

PREPAREDNESS OF BHUTANESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This research has examined “Preparedness of Higher Education Institutions for Inclusive Education in Bhutan” in terms of understanding, perception, policies and inclusivity of academic programmes. The study adopted explanatory sequential mixed methods guided by pragmatism as a paradigm. A total of 867 participants from 9 Colleges of Royal University responded to the survey out of which 317 were faculty, 80 support staff, and 422 students. Out of 98 participants who were interviewed, 88 were from the colleges including faculty, support staff, and students, and 12 stakeholders were from Ministry of Education. The key policy documents such as Students’ Admission Policy, Wheel of Academic Law of the university, Programme specific documents, and semester term plans followed for teaching and learning were analyzed. The study revealed that although faculty, staff, stakeholders and students have basic conceptual understanding of inclusive education, they were skeptical about the full inclusion of students with special needs in higher education institutions of Bhutan.

Keywords: Disability, Diversity, Inclusion, Learning, Policy and Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, inclusive education (IE) has changed educational reforms and practice around the world. As such, Bhutan adopted the Education for All - Dakar Framework for Action in 1994, ratified the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, signed the Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010, and became a signatory to the Proclamation of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) Commission on Disability on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in 2008 (Ministry of Education

[MoE], 2012). IE resonates in many national and educational policies of the country. The Constitution of the Kingdom (Article 7, Section 15, 2008) states that every child has the right to education regardless of one's physical challenges, socio-economic status, religion, mental illness, sex, language, race, and caste. With the establishment of the Muenselling Institute, the first specialised institute for students with visual impairment in Khaling, Trashigang in 1973, Bhutan has been striving to provide opportunities for every individual citizen to develop their unique gifts to better their lives and contribute towards nation building (MoE, 2012). Bhutan's move towards inclusive education is not only a response to international declarations for the rights of persons with disabilities. The sense of inclusivity is rather naturally embedded in our cultural ethos and development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. According to Dorji (2015), "the Buddhist belief in compassion and inter-connectedness of all sentient beings further provides opportunities for the formulation of policies and practices supportive of inclusion" (p.10). In pursuing happiness, all the ruling governments initiated several significant reforms such as wholesome education, Child friendly school, Educating for Gross National Happiness (GNH), the Green School Project, and 21st century education which all best align with the principles of inclusive education.

Besides numerous initiatives, the Ministry of Education has drafted the National Policy on Special Educational Needs in 2011. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) was also endorsed in 2019. Other initiatives such as the Standards for Inclusive Education of 2017, Guidelines on Assessment, Examination, Promotion, and Transition of Students with Disabilities of 2018, and the Ten-Year roadmap of inclusive and special education of Bhutan in 2018 are developments that would have a long-term sustainable impact in the overall advancement of inclusive education efforts in the country. In addition, the fact that the Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers (BPST) launched in 2019 by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan considers IE as one of the key standards to measure teacher professional standards (MoE, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted on knowledge, attitude, and practices on children with disability (CWD) in 2017 found that although knowledge of CWD is extremely limited, the general population possesses a positive attitude and agrees with the improving inclusive services in Bhutan (MoE, 2017). The lack of knowledge of CWD can be a critical barrier for any educational and social inclusion if left unaddressed.

Further, a limited number of researches are conducted on disability and inclusive education in Bhutan (Dorji, 2015). The handful of the existing literature of IE in Bhutan all describes the scenario in lower level educational institutions like preschool kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools. Research exploring IE for students with disabilities at HEIs in Bhutan is almost non-existent. On the other hand, both the number of students with disabilities and schools offering special education programmes have been rapidly growing over the years. As per the annual education statistics, 2020, there were 28 such schools, including two special institutes, with 1126 students with disabilities (MoE, 2020). This indicates a need for HEIs to prepare for a more inclusive approach to education. Moreover, the draft National Education Policy (MoE, 2019) requires all tertiary education institutions to plan academic programmes, teaching pedagogy, physical infrastructure, scholarship, and disaster management based on diversity such as gender, disabilities, and economic background of the students. As per the tertiary education policy, admission to higher education institutions will be based on merit (MoE, 2010) but lacks clear policy statements about making it accessible to students with disabilities.

Therefore, the current study examined the preparedness of the HEIs in Bhutan for the inclusion of students with disabilities in terms of four major areas; stakeholders' understanding of IE, perception on the inclusion of students with disabilities, institutional policies to support IE and inclusivity of academic programmes. The finding of this study will enable the relevant stakeholders to generate discussions and formulate policies and plans which will enable persons with disabilities to access, participate and benefit from being included in HEIs.

