

Diversity & Social Inclusion in Higher Education

Reflections from FICCI HES 2017



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Introduction

India is a land of diversities! This diversity cuts across various sectors, populations, among institutions, within societies, etc. It is important to study how public institutions respond to and accommodate such diversities. Among these, an important actor is the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Meant to serve 'public purpose', the HEIs are expected to cater to societal diversities and be inclusive in ways, which become symbolic of a nation, known for its diversities. This was the broad theme of the discussions at the session on 'Diversity and Social Inclusion in Higher Education', at the FICCI Higher Education Summit 2017. The session aimed at sharing innovative approaches in policy, procedure and implementation levels for enabling inclusion and strengthening diversity of students, faculty and staff. The session speakers shared their experiences, suggestions and insights on how our HEIs can be made more 'open to diversity and socially inclusive'.

Dr Budd Hall, Professor at the University of Victoria, Canada gave the keynote speech for the session. Among other speakers at the session were Dr Darren Brendan Lortan, Professor, Durban University of Technology, South Africa; Dr Manoj Kumar Pandey, Professor, SRM University; Dr Usha Iyer-Raniga, Professor, RMIT Melbourne and Dr Meena Gailliara, Professor and Chair of Social Entrepreneurship at NMIMS University. The session was moderated by Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, PRIA and Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. This piece while it presents the broad context of Indian higher education, from the lens of the theme at hand, it goes on to reflect on the discussions that took place in the session. Doing so, it aims to give its readers a sense of the context from around the world, and what implications it has on Indian higher education.



Pic 1: Dr Budd Hall, delivering the keynote address

Barriers in Indian Higher Education

Higher education in India has undergone tremendous massification in the last couple of decades. There are nearly 800 universities, 12,000 stand-alone institutions and 40,000 colleges in India as of date. Forty million students are enrolled in these institutions today, having more than 1.5 million teachers. This brings us to the question: *Notwithstanding this enormous expansion, is higher*

education able to serve the interests of the growing Indian population? Is it able to accommodate and include the 'last, lost and the least'? Unfortunately, it is not so. Despite extensive expansion, there are multiple barriers in contemporary higher education processes. These barriers exist on lines of restricted access, with entry being limited to certain sections of populations. Is having quota enough? Does this help mainstream the ethnic population in higher education? There have been debates about extending reservations to excluded sections of population. Will this alone help achieve the objective of being inclusive? Sky-rocketing costs have excluded the marginalized populations, who do not have adequate financial backing. Do scholarships serve the purpose? Does it help increase the access to HEIs? Certain disciplines witness difference in student composition with respect to gender. For instance, there is a majority of men in STEM subjects. What are the aspects that exclude women in STEM subjects? Is gender a barrier too? Our society includes a good proportion of differently-abled population. Are our HEIs inclusive towards them? According to a report in the Hindustan Times few years back, there are over 780 languages spoken in India and 86 different scripts used. How do our HEIs include the richness of this language diversity into its systems and processes?

These questions lead us to re-think the value of 'diversity and inclusion' in higher education. Being a nation which is characterized by its diverse population and processes, its higher education should appropriately respond to it, by being inclusive, and reflective of the rich diversity its society possesses. However, it is important to note that diversity in the society is not just limited to inheritance or class/caste divisions, but there also exists a diversity of languages, cultures, choice of livelihoods, careers, knowledge systems, values, beliefs and practices. Higher education, by virtue of its function as public good, must essentially reflect the richness of this diversity, by being socially inclusive. Simply put, inclusion in higher education, '*does not only refer to the number of excluded communities, but also exclusion in syllabus, context and pedagogies, and how these can be made more inclusive, given the diversity of our country*', as remarked by Dr Tandon at the FICCI Conference. Taking these discussions forward, Dr Tandon also posed some important and pertinent questions in this context: "*what is the use of having a similar syllabus for a sociology student based in Delhi and Bastar? What is the point of learning a theory, which does not reflect local contexts and backgrounds which the students come from? How do we respond to the disconnect an IIT student in Guwahati experiences, who, while studies the principles of water resources engineering practiced in a distant country, fails to understand the traditional water management practices in her/his own community?*" With this background, the section below aims to cull out broad messages that emerged from the FICCI session, from the experiences shared by the speakers.

Insights & Experiences

- **Institutionalization of social inclusion in the university structure**

Dr Hall in his keynote address stressed that '*The University of Victoria has taken its responsibilities towards Canada's indigenous people seriously for many years, but the new plan takes its commitment to a deeper, more detailed and comprehensive level.*' This new plan of indigenous education includes ensuring institutional commitment at every level to develop opportunities for Indigenous students, and also recognition of importance of indigenization of curricula through responsive academic programming, support programmes, orientations, and pedagogies. This also includes the value of promoting partnerships among educational and local Indigenous communities.

This in essence, presents a best practice model as to how diversity in social settings can be incorporated within the academia, ranging from diverse students to diversity in academic programmes and pedagogies.

