

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA AND BANGLADESH – PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted as part of the DIVERSASIA project “Embracing Diversity in ASIA Through the Adoption of Inclusive Open Practices”, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union. DIVERSASIA’s overall aim is to ensure that students with disabilities (sensorial and cognitive) can enjoy the same access to higher education (HE) as their peers without disabilities and enjoy access to digital training materials, open education resources (OERs) and massive open online courses (MOOCs). These are especially relevant to students who cannot currently physically access HE (and instead are part of distance learning schemes and courses) due to existing architectural barriers. The project partners developed questionnaires to be filled in by HE staff and students in order to identify the current situation of inclusive education provision in India and Bangladesh and to understand what focused activities are needed. This article summarizes the results of the staff surveys.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, Higher Education, Accessibility, Disability, Barriers to education*

Introduction

Definitions of inclusive education have been put forward since the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994). For example, it can be defined as an educational approach proposing schools in which all the students can participate and all are treated like valuable school members (Morina, 2017). While the need to ensure inclusive education at the HE level was not specifically identified at the time of the Salamanca Declaration, it was an important step towards recognizing that everyone has the same right to education and that countries must do their utmost to ensure access and support in the educational process, regardless of the barriers they face. Furthermore, the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) stated that all children and youth must have the opportunity to learn, and the role

of educators is emphasized to ensure an appropriate educational process for everyone. However, this document does not include a statement that inclusive education should be ensured at the HE level either.

The need for inclusivity in HE has already been highlighted by Jaegler (2022), who states that inclusivity must be understood as a concept for all stakeholders of a higher education institution (HEI): students, employees, alumni, and partners. However, the principles of inclusivity in HE are not so self-evident, which has been pointed out by several researchers (Nimante et al., 2021; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). One of the reasons researchers point to is that those working in HE do not have an understanding of how to provide inclusive education (Nimante et al., 2021; Bunbury, 2020) or how to assess student achievement in light of inclusive education principles (Griskevica et al., 2022).

Several studies on inclusive HE have been carried out, and in most cases, the results show that there are still many unresolved issues where resources need to be invested to make HE accessible to people with different special needs (Shopland et al., 2022). Various regulations and political guidelines indicate that this is to be recommended, and most European universities are bound to guarantee people with disabilities or special educational needs the appropriate environment to facilitate access, promotion, as well as full participation in academic life under equal conditions (Faura-Martínez & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022). However, it must be admitted that it is not always so. Inclusive principles and practices have been making inroads into university agendas, policies, and teaching and learning practices for some years, but in the context of HE, there is still a long way to go before we can claim that inclusion is ensured, and many challenges must be addressed to align educational practices with the principles of inclusive education (Morina, 2017).

This paper provides some preliminary results from the DIVERSASIA project, which focuses on inclusive HE in India and Bangladesh. There, too, inclusive education is thought about more at the general level than at the HE level (Ambia & Rahman, 2021; Fayaz, 2019; Singal, 2019; Taneja-Johansson et al., 2021). In HE, change happens rather slowly. In India, the government launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) in 2015 to “facilitate barrier-free urban development for persons with disabilities in three broad domains i.e., Built Environment, Information Technology, and Transportation.” This process concluded with the Supreme Court of India’s decision that HEIs must provide access to HE to persons with disabilities (India Today, 2022). Bangladesh has also been addressing inclusive education gradually, both in terms of including students with disabilities in education and providing material support, as well as in terms of thinking about gender equality (Grimes et al., 2021).

Despite the fact that steps have been taken to ensure inclusive education in both India and Bangladesh, research findings show that problems persist and that despite the support defined in the legislation for students with special needs, this support is mainly received by those who are more familiar with the various laws and regulations, can read documents, and know where to turn for help (Das & Shah, 2014; Dongre et al., 2022). This means that it cannot yet be said that all students are provided with an equal amount of inclusive education according to their needs. This paper, therefore, aims to discover what the current situation is with inclusive education provision in higher education today in the above-mentioned countries.