Research Questions

What is the preparedness of higher education institutions in Bhutan to support the educational needs and aspirations of students with disabilities?

Sub-research questions

- What is the understanding of inclusive education according to faculty, staff, students and other stakeholders of higher education institutions in Bhutan?
- What are the perceptions of faculty and staff of higher education institutions and other stakeholders on the inclusion of students with disabilities?
- What kind of institutional policies are there to support inclusive education in higher education institutions?
- How inclusive are the academic programmes offered by higher education institutions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning of Inclusive Education

The meaning and scope of the term 'Inclusive Education' has been through a dynamic process. The global definitions vary widely depending on context and policy (Dorji & Schuelka, 2016; Szumski, et al., 2017). In the past, it was merely perceived as a process of including students with learning difficulties and disabilities in regular schools (Zangmo & Mittu, 2020). However, the term is increasingly being understood more broadly as a systemic reform and a new model of education that responds to the diverse needs of all learners (Szumski, et al., 2017; Imania & Fitria 2018). The definition adopted by United Nations agencies appears more comprehensive and universal. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) explains inclusive education as "An inclusive education system accommodates all students whatever their abilities or requirements, and at all levels – pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and life-long learning" (UNICEF, 2017, p. 3). Similarly, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(2011) defines inclusion as "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing exclusion from education and from within education" (p. 21). In the context of Bhutan, the Ministry of Education (2020) defines IE as "the process of valuing, accepting and supporting diversity in schools and ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to learn" (p. 4). IE can be understood as a holistic education system that is equally available and accessible to every learner irrespective of abilities, various social, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Ceresnova, 2018). It is fundamentally about celebrating diversity and supporting the achievement and participation of all learners (Keeffe & Carrington, 2007). In the

context of this research, IE is defined as the provision of inclusive educational programmes and various support services for students with disabilities in higher education institutes.

Benefits of Inclusive Education

Owing to its numerous multifaceted benefits, inclusive education is increasingly embraced by many educational institutions throughout the world. Despite a few common criticisms of placing students with disabilities in a general classroom, there is substantial research evidence claiming better outcomes of inclusion in many areas: academic achievement, self-esteem, social skills, attitude, and quality of instruction for both students with and without disabilities (McDonnell & Hunt, 2014; Nishan, 2018). Rea et al. (2002) found that students who attended inclusive classrooms scored higher grades, possessed fewer behavioural problems and absenteeism as compared to students who were served in pull-out special educational programs. In contrast to the general belief, the academic achievement of students without disabilities is found to have no relationship with the inclusion of students with disabilities in the same classroom (Ruijs, et al., 2010; Szumski, et al., 2017). Likewise, Sermier et al. (2013) also found no significant difference in the progress of the low, average, or high-achieving pupils from classrooms with or without inclusion. According to McDonnell and Hunt (2014), all students receive higher quality instruction in an inclusive setting as teachers plan lessons based on inclusive principles. Moreover, students with disabilities experience better academic achievement and improved learning than do their peers in non-inclusive settings because of the use of innovative instructional strategies and resources by the teachers (Suleymanov, 2014).

In terms of social development, inclusion facilitates more interactions, peer support, acceptance, and friendship, learning of social skills thus resulting in the removal of deeply rooted social prejudice towards students with disabilities (McMillian 2008; McDonnell & Hunt, 2014). Students involved in helping others through peer tutoring and other similar opportunities in inclusive settings benefit from improved social and communication and also experience improved self-esteem and value for differences (Loreman et al, 2005). At the systemic and societal levels, IE facilitates quality education for all learners which is cost-effective and ultimately builds an inclusive society (UNICEF, 2017). It is also viewed from the 'right-based model' where education for PWD is seen as a matter of human right than simply a privilege (Chopra, 2013). It also has significant benefits for teachers by acting as a catalyst for continuous development of their knowledge and skills for teaching (Loreman, et al. 2005). Likewise, Dorji (2015) considers inclusive education to be "more cost-effective in the long-term considering the positive impact on post-school outcomes in preparing children with special educational needs for gainful employment and independent living" (p.9).