- **Struggle for harmony in South African higher education, which continues to reflect the hues of colonization and exclusion**

Dr Darren Brendan Lortan, Professor at the Durban University of Technology, reflected on the situation in his country as he shared, *'In South Africa, higher education has till date not been successful in ensuring its complete decolonization. Higher education in the country continues to be viewed differently by different sets of people (the whites and the blacks), and so is the different treatment it meets out to them'*. While the post-apartheid transformation has been mainly driven by the political elite in the government, the higher education sector has failed to lead in the struggle for economic, social and cultural liberation. Student movements like *#RhodesMustFall* and *#DecolonizeUCTLaw* bear testimony to these developments.

- **Perpetuation of colonization of human mind**

Dr Lortan also shared that exclusionist curricula in higher education also inflicts harm in not only reproducing and promoting dominant values, cultural norms, and beliefs of an apartheid society but, also serves as an instrument to maintain and legitimize unequal social, economic and political power relations. Dr Lortan questions, *'What is the use of studying a particular subject, if it alienates and excludes the students from its diverse local contexts?'* Putting it simply, exclusion in higher education teaching processes and pedagogies not only perpetuates but also reinforces the divisions that fragment the society on lines of inequality and socio-cultural differences etc. This leads to the continuation of colonization of human minds and thought processes, constrained in the shackles of the colonial traditions and ways of thinking, acting and believing. Dr Pandey articulated this perspective aptly as he said, *'Decolonization of human mind is even bigger a battle than decolonization of politics, or education, and unless this happens, making our higher education inclusive of varied diversities existing in our society will be a difficult proposition'*.



Pic 2: Dr Darren Lortan sharing his experiences



Pic 4: Dr Pandey, sharing his thoughts

- **Making higher education curricula inclusive by transforming pedagogies**

Dr Raniga, Associate Professor from RMIT Melbourne, suggested that transformation of higher education curricula is possible by making it inclusive of the diverse contexts of the society and the communities. Citing the example of the aboriginal history and context in Australia, she shared that, *'use of aboriginal case studies as part of higher education curricula in the context of Australia, can play an important role in making higher education inclusive of its rich context and tradition'*. It also helps the students connect with the diversity of cultures and contexts in their communities, and acknowledge and appreciate the same. Adding to this, Dr Pandey reiterated the need for enriching higher education curricula by incorporating the practical expertise of practitioners from beyond the university campus. Dr Gailliara, shared about the civic engagement practices in which the MBA students at her university engage in. She shared that, *'the students as an output of their engagement activities, produce reports, which are re-produced as case studies and serve as learning materials for the upcoming batches of students'*. These case studies are also published as academic literature, which helps in not only developing and disseminating, but also validating indigenous knowledge in academic circles.



Pic 4: Panellists at the session on 'Diversity & Social Inclusion in Higher Education' (From left to right: Dr Darren Brendan Lortan, Dr Manoj Kumar Pandey, Dr Budd Hall, Dr Rajesh Tandon, Dr Usha Iyer-Raniga, Dr Meena Gailliara and Prof Rajan Saxena, Chair, FICCI Higher Education Committee)

Implications on Indian Higher Education

The aforementioned account of experiences and insights from across the world on 'diversity and social inclusion in higher education' helps us to reflect on the topic 'holistically'. It helps us appreciate the value of the concept of 'diversity', much beyond its limited understanding of only 'including the marginalized'. We understand that it also entails aspects like inclusion of knowledge cultures, interests and doing away with systemic and structural barriers that re-inforce the dominance of elites and decolonization of education in general. It is interesting to gauge these

observations in light of the Indian higher education and assess the implications the former has on the latter. In the Indian context, there are still significant multi-dimensional inequalities in enrolment rates between rural and urban populations, rich and poor, minority and mainstream communities, men and women and people with disabilities and those representing varied ethnicities, contexts and knowledge cultures. This calls for 'social inclusion to be urgently prioritized as a much needed reform in Indian higher education. So, *how do we ensure inclusion of diversity at several levels, from student composition, to curriculum and pedagogies, faculty composition? How to maintain the diversity of knowledge, language and perspectives while including them in higher education processes?* It is these questions that we need to focus on in the current higher education context, because *'if we lose the social/linguistic/cultural diversity in higher education processes, we lose the strength that our society possess, which in turn weakens the learning outcomes for students at the universities'*, remarked Dr Tandon .

So, taking cue from the Canadian experience, can we expect a similar scenario in Indian higher education? *Can we, as a country demonstrate by example, our commitment for diversification and inclusion in higher education by including the socially/linguistically and culturally diverse population into the academic mainstream, and thereby protecting our diverse indigenous knowledge systems?* This will, however require a deep-seated commitment from the higher education policy makers and regulators. Unless and until, the sector is led with a vision which supports diversification, backed by favourable higher education policies and a supporting leadership; mainstreaming of diverse communities and settings will be difficult. It is also important to note that while the role of higher education leadership is important, equally crucial is the approach of university as an institution and its faculty and students and how they approach and embrace such diversities in academic settings.

