

Preparedness of Bhutanese Higher Education Institutions for Inclusive Education: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This study explored the preparedness of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bhutan for inclusive education, focusing on current culture, practices, and policies related to inclusion. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach guided by pragmatism, the study employed stratified random sampling to select participants, including academics, support staff, and students from nine constituent colleges and two affiliated colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), as well as stakeholders and parents. Findings were analysed across six themes: understanding of inclusive education, perceptions of student inclusion, institutional policies, infrastructure, and academic preparedness. The study revealed that HEIs in Bhutan are insufficiently prepared for the inclusion of students with disabilities, with inadequate infrastructure and physical environments. Although the 2010 Tertiary Education Policy includes provisions for inclusion, it lacks specific guidelines on admission, pedagogy, and infrastructure. The study recommends developing guidelines for students with disabilities in HEIs, reviewing admission criteria, fostering collaboration between Royal University of Bhutan and the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), enhancing faculty training, building accessible facilities, and conducting advocacy programs to promote greater inclusivity.

Keywords: Preparedness, equality, inclusive policies, inclusive culture, inclusive infrastructures, higher educational institutions.

Point of Interest

- This study highlights the current state of inclusivity for students with disabilities in Bhutan's higher education institutions, emphasizing the need for better support and infrastructure.
- It reveals significant shortcomings in policies and facilities that hinder the effective inclusion of students with special needs, stressing the urgency of addressing these issues.
- The findings can help shape discussions among educators and policymakers to create effective guidelines and policies that support students with disabilities.
- The study underscores the importance of training for faculty and staff to foster a better understanding of inclusive education practices.

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- Recommendations from the research point to actionable steps for improving access and support for students with disabilities, which can enhance their educational experiences and outcomes.

Introduction

Throughout history, education has always been seen as a significant human right that serves as a social equaliser. This idea of education is supported by the United Nations agenda setting such as the Jomtien “Education for All” Conference (UN Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), the Dakar World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2000), and the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000). Much emphasis was felt at the regional level when Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific was launched in late 2012 to chart the new course of action. It was further strengthened by the Beijing Declaration and Action Plan of 2017 specifying a set of policies for all stakeholders and providing strategic guidance for fully implementing the plans in the region Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP, 2018). In Bhutan, there has been considerable progress in improving access and education quality since the 1960s. Education has always been a high priority in Bhutan’s development efforts and the quality of education is recognised as one of the key educational aspirations in the national policy of Gross National Happiness. Often, education is deemed a key catalyst for national development. Notwithstanding the nature of empiricism surrounding this discourse, the common policy issues in education include access, cost, and quality (Schuelka, 2012). The framework of inclusive education acts as one of the policy solutions that attempt to address these concerns (Schuelka, 2012).

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 (MoE, 2012). Inclusive education resonates in many national and educational policies of the country. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2008), Article 7, Section 15, 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. 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 GNH, all the ruling governments initiated several significant reforms such as wholesome education, Children friendly school, Educating for GNH, the Green School Project, and 21st-centuryst century education which all best align with the principles of inclusive education.

Besides numerous initiatives, the Ministry of Education 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 and Skills Development (MoESD) in Bhutan considers IE as one of the key standards to measure teacher professional



standards in Bhutan is a significant educational reform initiative to promote inclusive approach towards education.

According to Bhutan Education Sector Strategic Vision 2020 (2003), all children with disabilities and with special needs, including those in the institutes of higher learning “will be given equal access to full access to the curriculum, participation in extracurricular activities and access to cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities” (p. 36). Similarly, Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024 (2014) defines access to education as “ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure that students have equal opportunities to take full advantage of their education at all levels to realize their full potential” (p.24). All these policies and guidelines are geared toward improving the access and quality of education for all children with disabilities in Bhutan (MoE, 2020). Despite such encouraging schemes, IE in Bhutan faces many challenges such as “incompetency, rigid curriculum, lack of collaboration among education stakeholders and financial resources as serious impediments of inclusive education in Bhutan” (Dukpa, 2014; Schuelka, 2014 as cited in Dorji, 2015, p. 10).

Further, there is a limited number of study conducted on disability and inclusive education in Bhutan (Dorji, 2015). The handful of the existing literature on IE in Bhutan all describes the scenario in lower-level educational institutions like primary schools and secondary schools. Research exploring IE for students with disabilities at the higher educational institutions (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. This indicates a need for HEIs to prepare for a more inclusive approach to education. Moreover, the National Education Policy [draft] (2022) 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.