Factors Determining Inclusion in Higher Education

Ensuring successful implementation of IE at higher education institutions entails numerous factors in place. Booth et al (2002) asserts that the foundation of IE comprises three interconnected and interwoven dimensions: inclusive policy, inclusive culture, and inclusive practice. One of the most powerful ways is having clear and visible educational leaders who can push a comprehensive and strategic change programme for inclusion (Ceresnova, 2018). As inclusivity is a hallmark of quality, it is necessary to design university-level policies and

strategies to help students with disabilities acquire higher education attainments successfully (Moriña, 2017). Faculty attitude and disability-related training is another indispensable factor of IE ((Moriña, 2017). Faculty trained in IE are found to have positive attitudes and reported more use of universal design teaching-learning strategies but most faculty in higher education institutions are not trained in inclusion (Davies et al., 2013). Some of the good practices across the world include universities' commitment to widening participation through in-reach and out-reach programmes, use of relevant teaching material such as Case Studies of Inclusive Practice, Support for Care Leavers (Donnell, 2015), and office for students with disabilities (Morina, et al, 2020). Having policies and regulations of IE alone may not lead to full inclusion. The curriculum, learning materials, and assessment methods must be accessible and available for all students with diverse needs. The commonly practiced student-centered methods such as universal design for learning or universal design for instruction should be applied in all courses (Ceresnova, 2018). For instance, the faculty's willingness to provide simple accommodation in terms of alternative assignment, lecture notes, and assessment methods directly impact the academic success of students with disabilities (Dyer, 2018). There is the substantial research evidence on how the attitude of faculty and administrators can positively affect both academic success and social adjustment of students with disabilities (Moriña, 2017). A comparative study conducted in some universities in Spain, Canada, and the United States found that academics who attended disability-related training showed positive attitudes towards inclusion (Moriña, 2017). Morgado et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of training all faculty of the universities in training in IE as the number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is rapidly increasing.

METHODOLOGY

As the aim of this study was to explore the preparedness of higher education institutions in Bhutan for inclusive education, explanatory sequential mixed methods guided by pragmatism as a paradigm was adopted in this research. In an explanatory design, quantitative data is first collected and analyzed, and results are used to drive the development of a qualitative instrument to further explore the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As a result of this design, three stages of analyses are conducted: after the primary quantitative phase, after the secondary qualitative phase, and at the integration phase that connects the two strands of data and extends the initial quantitative exploratory findings (Creswell et al., 2011). Stratified random sampling was used to select participants for the quantitative part of the study. The participants included academics, support staff, and students of nine constituent and two affiliated colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan who were selected randomly, however, ensuring a representation by College, gender, and programme of study. A total of 867 participants responded to the survey out of which 317 were academics, 80 support staff, and 422 students. For the qualitative part, a non-probability sampling method of convenience sampling (Terre et al., 2002) was used to select participants. Accordingly, a total of 98 participants were interviewed. Out of the total participants, 88 were from the Royal University of Bhutan's constituent and affiliated Colleges including academics, support staff, and students, and 12 were stakeholders.

Instruments and Data Collection

The academics, support staff and students who participated in this study completed the inclusive education questionnaires. The questionnaires were self-designed covering demographic data of the participants and aspects related to the preparedness of the HEIs for inclusive education. The individual items of the questionnaire were measured using a 6-point Likert scale (1 Strongly disagree; 2 Disagree; 3 Somewhat disagree; 4 Somewhat agree; 5 Agree, and 6 Strongly agree). The internal consistency of the questionnaires was measured using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient (Huck, 2004). Initially, the result of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for some themes was less than 0.52 indicating weak result reliability of the test. As a result, a few items were removed which yielded a more positive Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.7 and more for all the themes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather perspectives from academics, support staff, and students of the constituent and affiliated Colleges and the stakeholders from relevant agencies. A total of 10 questions were asked to academics, 5 to support staff, 6 to students, and 5 to stakeholders. The interview questions focused more on those research questions which were qualitative in nature.

Document Analysis

Besides the survey and interview, document analysis formed the key sources of data for the current study. The key policy documents such as the RUB Students' Admission Policy, Wheel of Academic Law (WAL), Programme specific documents, and semester term plans followed for teaching and learning were analysed.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Survey data were coded, entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 and cleaned for the statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to describe and summarise the demographic data and themes for preparedness of HEIs for inclusive education. The raw data gathered from semi-structured interviews were transcribed, coded and categorised into various themes for the interpretation of the qualitative component of the data. The quantitative findings of the study were presented in tables with descriptions and interpretations. The qualitative findings were presented using rich descriptions and interpretations including case studies.