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed for the needs of the project using Google Sheets, enabling it to be distributed digitally. The questionnaire collected data from five areas: demographic information, inclusive policies and practices in educational institutions, experiences and knowledge about inclusive education, and the support needed to provide inclusive education and distance learning in universities. The questionnaire consisted of 36 questions and 77 sub-questions. The initial version was developed in English, and the project partners from India and Bangladesh then chose whether to translate the questionnaire. The Indian partners chose to use the English version as one of India's official languages is English, while the Bangladeshi partners translated the questionnaire into Bangla. Thus, the data were extracted in two streams, but these were then exported into Microsoft Excel and merged before being imported into SPSS. The data analysis used both descriptive and diagnostic methods, and in some cases, the results obtained from the two countries were compared.

The questionnaires were distributed to academic and administrative staff by the project partners in the countries where the study was carried out. The researchers used the convenience sampling method by sending questionnaires to a wide range of people representing the group whose views the researchers were seeking. Completion of the survey was voluntary, and the data were analyzed only in aggregate form. This study focuses on two Asian countries that are quite different according to various parameters, so the comparison of data was done for statistical purposes only, without in-depth analysis at this stage.

Results

1. Demographic information

A total of 356 respondents from India (192) and Bangladesh (164) participated in the study, comprising 224 men and 132 women. Most of the participants were 25–34 years old (150) or 35–44 years old (140). The majority of respondents were university teachers or HE administrative staff. A significant number did not indicate the level of the educational institution they represented, while the rest of the respondents represented special educational institutions, secondary schools or HEIs with profession-oriented study programs. The majority of respondents from both India and Bangladesh lived in capital cities (146), major cities (74) or suburbs of large cities (59). Many fewer respondents came from smaller towns, villages and the outskirts of the country (72). This is due to the fact that it was the opinions of HE lecturers and administrators that were analyzed in this step of the research, and HEIs are concentrated in larger urban areas. The respondents came from different educational institutions, and the number of students in these institutions varies (see Figure 1).

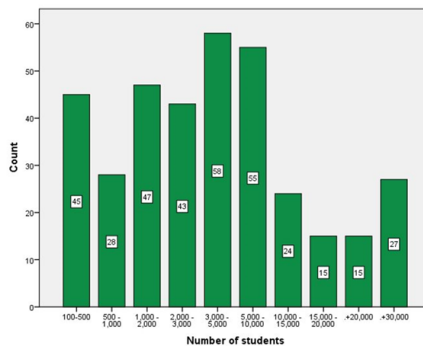
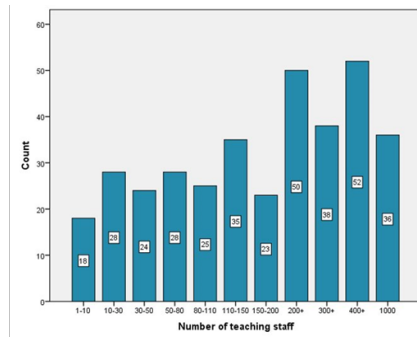
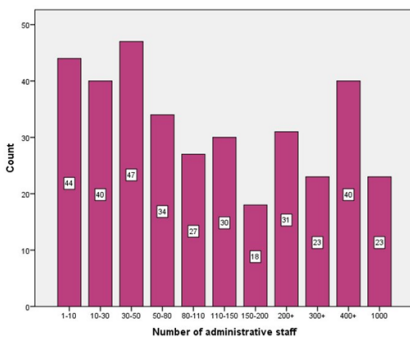


Figure 1. Number of students at the respondents’ institution



Figures 2.1 and 2.2. Number of staff members at the respondents’ institution

Data were collected from both teaching staff and administrative staff, and the total number of these members of staff in the respondents’ institutions can be seen in Figures 2.1 and 2.2.