Therefore, the current study intended to examine the preparedness of the HEIs in Bhutan for the inclusion of students with disabilities. The finding of this study will enable the relevant stakeholders to generate discussions and formulate policies and plans that will enable persons with disabilities to access, participate, and benefit from being included in HEIs.

Meaning of inclusive education

The meaning and scope of the term ‘Inclusive Education’ have not remained constant. 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 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. 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, UNESCO

(2011, p. 21) 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”. 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, and 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, and 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., 2020; 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). 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 (Fuh, 2020).

It also has significant benefits for teachers by acting as a catalyst for the continuous development of their knowledge and skills for teaching (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2005). 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

Ensuring successful implementation of IE at higher education institutions entails numerous factors in place. Booth and Ainscow (2000) assert 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 to have 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 are other indispensable factors of IE ((Moriña, 2017). Faculty trained in IE are found to have positive attitudes and reported more use of universal design teaching-learning strategies, however, 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 outreach programmes, the 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 & Perera, 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-centred 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). Doloresd, et al (2016) emphasise the importance of training all faculty of the universities in IE as the number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is rapidly increasing.

According to Powell (2012), all university spaces should be designed based on universal design principles and make them fully accessible without any physical barriers for students with disabilities. Such spaces will enhance mobility and full participation of all students, particularly students living with physical disabilities. Similarly, some HEIs have given importance to digital media as a driver of more inclusive higher education. Their websites present their "institutions online as open, flexible and inclusive for all learners, particularly using digital media" (Almeida et al., 2016).

Funding and scholarship for students with disabilities is another critical factor. Ahmad (2018) suggests appropriate funding mechanisms for all universities to support education and scholarship to support students with disabilities. Most of the PWD come from families who are below poverty and become a barrier to education (Limaye, 2016). For example, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in India has set up the Disability Unit with an expert review committee to cater to educational needs and advise students with disabilities (Gosh, 2017). Some of the good practices of IE in universities in Europe and America include 'Up the Hill Project (UTHP)'- practice in which students are supported by peer mentors, progressive funding models such as disability scholarships, student loan schemes, and accessible design of public places and facilities for all people (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019; Lord & Stein, 2019).

The other factors include family support, peer-support network, and assistive technology for full participation of students with disabilities in university colleges ((Morina 2015). Thus, the success of the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education becomes a collaborative process amongst many factors and stakeholders.

Research design

To explore the preparedness of higher education institutions in Bhutan for inclusive education, this study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design guided by pragmatism. This approach involved three stages of analysis: initial quantitative data collection, followed by qualitative data development, and finally integrating both data strands.

Stratified random sampling selected 867 participants from the Royal University of Bhutan's colleges, including academics (317), support staff (80), and students (470). For qualitative insights, 45 participants were interviewed using convenience sampling, including 35 from RUB colleges and 10 stakeholders.

Data were collected through self-designed questionnaires on inclusive education, measured with a 6-point Likert scale. The questionnaires for academics covered inclusive policy, infrastructure, and preparedness; for support staff, inclusive policy and infrastructure; and for students, inclusive infrastructure. Cronbach Alpha coefficients for reliability were improved to 0.7 after item adjustments.

Semi-structured interviews involved 10 questions for academics, 5 for support staff, 6 for students, and 5 for stakeholders. Document analysis included key policy documents and teaching plans.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics summarizing demographic data and preparedness themes. Qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and presented through rich descriptions and case studies. The study's sample included 867 survey participants and 45 interviewees, with a mix of RUB members and external stakeholders.

Ethical considerations are crucial to maintaining research integrity, and this study adhered to the Research Code of Conduct and Regulations of the Royal University of Bhutan, obtaining necessary permissions and informed consent from participants. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used, and all data were securely stored on password-protected devices.

Results and discussions

Understanding of inclusive education

A clear understanding of the term 'Inclusive Education' is fundamental as it ultimately determines one's attitude and behavioural 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 for quality education for students from diverse

backgrounds. Some participants understood IE as a form of schooling for people with disabilities. For instance, an academic 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 and reduce inequalities 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. The majority of the participants have described IE as an equal opportunity for 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, colour, gender, race, and ethnicity should be provided with an education that they will be able to learn and make use of their potential.” 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 in Bhutan have a generic conceptual understanding of the meaning, purpose, and scope of IE.