Ethics

Ethical issues cannot be ignored as they relate directly to the integrity of a research (Bryman, 2016). All ethical issues were addressed with strict adherence to the Research Code of Conduct and Regulations of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB, 2014). The permission to carry out the study was sought from the Office of Vice Chancellor (OVC), Royal University of Bhutan. Similarly, permission to conduct the study in Colleges was sought from the heads of nine constituent and two affiliated Colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan. A written consent was taken from all the participants prior to their participation in the survey and interview after explaining to them the purpose of the research and their role as research participants. They were also provided the option to discontinue from participation at any point in time. To protect the

identity of participants, pseudonyms were used while writing the results and discussions. The completed survey questionnaires, interview audio and transcripts, and all other data related to the study are stored in the password protected personal computers of the researchers. The data collected in the study are available with the researchers and can be made available accordingly.

Study Participants

For the quantitative data, a survey was conducted to 867 participants who were working or studying in the Royal University of Bhutan's nine constituent and two affiliated Colleges respectively. Out of the total participants, 317 (36.6%) were academics (70% male and 30% female), 80 (9.2%) support staff (42.5% male and 57.5% female) and 470 (54.2%) students (49.8% male and 50.2% female).

Interview Participants

For the qualitative data, a total of 98 participants were interviewed. Out of the total participants, 89.8% were from the Royal University of Bhutan's constituent and affiliated Colleges and 10.2% from other agencies. Among the participants of the Royal University of Bhutan, 28.4% were academics, 19.3% were support staff and 52.3% were students. Besides, stakeholders comprising 1 official each from the Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE), Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) Division, Ministry of Education, and Office of Vice Chancellor, Royal University of Bhutan participated in the interview. In addition, 2 teachers who teach in schools with SEN programmes, 2 College students and 3 graduates with visual impairments, and 5 parents of students with SEN also participated in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding of Inclusive Education

A clear understanding of the term 'Inclusive Education' is fundamental as it ultimately determines one's attitude and behavioral responses to students with disabilities. The qualitative data analysis demonstrates that IE is described in distinct expressions by research participants; an education for people with disabilities, special needs, different abilities, and equal opportunity of high-quality education for students from diverse backgrounds. Some participants understood IE as a form of schooling for people with disabilities. For instance, a faculty described IE as "catering to the needs of people with physical disabilities in terms of infrastructure and other facilities so that they do not suffer." Further, few participants have pronounced IE as an educational provision for students with special needs in mainstream schools with other students. For example, one of the stakeholders defined IE:

To me, Inclusive Education is educating children with special needs with that of their aged peers in the same school to provide mainstream education to all children irrespective of their strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, one student added, "inclusive education is providing a comfortable environment or facilities to the students with special needs so that they can also enjoy their school life in a normal way like those of normal students." Likewise, many participants have described IE as a system supporting students with different abilities. According

to one support staff, “IE is an education curriculum designed and made favorable for all kinds of differently-abled students taking up education.” Similarly, another support staff opined it as “truly including all children together in an effective learning environment. And also accepting and supporting all the children regardless of their abilities.” The majority of the participants have described IE as an equal opportunity for high quality education for students from diverse backgrounds in the same classroom. To illustrate, one of the stakeholders emphasized IE as “ensuring that all children from diverse backgrounds irrespective of age, color, gender, race, and ethnicity should be provided with an education that they will be able to learn and make use of their potential.” All students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their schools to receive high-quality instruction, education, and support that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum. Successful inclusive education happens primarily through accepting understanding and attending to student differences and diversity, which can include physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional. The main principle is to make all students feel welcomed, appropriately challenged, and supported in their efforts. However, two participants seem to have not heard about Inclusive Education as quoted (Student) “hearing it for the first time.”

The analysis of qualitative data shows that understanding of the term IE slightly varies from person to person. The description of IE as education for students with disabilities indicates that the understanding of some participants of IE is still narrow. In the past, IE was merely perceived as a process of including students with learning difficulties and disabilities in regular schools (Zangmo & Mittu, 2020). As indicated by the participants, understanding of IE revolves around educating students with special needs and different abilities in nearby regular schools. This understanding is consistent with UNICEF’s definition of IE as one that accommodates all students whatever their abilities or requirements, and at all levels – pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and life-long learning’ (UNICEF, 2017, p. 3). The majority of the participants have described IE as an equal opportunity for high-quality education for all students irrespective of diverse backgrounds such as color, race, ethnicity, disability, economic status, and language. The above perspectives align with “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing exclusion from education and from within education” UNESCO (2011, p. 21). In our Bhutanese context also, the Ministry of Education (2020) defines IE as the process of valuing, accepting, and supporting diversity in schools and ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to learn’ (p. 4). It is evident from the data that IE is understood as an educational provision for people with disabilities, special needs, different abilities, and diverse backgrounds. Such expressions about IE show that the majority of stakeholders, academics, and students of higher education institutions of Bhutan have a generic conceptual understanding of the meaning, purpose, and scope of IE.

