in higher education by providing data-driven insights and concrete examples to inform policy decisions and future initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis primarily relies on secondary data sourced from diverse government outlets, websites, documents, as well as academic literature. It predominantly focuses on policies and laws of the Odisha government. Therefore allowing limited room for modification.

INITIATIVES BY ODISHA GOVERNMENT

1. Odisha Higher Education Program for Excellence and Equity (OHEPEE): This flagship program provides funding for infrastructure development, faculty training, and student support services in 138 colleges and 11 universities. It focuses on improving access to quality higher education for students from disadvantaged groups, particularly STs.
2. Green Passage: This scheme offers automatic admission and scholarship benefits to meritorious students from SCs and STs. It aims to increase their enrollment in higher education institutions.
3. Laptop-DBT Scheme: The government provides laptops to students from SCs, STs, and OBCs to bridge the digital divide and enhance their learning experience. Ensuring Equity and Inclusion:
4. Reservation Policy: The government implements a reservation policy in higher education institutions, ensuring representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in faculty positions and student admissions.
5. Financial Aid: Various scholarship schemes are available for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, including minority communities and students with disabilities. This removes financial barriers to education.
6. Accessibility Initiatives: Educational institutions are being made physically accessible for students with disabilities through infrastructure improvements and assistive technology provisions.
7. Gender Equity: The government promotes gender equality in higher education through initiatives like girls' hostels, mentorship programs, and self-defense training. This empowers female students and encourages their participation in higher education.
8. Diversity and Inclusion Cells: Dedicated cells are established within universities and colleges to address issues of discrimination and promote inclusive practices.
9. Sensitization Programs: Workshops and training programs are conducted for faculty and staff to sensitize them towards issues of diversity and inclusion. Strengthening Governance:
10. Online Grievance Redressal System: Students can register complaints related to discrimination or harassment through an online portal, ensuring timely and effective intervention. Paving the Pathway to Access

11. Green Passage: This scheme offers financial assistance to students from Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC) communities, enabling them to pursue higher education without financial constraints.

12. Relaxation of Percentage of Marks: The government has relaxed the minimum eligibility marks for ST and SC students, making higher education more accessible to them.

13. Online Student Feedback System: This system provides students with a platform to anonymously evaluate faculty performance, promoting transparency and accountability within institutions. Promoting Equity and Inclusion:

14. Disability-Friendly Campuses: The government is actively working to make college campuses more accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities. This includes the construction of ramps, elevators, and other facilities, as well as the provision of assistive technologies.

15. Gender Sensitization Programs: These programs are implemented to raise awareness about gender equality and prevent discrimination on campus.

16. Anti-Ragging Measures: The government has implemented strict anti-ragging policies and established strong enforcement mechanisms to ensure the safety and well-being of students.

17. Diversity in Curriculum and Faculty: The government is encouraging higher education institutions to diversify their curriculum and faculty to reflect the state's rich cultural and linguistic heritage. Empowering Through Scholarships

18. Chief Minister's Special Scholarship Scheme: This scheme offers scholarships to students from economically weaker sections, enabling them to access quality education regardless of their financial background.

19. Gsopabandhu Sikhya Sathi Yojana (GSSS Yojana): Provides financial assistance to orphans and destitute students pursuing higher education

20. Biju Yuva Sasaktikaran Yojana (BJYS): Distributes laptops to meritorious students from underprivileged backgrounds to bridge the digital divide

21. Kalinga Sikhya Sathi Yojana (KSSY): Offers interest subsidy on educational loans taken by students from economically weaker sections for pursuing professional courses

22. Merit Scholarship Scheme: Rewards meritorious students pursuing higher education in the state

23. Rs 50,000 Aid for SC/ST Students: Provides financial aid of Rs. 50,000 to underprivileged Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students pursuing degree courses

24. Odisha State Higher Education Council (OSHEC): Established to advise the government on formulating and implementing policies for higher education development

25. Implementation of Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA): Aligns with the national mission to enhance access, equity, and quality in higher education

26. Mo College Initiative: Encourages industry partnerships to develop skill-based courses relevant to job markets

27. Focus on NAAC Accreditation: Supports institutions in obtaining National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) accreditation to ensure quality standards

28. Expansion of Educational Institutions: Aims to increase the number of universities and colleges to improve access

29. Nua O Yuva Odisha Nabin (NOYON): A recently launched scheme (November 2023) to support higher education students . Basically it is a new scholarship scheme for student empowerment .

30. Expansion of PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) Empowerment Programme: May address educational barriers faced by these communities, potentially increasing their access to higher education in the long run .

CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS

1. Improving the quality of education in rural areas: This will help to ensure that students from rural backgrounds have access to the same quality of education as students from urban areas.
2. Addressing the issue of gender inequality: The participation of women in higher education is still lower than that of men. Initiatives need to be implemented to encourage more women to pursue higher education.
3. Providing more support for students with disabilities: Students with disabilities often face challenges in accessing higher education. Initiatives need to be implemented to provide them with the support they need to succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

The Odisha government's commitment to diversity and inclusion in higher education is evident in the numerous initiatives implemented over the past few years. These initiatives have resulted in significant progress towards creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for students from all backgrounds. However, there is still room for further improvement, and continued efforts are needed to address persistent challenges and ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive in higher education. By building on the existing initiatives and addressing the remaining challenges, the Odisha government can ensure that higher education becomes truly inclusive and accessible to all students, regardless of their background. This will contribute to a more equitable and just society where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential

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