The South African example bears testimony to the fact that aspects like exclusion and marginalization of indigenous communities and their knowledge systems, negatively impacts the learning outcomes of students by perpetuating societal divides. This further reinforces the importance of inclusion and diversification of higher education. Here, the question emerges: *how to do it? And who will do it?* In this context, it is important to reflect on the example shared by Dr Meena regarding her MBA students producing their field reports as case studies, which in turn serve as learning materials. This has dual implications: firstly, it reinforces how disciplines like management can set an example of inclusion and secondly, it presents a best practice model of how the experiences of students from a diversity of settings in the field can feed into the curriculum. This therefore negates the need for any special efforts to diversify higher education and make it more inclusive. 'Simple' and 'engaged' efforts of students and faculty themselves can help achieve these objectives by diversifying the curriculum, and making the syllabi inclusive of the rich diversities which the society possesses. Supporting these efforts should be the commitment on part of the HEI leadership and higher education policies which promotes inclusion and diversity at all levels and contexts.

We need to therefore, think of nurturing diversity by including it in higher education through a range of options such as:

- *Mainstreaming the marginalized populations*

This has to be on the lines of the practices adopted at the University of Victoria, which calls for the university to be more inclusive, not only by mainstreaming the indigenous population, but also in being diverse in terms of programmes, teaching processes, curricula and pedagogies. Diversity in institutions of higher education is important not only for improving the economic and educational opportunities for students, but also for the social, academic, and societal benefits that diversity presents for all students and communities. HEIs have the primary responsibility to educate a 'diverse' student population, coming from a diverse society. This inclusion in terms of student population and composition needs to take place at several levels, such as inclusion of Dalits and Adivasis in mainstream academia, inclusion of more women in STEM subjects, etc. This is because inclusion also means challenging the systemic and structural forms of exclusion in higher education. It is also imperative for a 21st century HEI to nurture students who value 'social diversity'. This process begins with accepting and appreciating the same in the classroom, which then leads to an understanding of the same, which exists in the larger society.

- *Transforming pedagogies, into ones which are more inclusive and open to diversity*

Inclusion in higher education also entails inclusion in pedagogies, curricula and teaching and learning processes. New and inclusive forms of pedagogy and teaching modalities can be devised which reflects diverse ways of knowing and knowledge production, decolonization of concepts, meaning, curricula etc. Diverse learning environments and pedagogies also help students sharpen their critical thinking and analytical skills and prepare them for success in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, while helping break down stereotypes and reduce bias.

- *Restructuring institutional arrangements, for creation of an inclusive campus*

Existing in a diverse social context, HEIs are susceptible to social hierarchies, marginalization and discrimination. A commitment on part of the universities is therefore, needed to value diversity and inclusiveness for the collective prosperity of the society as a whole. It is also the responsibility of an HEI to foster social justice by restructuring institutional arrangements that privilege particular experiences over others, and change dominant policies and practices to reflect an inclusive higher education. Commitment to diversity and inclusion are in fact, the essential ingredients of academic excellence. Creating an inclusive campus also requires having in place a diverse faculty composition and hiring people in administrative positions, from diverse backgrounds and contexts.

- *Revising curricula by including content from a diversity of social settings*

The examples cited by Dr Raniga and Dr Galliara bear testimony to the fact that how higher education curricula can be reflective of its society's diversity by facilitating student engagements and encouraging literature which documents the learning's and reflections from such engagement. The curricula should be representative of the diverse local contexts and realities, in ways that makes the students (from different backgrounds, contexts and knowledge cultures) more 'engaged and in-sync' with the society at large, rather than assuming them as one 'homogenous whole' and prescribing a syllabus which is colonial and disregards the realities and challenges of the local contexts. Dr Lortan emphasized this point as he said, '*What is the use of studying a particular subject, if it alienates and excludes the students from its diverse local contexts?*' Dr Tandon reiterated this point as he shared

that *'having a common syllabus for students in Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Gujarat we fail to provide our students with diversified learning opportunities, which their local contexts offers, and in turn, negatively impact their learning objectives'*. Further, apart from social diversity, there is a need to respect, acknowledge and document diversity at other levels as well such as intellectual, cultural, biological etc.

Our democracy today is faced with critical challenges like increasing political, educational and economic inequalities and inequities, deepening mistrust in democratic institutions, practices and values, intolerance, alienation and rejection of cultural diversity. It is in this context that the role of public institutions and HEIs in particular, gains much pertinence. We realize that status quo which maintains the provision of a 'generic education' is not sustainable, largely because it assumes the society to be homogenous, and as a result, universalizes pedagogies and also knowledge production processes. HEIs need to acknowledge and respect the heterogeneity which exists in the society and ensure it does not homogenize or assimilate the differences while including the wide range of students. Having the responsibility of nurturing future citizens of the country, higher education is expected to play an important role in cementing the values of democracy by furthering inclusion, recognizing and appreciating diversity and helping build democratic societies. This function of higher education is critical because only when it follows and practices these ideals, can it effectively give back to the society, *'responsible and responsive citizens'*, who appreciate and value the democratic ideals, which in essence, builds the soul of the nation.