Perceptions on The Inclusion of Students With Disabilities

One of the ways the study employed to understand the preparedness of HEIs for inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities was through the collection of views from all five groups of participants. When asked about their feelings and concerns about the inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities in higher education institutes, most of the participants reported that the HEIs in Bhutan lack proper infrastructures and conducive physical environments for the

inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities. For instance, one of the academics said, “I would like to see more students with special needs be a part of the higher education institutions in Bhutan, however, I am also aware that many of the institutions do not have the right infrastructure to take that step fully.” The majority of the academics pointed out that all the higher education institutes in Bhutan should have an avenue to admit students with special needs.

Similarly, many academics admitted that the current programmes and courses offered by HEIs are not inclusive. For example, 4 of the 25 academics reported that the current academic programmes are not aligned to the needs of the students with special needs. While the academics emphasized the need to make the programmes and courses more inclusive, it also became clear from the participants that the capacity building of academics is a significant step towards enabling them to understand the concept and philosophy of inclusion and apply it in their daily practice. It is poignant to note that most of the academics have not received any training or professional development programmes on IE. The majority of the academics reported that they lack proper knowledge and skills to support the needs of PWDs. One of the academics admitted that of late, his College has started getting students who needed special attention but most of their assessment regulations do not cover students with disabilities. This indicates the urgency for HEIs to think seriously about the policies and practices in reality.

There were also a few participants who suggested that students with special needs/disabilities should be enrolled in general degree Colleges or selected Institutions that have suitable courses for them. For instance, some participants expressed that the students with special needs/disabilities will find it difficult to complete courses in technical Colleges due to a lot of fieldwork and practical components. However, in inclusive education, instead of students selecting the colleges based on their disabilities, colleges should make their policies, culture, and practices more inclusive that are manageable for PWDs to cope up with by making sure that teaching and the curriculum, college buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport, and toilets are appropriate for all students. Inclusive education means all children learn together in the same schools or colleges.

The views of the stakeholders were not so different from the academics. Eight of the twelve stakeholders supported that students who completed their higher secondary schools should be allowed to enrol in HEIs. One of the stakeholders asserted that students with disabilities should be given opportunities based on their abilities and aptitude and offered choices to make in terms of what they can learn (curriculum) and based on what they can do and be in society. Similarly, a few stakeholders admitted that, despite the existence of inclusive provisions in the 2010 Tertiary Education Policy, it lacked interpretation into the related policies and guidelines surrounding admission, teaching, learning pedagogy, and infrastructure. One of the stakeholders reported that students with disabilities “heavily relied on the goodwill and support of their friends and teachers as there are no proper systems instituted to facilitate their full growth and become independent”. Another stakeholder, a teacher who teach in schools with SEN programme, shared similar sentiments mentioning that he had come across a parent preparing for his son’s transition to a private College after he completed class XII when ideally it should have been the school and the Ministry doing this transition planning in collaboration with the parents. It is evident from the responses that most of the HEIs in Bhutan are not adequately prepared for the inclusion of students with disabilities. While some Colleges have been welcoming students with special

needs/disabilities, there are Colleges and Institutes without any plans to take such students due to the nature of the courses they offer. It is consistent with a study by Grimes et al, (2011) which states that IE practice in Southeast Asia is still ineffective, problematic, and far from achieving those goals of facilitating education for all. Although Article 7, Section 15 of the constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan states that every child has the right to education regardless of one's physical challenges, socio-economic status, religion, mental illness, sex, language, race, and caste, there still exists a gap between the policy and its practice. Similarly, Bhutan adopted the Education for All - Dakar Framework for Action in 1994, ratified Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, signed the Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010, and became a signatory to the Proclamation of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) Commission on Disability on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in 2008. However, it is not well interpreted into various other related policies and guidelines such as the admission, teaching-learning pedagogy, and infrastructure. Thus, the interview responses reveal that the general perception of the participants on the inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities in HEIs in Bhutan is not very positive due to various factors such as the lack of proper infrastructure and facilities, the absence of inclusive policies, the lack of inclusive experts, and other services to support inclusion.