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 colour, 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).

Perceptions of students

One of the ways the study employed to understand the preparedness of HEIs for the 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, some 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 academics have not received any training or professional development programmes on IE. The majority of the academics reported that they lack the proper knowledge and skills to support the needs of PWDs.

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. The views of the stakeholders were not so different from the academics. Most of the stakeholders supported that students who completed their higher secondary schools should be allowed to enroll 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 of 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”. When 2 parents of students with disability were asked about their views on the Inclusion of students with disabilities in HEIs shared similar sentiments about HEIs not being prepared for inclusion. One of the parents commented, “As far as I am aware, HEIs in Bhutan accepted only blind students but not the other forms of disabilities. Moreover, there is very minimal support in terms of assistive devices, accommodation, adjustment, and adaptation”. Another parent, when asked about his autistic son, humorously mentioned that he is attending “home college”. Both the parent participants expressed their concern about HEIs not having any specific legislation and policies, lack of accessible physical environment, and the absence of inclusive experts to support students with disabilities. They also unanimously voiced out that awareness about disabilities among the students and staff of HEIs was a must to protect students with disabilities from social exclusion and other forms of discrimination.

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, socioeconomic status, religion, mental illness, sex, language, race, and caste, there still exists a gap between the policy and its practice.

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 also 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, 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.

Tables 1 and 2 below illustrate the perspectives of academics, support staff, and students regarding the inclusiveness of institutional policies for students with special needs and disabilities in higher education.

Table 1

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

	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	

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	

Academics and support staff generally perceive the values of inclusion as evident in their college's vision and mission, with mean scores of 4.10 and 4.31, respectively. However, there is a notable disparity in perceptions regarding the actual support provided; for instance, academics rated the availability of policies to enroll students with special needs at a mean of 2.92, while support staff rated it slightly higher at 3.14. Student responses highlight areas needing improvement, particularly in disability awareness programs, which received a low mean score of 2.35. Students emphasised the importance of equal opportunities, reflected in a high mean score of 5.23.

While there is a foundational recognition of the need for inclusiveness, significant gaps remain in the implementation of supportive measures across the institution. Dorji and Schuelka (2016) 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 for students with SEN (Ceresnova, 2018) to access equal benefits, services, and opportunities thereby reducing inequalities.

Recognizing the importance of policies and guidelines, the MoESD (2020) has introduced National Policy on Special Educational Needs (2012), the Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers (BPST) in 2017, and the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) in 2019 that are geared towards improving the access and quality of education for all students with disabilities. Despite many national and educational policies on inclusiveness, the HEIs still lack any official policies and procedures. This gap in the implementation of policy especially in HEIs is apparent even in other South Asian countries (Amin, 2017). It is straightforward that the participants haven't heard of or read any College policy and act related to students with disabilities. 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).

Infrastructure facilities

Inclusive infrastructural facilities play an imperative role in education institutions (Dorji, 2015; Dukpa, 2014; MOE, 2014; Schuelka, 2014) and almost all participants expressed that to improve real academic inclusion with special needs, there is a need for inclusive friendly infrastructure facilities. For example, one of the academics illustrated “As far as I feel, there is no institutional (officially) set up procedures/policies/physical infrastructure to deal with such students.” Based on the data, there was a possible indication of a few or no enrollment of students with SEN in the HEIs which could be attributed to HEIs not being equipped with inclusive infrastructure.

One of the academics stated, “Honestly, not at all prepared and not ready to welcome students with special needs.” Most participants indicated that not having inclusive infrastructures in place had incidentally obstructed students with special needs or disabilities in transitioning to higher studies. This is exemplified by a student, “Until now I haven’t seen any facilities and what I think is that no disabled students were taken in the college to provide education service due to lack of facilities.”

Table 3 and 4 below highlight the views of academics, support staff, and students regarding the inclusiveness of infrastructural facilities for students with special needs and disabilities in higher education institutions. All the groups reported low mean scores, indicating significant concerns about accessibility.

