Supporting Students With Disability

For decades now India's collective aspiration has been to be one among the "developed" nations. But, for this nation of billions, what does development truly entail? Is it only measured by per capita income? In our quest for economic stability, we overlook our social responsibilities. A nation is as good as the infrastructure it offers to its citizens—all of them—including those who are disabled.

In a "developed" nation, persons with disabilities are encouraged to pursue a range of activities—go to school, avail higher education and seek employment. Options are not restricted to the moneyed section alone. Public facilities are also disabled-friendly. As a signatory to the UN Human Rights Treaty, India has promised to provide a better life to its citizens with disabilities. The legal basis to this promise is provided in the Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. According to this Act, government-funded institutions (including IITs and IIMs) have been reserving three percent of its seats for persons with visual, hearing and locomotor disabilities. The UGC has been providing grants to set up equal opportunity centres. But—is all this enough?

The Bigger Challenge

According to the 2001 Census, about 2.1 percent of India's population comprised people with disabilities. Due to inadequate facilities at the school level, the access of children with disabilities to schooling is poor. The problem is aggravated when it comes to higher education. Entrance tests are competitive and require special coaching. Even if such tests allow some accommodations (CAT allows additional time to persons with visual disability), preparatory classes and study material are often not disability-friendly. India's premier campuses of higher education institutions were built at a time when sensitivity to needs of the disabled was poor. As a result, physical access to these campuses can pose a challenge. To comply with the PWD Act, some campuses have installed ramps, railings, lighting, elevators, and toilets with wheelchair access. However, design constraints and non-standardised implementation have meant that some parts are still out of reach.

An even more serious issue is the lack of equal access to the classroom teaching; conventional lectures pose a problem for both hearing and visually-impaired students. Use of Power Point slides is problematic for the visually challenged. Immersive learning methods (case study discussions) are difficult for hearing-impaired students.

Technical Solutions

Fortunately, technology offers solutions to these problems. Software packages such as JAWS enable conversion of text into voice. Assistant technologies such as ZoomEx allow conversion of

an image file into a text without the several layers of scanning and conversion. Transcription of voice to text remains a challenge when there are multiple voices with different accents and tones, but "single voice" transcription software is improving.

The bigger challenge is to create a system that provides students with disability what they need, when they need it; and as a matter of right, not as a favour. This involves systemic and behavioural changes. Concepts of merit and equity are ingrained in us, and it takes time to realise that asking a blind student to interpret data depicted on a graph (even with the help of a scribe) is not a fair way of testing him or her.

Fortunately, several best practices have emerged over time in the developed world, and some institutions in India are slowly beginning to adopt these. At the core is the formulation of a clear institutional policy to provide equal opportunity to all students with disability. This policy is put into practice through the creation of an office of disability services (ODS) at the institutional level. The ODS typically assesses each student at the

puter with JAWS. Students with hearing disabilities have a note-taker assigned in advance, who is present in every class. Students with serious locomotor disabilities attend classes in rooms that are accessible without having to ask for it.

Setting up an ODS requires an initial investment in equipment and technology, but the staffing requirements are modest. Support may be forthcoming from caring corporate partners. The ODS at IIM Bangalore was set up in January 2010 with a generous grant from Mphasis Ltd. Sensitivity training for faculty, staff and students is an important complement to the setting up of an ODS. Fortunately, there are several NGOs (including, at the national level, the NCPEDP run by disability activist Javed Abidi) who can provide access to qualified trainers. An increasingly important dimension of disability access is institutional websites. With the Internet being the primary means of information, and a medium for application and communication, institutional websites need to be compliant with standards such as WCAG 2.0 that enable visually-impaired students to navigate the site.

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time of admission and determines what additional support (called accommodations) are required for the disabled student.

These accommodations are communicated automatically, and in advance, by the ODS to faculty, teaching assistants, and facilities providers, so that these are provided without the student having to seek them each time. (This determination of accommodations to be provided is different from the certification of disability which according to law is done by a medical board constituted by the commissioner for disabilities in each state).

If this system works, then a student with visual disability receives a CD with the reading material converted into JAWS-compatible textfiles—at the same time when others receive their textbooks and article binders. Similarly, students with visual disabilities receive a copy of the PPT file of their classes so that they can load it on a personal com-

While finding appropriate job opportunities for graduating students with disability is sometimes a challenge, the good news is that a commitment to greater diversity is now visible in corporate India. When we first started reservation for students with disability at IIM Bangalore 10 years ago, we had to beg or arm twist employers into providing internships. Things, however, have changed. This year, for example, we had companies such as Mphasis, IBM and Wipro seeking out students with disability. While support for students with disability is mandated by law for government-funded institutions, it could be a great differentiator for private universities.

Incorporating disability-friendly access is much easier in new buildings than in existing ones. Private universities can aspire to place themselves among the best in the world right from their inception if only they keep these disability-friendly steps in mind! **EDU**

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