Institutional Policies

To specifically discuss the current inclusive policy in the Colleges, all the participants indicated non-existence or obliviousness of having any inclusive policy in black and white. The current admission and registration regulations do not mention anything about inclusive criteria. Although section C-Admission and Registration of Students, clause 7 of The Wheel of Academic Law, which is the definitive compilation of policies, regulations, and guidelines governing academic matters of the Royal University of Bhutan, states that the University will endeavour to encourage access to tertiary education for disabled students, and it will seek to make the necessary facilities available for that purpose, there is no mention about any inclusive admission criteria. Clause 1.2 of section C states that The Royal Charter of the University requires the University to admit students on merit and irrespective of religion, origin, sex, sexual orientation, or race, but there is no mention of inclusive criteria. Except for clause 2.1, which outlines the general minimum entrance requirements for the degree and diploma applicants, which was endorsed by the 18th Academic Board meeting in January 2010, none of the other clauses under section C was revised since its endorsement by the 1st Academic Board Meeting in July 2004.

The interview participants revealed that HEIs lack comprehensive policy correlated to students with SEN or disabilities. However, the analysis of survey data shows that almost all Colleges provide some form of support for students with special needs. The average mean for institutional policies on IE as rated by academics, support staff, and students (3.39, 3.53 & 3.76) inclines towards Agree category indicating the existence of some institutional policies on IE in the Colleges. Additionally, Colleges that have students with special needs are provided SEN opportunities that allow them to continue their academic careers. However, it is also revealed in the higher institutions that one of the biggest challenges faced by educators, students, and policy-makers is to support the varying needs of students due to a lack of tangible policies. Despite many national and educational policies of the country, the HEIs still lack any official policies and procedures. It is straightforward and revealed by all participants of them not hearing of or

reading any College policy and act related to students with disabilities This is evident in the quote by the student with a disability:

I think there is a dire need for policy. For example, no footpath is accessible. Also, there is a need for awareness programs as many do not know anything about disabilities. I saw some special considerations in higher secondary schools than in college levels. I feel that even personnel at higher positions are not aware of the disability.

This view was supported by one of the stakeholders who stated:

Firstly, the admission policy must be inclusive of students with disabilities. Secondly, the institute should have both hard (infrastructure and facilities) and soft (qualified HR, finance, programme) resources in place to support the education of students with disabilities. The institute could have all these policies and proposals in their master plan and start establishing.

Table 1. Views of Academics and Support staff of Higher Education Institutions on Inclusiveness of Institutional Policies

Items	Academics		Support staff	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
The values of inclusion are evident in my college's overall vision and mission.	4.10	1.43	4.31	1.20
Students with special needs/disabilities have equal access to study in my college.	3.23	1.61	3.63	1.49
My college has policies to enroll students with special needs/disabilities.	2.92	1.45	3.14	1.52
My college discusses the inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities in some forums.	3.48	1.45	3.11	1.46
My college provides required support to address the needs of students with special needs/disabilities.	2.99	1.48	3.49	1.50
There are students with special needs/disabilities in my college.	3.47	1.64	3.15	1.69
My college has a practice of assessing students' special needs.	3.07	1.39	3.29	1.34
My college organizes programs for students with special needs/disabilities.	2.54	1.38	2.69	1.34
The students with special needs/disabilities participate in all college programs and activities.	3.12	1.38	3.11	1.47

Students with special needs/disabilities must be given equal opportunities to study in higher educational institutes.	4.96	1.56	5.41	0.95
Mean	3.39	1.48	3.53	1.39
N	317		80	

As the policy is an assurance of the quality of a university, it is necessary to design university-level policies and strategies to help students with disabilities access higher education attainments successfully (Moriña, 2017). For instance, many participants articulated that the establishment of HEIs policies will provide equal rights and access, stop discrimination and unequal treatment, secure physical and mental support, and importantly prepare students with SEN as one of the stakeholders exemplified “citizenry for the world of work” (Stakeholder).

Table 2. Views of Students of Higher Education Institutions on Inclusiveness of Institutional Policies

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
My college assesses whether the student has special needs or not.	3.42	1.46
I have attended disability awareness programs in college.	2.35	1.53
There are students with special needs/disabilities in my college.	3.11	1.66
My college supports the individual needs of students with special needs/ disabilities.	3.39	1.47
The students with special needs/disabilities can participate in all college programs and activities.	3.57	1.78
College should have a separate unit to support students with special needs/disabilities.	4.63	1.56
My college has policies to support students with disabilities.	3.31	1.39
Students with special needs/disabilities must be given equal opportunities to study in higher educational institutes.	5.23	1.26
Students with special needs/disabilities have abilities to study any academic programs of my college if given appropriate support.	4.84	1.39