Table 3

Views of Academics of Higher Education on the Inclusiveness of Infrastructural Facilities

Items	Academics		Support staff	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
My college campus is wheelchair accessible.	2.03	1.24	2.21	1.23
My college campus is accessible to students with visual impairment.	2.80	1.54	3.04	1.36
My college has hostel facilities to accommodate students with special needs/disabilities.	2.42	1.30	2.73	1.41
My college library has services to support the learning of students with special needs/disabilities.	2.39	1.27	2.71	1.32

My college has services to help students with special needs/disabilities to access learning materials.	3.32	1.48	2.84	1.30
My college has sports facilities for students with special needs/disabilities.	2.12	1.22	2.84	1.52
My college has classroom facilities to accommodate the needs of students with special needs/disabilities.	2.42	1.35	2.88	1.32
Mean	2.50	1.34	2.75	1.35
N	317		80	

Table 4

Views of Students of Higher Education on the Inclusiveness of Infrastructural Facilities

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
My college has services to support education for students with special needs/disabilities.	3.26	1.59
My college campus is wheelchair accessible.	2.46	1.49
My college campus is accessible to students with visual impairment.	2.88	1.47
My college has hostel facilities to accommodate students with special needs/disabilities.	2.81	1.53
My college library has services to support the learning of students with special needs/disabilities.	2.94	1.52
My college has services to help students with special needs/disabilities to access learning and assessment materials.	2.99	1.45

My college has games and sports facilities for students with special needs/disabilities.	2.59	1.45
My college has facilities to accommodate students with special needs/ disabilities in classrooms.	2.75	1.39
Mean	2.84	1.49
N	470	

The data further reflect this concern, with mean scores for inclusiveness of infrastructural facilities rated by academics (2.50), support staff (2.75), and students (2.84) falling within the "Somewhat Disagree" category (Tables 3 and 4). These scores indicate limited availability of inclusive infrastructure across the colleges. Notably, wheelchair accessibility scored low at 2.03 for academics and 2.21 for support staff, while hostel facilities received mean scores of 2.42 and 2.73, respectively. Although support for accessing learning materials was slightly better (mean of 3.32 for academics), the overall findings highlight a pressing need for improvements in infrastructural support to enhance accessibility for all students with special educational needs.

Both quality and quantity data strongly correlate with the prevalence of not having friendly and inclusive infrastructural facilities in HEIs. On the other hand, based on understanding obtained through some academics and stakeholders, it was possible to point out a lack of financial resources in Bhutan (Subba, et al., 2018) as having adversely affected the provision of providing IE in HEIs. However, with more students with disabilities completing secondary education, the need to develop inclusive higher education is of paramount importance (Moriña, 2017). To fulfil the efforts initiated by the Royal Government to make education fully accessible for all, including students with different disabilities, as emphasized in the Education Sector Strategy 2020 (Ministry of Education 2001), few participants urged every educator, stakeholder, and parent to have discussions especially in instituting infrastructures that can enable the students with SEN to transit inclusively to HEI.

While literature suggests that before we start our inclusion effort, we should learn about the current situation of people with disabilities, specific policies related to their rights, and approaches to inclusion that can be applied in our situation (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2013), there are also arguments that inclusion begins by accepting PWDs/CWDs into one's institute. Unless there is a person, his/ her needs cannot be determined. After the person is admitted, the campus starts reasonable accommodations, adjustments, and other provisions that enable a campus to embrace inclusivity progressively.

Preparedness of academics

Both quality and quantity data show that both academics and students have not attended any training related to IE. The participants, during the interview, strongly recommended robust training to support the needs of the students with special needs in the colleges. The academics have also expressed the motivation and need to learn the basics of IE and design inclusive curriculum and pedagogies. For example, one academic noted the importance of "starting from the basics of different types of disabilities, identifying them, approaching and accessing support, addressing management and coordination issues, and understanding the attitudes needed when dealing with such individuals." Another academic pointed out "a training on how to design a curriculum for inclusive education would be helpful". Some have gone to the extent of saying that they do not have 'any idea' of such a concept. For example, one of the academics stated "no idea as we have not had any such students". The possible reasons for lack of knowledge about IE are attributed to not having any students or friends with disability in their Colleges.

The quantitative data, as shown in table 5 below, also reveals a critical gap in the preparedness of academics for inclusive education in higher education institutions, with a mean score of 3.18 indicating moderate awareness of the capabilities of students with special needs, but significantly lower scores for training and experience in teaching these students.

Table 5

Preparedness of Academics of Higher Education Institutions for Inclusive Education

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students with special needs/disabilities have abilities to study any academic programs of my college.	3.40	1.48
I have experience in teaching students with special needs/disabilities.	2.15	1.44
I have undergone training to teach students with special needs/disabilities.	1.73	1.22
I employ inclusive teaching strategies in my teaching.	3.72	1.45
I can teach students with special needs/disabilities.	2.52	1.43
The academic faculty should be trained in areas of inclusive education.	4.96	1.40
There is a need for faculty in my college with a specialization in inclusive education.	4.60	1.51
The staff of the college has knowledge and skills to support the learning of students with special needs/disabilities.	3.11	1.35
My college has trained staff to support the education of students with special needs/disabilities.	2.39	1.46

	3.18	1.42
Mean		
N	317	

In response to the item '*I have undergone training to teach students with special needs*, the academics have rated *disagree* ($M=1.73$; $SD=1.22$). Similarly, for the item '*I have experience in teaching students with special needs*, with ($M=2.15$; $SD=1.44$), which shows that the majority of the academics do not have previous experience in teaching students with disabilities. Moreover, the academics have rated *somewhat disagree* ($M=2.52$; $SD=1.43$) about their ability to teach SEN/disabilities. In response to the item, '*the academic faculty should be trained in areas of inclusive education*, with ($M=4.96$; $SD=1.40$), they have indicated the need for professional development.

The findings show that academics of the RUB Colleges have not attended any training on IE and some have no idea at all. One possible reason for such a scenario is attributed to the lack of students with disabilities in their Colleges. While most colleges do not offer modules on disability or inclusive education, some colleges offer it as an optional module and very few faculty members have received some orientation on inclusive education in the past. However, IE experts may probably interpret such scenarios as a lack of an institutional policy and basic knowledge of IE where the special needs of students are hardly identified and supported. For example, Davies et al (2013) assert that faculty trained in IE have positive attitudes and use more universal design teaching-learning strategies. Without professional training in academics, there remains a risk of unknowingly excluding students with disabilities both in academia and from the social life in the Colleges. On the other hand, the study found that the lecturers have the motivation to learn about IE and make their teaching more inclusive which is imperative in making any institution inclusive for all. They have even accommodated the needs of students with disabilities through some basic strategies based on their experience and discretion. However, with the current status of professional development, it is clear that academics are not prepared to appropriately support students of disabilities in HIEs.

Conclusion

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 for high-quality education for all irrespective of diverse backgrounds in any aspect of life thus revealing a generic conceptual understanding of 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 of supporting IE. The study highlights many fundamental challenges that the HEIs in Bhutan are faced with such as lack of inclusive policies, lack of infrastructures and facilities, inappropriate academic programmes, financial constraints, inadequate academic resources, and lack of support service. It is also evident that academics of HEIs lack the competence to teach children with special needs due to a lack of knowledge and skills to deal with students with special needs/disabilities. It is consistent with the findings

of Chhetri (2020) who reported that, although Bhutan has recognized an inclusive approach as an important pedagogical approach, the lack of skills among teachers is creating barriers that compromise learning. Similarly, Westwood (2018) declared that developing teachers' understandings of IE and building their ability to handle pedagogical challenges remains a challenge. The finding suggests that there is a need to develop specific policies that provide provision for the inclusion of students with special needs/disabilities in HEIs that will guide the HEIs in developing disability-friendly infrastructures and facilities, inclusive programmes, and other support services. Further, the study suggests that HEIs should focus on expanding teacher expertise and it should be a top priority.

Recommendations

- Develop national guidelines or policies to address the challenges faced by students with special needs in HEIs, despite existing provisions in the 2010 Tertiary Education Policy.
- Review and adjust RUB's admission criteria to better include students with disabilities and consider catering each college to specific types of special needs.
- Collaborate with MoESD to track and share data on students with disabilities completing secondary education to aid HEIs in planning and infrastructure development.
- Implement compulsory basic pedagogical training for academics on inclusive education, and integrate inclusive education principles into academic programs at RUB.
- Construct disability-friendly facilities, including accessible WASH facilities, to create a supportive environment for students transitioning from secondary to higher education.
- Conduct advocacy and awareness programs on disabilities to foster a more inclusive environment, with active involvement from government agencies, CSOs, and NGOs.

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