Mean	3.76	1.50
N	470	

Furthermore, the rating for the item, Students with special needs/disabilities must be given equal opportunity to study in higher education institutes by academics, support staff, and students falls in Agree to Strongly Agree category (4.96, 5.41, & 5.23). The higher mean suggests a necessitating policy that will provide equal opportunity for students with SEN/ disability to study in HEIs. In the same line, Dorji and Schuelka (2016) had also maintained the importance of ensuring all students with disabilities get full access to appropriate educational and social support services. Therefore, the RUB needs to ensure that it has policies and procedures as this will outline the vision in the HEIs as a major enabler of students with SEN (Ceresnova, 2018) to access equal benefits, services, and opportunities.

Despite any officially instituted policy and procedures of inclusion, the data from many Colleges involved in this study specify good practices that support students with SEN in various learning. For instance, one academic said, “When cases come, I have seen concerned officials catering or helping students with some disabilities” and this is further supported by many participants testifying that students facing difficulties in learning are appreciated and supported by the College. This resonates with Dyer’s (2018) statement of how providing simple accommodation can directly impact the academic success of students with disabilities, and improve self-esteem and value for differences (Moriña, 2017; Loreman et al, 2005). This provision of support and inclusive practices are also evident in the quantitative data. The average mean for items under the support and inclusive practices inclines towards 4 which falls under Agree category as shown in Table 1 and 2. However, catering the support to the students by linking policy with practice at an institutional level, rather than engaging in negotiations when situations arise is more secure and sustainable.

Academic Programmes

An inclusive education programme is pivotal in motivating students with disabilities to strive for excellence in learning in HEIs. The participants’ responses to the question ‘how inclusive are the academic programmes offered by different HIEs?’ are diverse and insightful. The participants opined that most of the academic programs of HEIs as ‘not inclusive’ predominantly due to lack of policy, nature of the programme, and lack of IE professionals. One of the academics said “currently the curricula taught in my college are not inclusive as the tutors who developed the courses are not trained. Similarly, a stakeholder illustrated:

About students with special needs and their status in higher education, while the highest level of policy such as the Tertiary Education Policy, 2010 of Bhutan has provisions to be inclusive, it has not been interpreted into the various other related policies and guidelines such as the admission, teaching-learning pedagogy, and infrastructure, etc.

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, item analysis for the theme Inclusiveness of academic programs, with overall mean and standard deviation (M=2.97; SD=1.38) of academics highlight that they

perceive programmes as not inclusive for students with disabilities. However, both academics and students rated somewhat agree in terms of contents of academic programs. Most significantly, both academics ($M=2.50$; $SD=1.31$) and students ($M=3.01$; $SD=1.44$) have rated somewhat disagree in response to the question ‘the reading materials of my course are accessible to students with special needs. In addition, both have rated somewhat disagree for the item ‘the assessment methods of my course can accommodate students with special needs. One of the visually impaired students also said that they “need to have more BA courses where students with disabilities can study as such courses are quite limited as of now”. The participant expressed the need to make learning materials more accessible for visually impaired students.

Table 3. Views of Academics of Higher Education Institutions on the Inclusiveness of the Academic Programmes

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
The module(s) I teach, adequately addresses the needs of students with special needs/disabilities.	3.05	1.43
The module(s) I teach, embraces inclusivity in terms of content.	3.15	1.47
The module(s) I teach incorporates assessment strategies that accommodate students with special needs/disabilities.	2.54	1.26
The teaching-learning materials I use are in formats accessible to students with special needs/disabilities.	2.50	1.31
I incorporate principles of inclusion in the development of the new module.	3.62	1.41
Mean	2.97	1.38
N	317	

Table 4. Views of Students of Higher Education Institutions on the Inclusiveness of the Academic Programmes

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
The academic course that I study can be pursued by students with special needs/disabilities.	3.27	1.61
The teaching strategies in the classroom can accommodate students with special needs/disabilities.	3.27	1.43
The reading materials of my course are accessible to students with special needs/disabilities.	3.01	1.44
The assessment methods of my course can accommodate students with special needs/disabilities.	3.01	1.39
Mean	3.14	1.47
N	470	

Similarly, technical programmes are found to be not inclusive compared to Humanities. An academic said, ‘in engineering, there are certain aspects of teaching-learning such as lab services and practical that are not inclusive or may not be able to be inclusive to all forms of disability. On other hand, many participants are not aware of the inclusivity of programmes as they have not seen any students with disability in their respective Colleges. Another academic pointed out “as of now, I have not seen such students in my College. I think we must teach curricula to those students using ICT and virtual learning technology based on the type of disability/needs”. On the other hand, some participants have reported the use of some inclusive teaching methods and assessments based on one’s knowledge and skills. They have provided Braille books, large font size reading materials, extra time during exams, and one-on-one consultation as per the need of the student. For example, one academic described the experience “we have discussed in Programme Board of Examiners (PBE) and allowed extra time for one undergraduate student who has a minor physical disability where his writing speed is impaired, such considerations should be there”.

To make the academic programmes more inclusive, the participants recommended several remedies such as; revamp the curriculum, training the staff of HEIs and liaising with relevant organisations to design the way forward. For instance, one of the stakeholders recommended: For RUB it would be helpful to work with MoE to understand the status of special needs in schools and study the trend and data. This may help the RUB to be prepared for students with special needs. Currently, there is no data or information to design any policy. On the other hand, if MoE could provide a list of those sitting for grade 12 examinations, with their nature, degree,

and type of disabilities, RUB could already anticipate incoming students with disabilities. However, for those with learning difficulties, it would be hard to meet the cut-off marks set by RUB for admission to colleges for whom the RUB may have to revise the admission criteria to make it more inclusive. It was also found that most of the academic programmes of the RUB are generally not inclusive as the programmes are developed without integrating the principles of IE. The lack of a clear admission policy for students with disabilities in HEIs is perceived as one of the main reasons. Moriña (2017) asserts that it is necessary to design university-level policy and strategies to help students with disabilities acquire higher education attainments successfully. Without such a policy, the existing trend of few competent students with disabilities pursuing higher education is likely to continue in some academic programmes and Colleges. It was also found that only some students with visual and physical impairment are admitted to Colleges that offer courses in Humanities. The finding also shows that although academic programs are not designed to be fully inclusive, the use of some basic practices of inclusive teaching methods and assessment are evident. For example, a student with disabilities is taught using basic accommodations such as providing large font size, extra time, individual consultations, and alternative reading materials. According to Dyer (2018), faculty's willingness to provide simple accommodation in terms of alternative assignments, lecture notes, and assessment methods directly impact the academic success of students with disabilities. In addition, it was found that the lack of IE professionals was a barrier in making academic programmes more inclusive. The overall academic programmes are generally not inclusive particularly in terms of learning materials and assessment strategies. Even then, some basic practices of IE are implemented in teaching some academic programmes based on the academics' experience and personal discretion.

CONCLUSIONS

Although IE resonates across most policy documents, the gap between policy and practice, especially among HIEs in Bhutan, remains a reality. The study reveals that the HEIs in Bhutan are not adequately prepared for the inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities. While some participants understand IE as an educational provision only for people with disabilities or special needs, others consider IE as an equal opportunity of high-quality education for all irrespective of diverse backgrounds in any aspect of life thus revealing generic conceptual understanding about the meaning, purpose, and scope of IE. Despite Bhutan's commitment to the rights of people with disabilities, HEIs are found to be still at the preliminary stage in supporting IE. It is evident from the study that the majority of the academics have not come across students with disabilities in their Colleges, which is quite debatable and ironic as such a scenario could be the result of not having even a basic idea of IE to recognize the special needs of students. The study highlights some fundamental challenges that the HEIs in Bhutan are faced with such as lack of inclusive policies, inappropriate academic programmes and inadequate academic resources. The finding suggests that there is a need to develop specific policies that provide provision for inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities in HEIs that will facilities inclusive programmes and other support services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Although faculty, staff, students and stakeholders of HEIs possess basic conceptual understanding of IE, it is recommended to create more awareness to deepen their understanding of education for students with special needs. Their in-depth understanding of IE will be instrumental in making HEIs more inclusive in all aspects.
- To address the challenges of admission of students with special needs in HEIs, it is important for RUB to formulate a separate policy of IE. As the number of students with special needs/disabilities completing secondary school education (grade 12) is on the rise, there is a need for specific policy to support them to continue their education in HEIs.
- To further make the academic programmes of HEIs more inclusive, a comprehensive research is recommended to assess and evaluate all programmes through the lens of inclusive education. This will help to gain deeper understanding of correlation among programmes and special needs of diverse students for admission.
- To advocate, plan and implement the activities of IE, HEIs can have SEN coordinator and Unit. This will help in smooth implementation of plans and policies related to IE at HEI

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