Data were first collected to find out the percentage of students with special/functional needs in HE and then analyzed to understand the situation in HEIs in India and Bangladesh. As can be seen in Figure 3, their situations differ: there are more students with special needs in Bangladesh, and the biggest percentage of students with special needs are those who have mobility problems. Such a difference can indicate that students from Bangladesh with special/functional needs get more support during their compulsory education, allowing them to complete their education and enter HE. The situation in India may start changing positively after the Supreme Court ruled in July 2022 that HEIs should ensure access to education for disabled students.

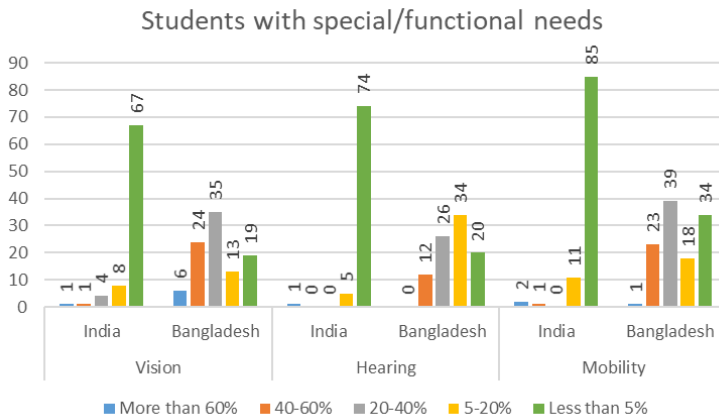


Figure 3. Students with special/functional needs

The following set of questions was about different special/learning needs. It can again be seen from these data that the situation is slightly different in Bangladesh, where there are more students with special/learning needs in HE (see Figure 4). It can be assumed that support is provided for them (Dongre et al., 2022).

When analyzing data about students’ problems with social relations and economic barriers, it can be seen that the two countries’ situations are again different, and it could be concluded that there are more students with social and economic problems in Bangladesh (see Figure 5). However, the researchers believe that this shows that HE in Bangladesh is more open to students with diverse needs and that teachers recognize them in the study process. These data are in line with earlier responses (see Figures 3 and 4),

which suggest that more students with special needs are included in HE in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, according to the research of other authors, there is not such a positive attitude towards students with high support needs (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018).

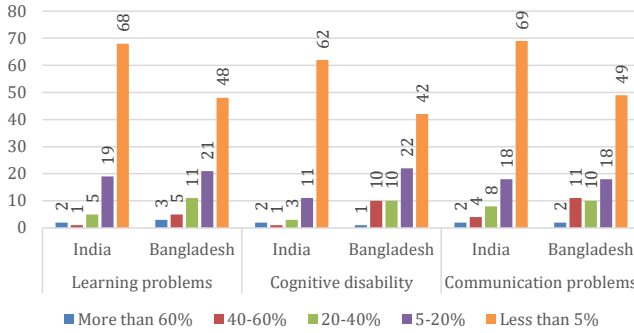


Figure 4. Students with special/learning needs

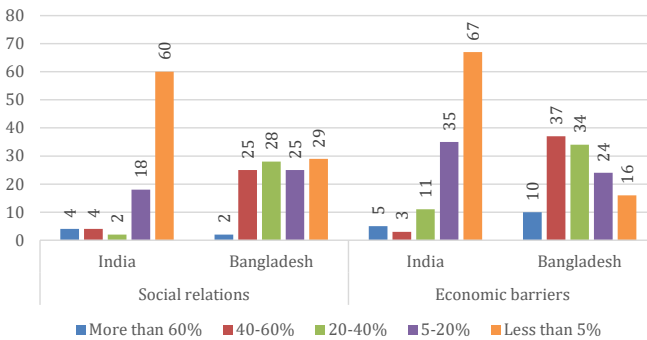


Figure 5. Students’ social situation

The participants were then asked how they rate their knowledge of inclusion, equality and access for students with disabilities as well as their experience of working with students with special needs, both on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant no knowledge or experience and 5 meant a very high level of knowledge and experience. Lecturers’ attitudes and knowledge about inclusive education are powerful factors in ensuring that students with special needs can learn successfully, and the importance of this aspect has already been highlighted by other researchers (Bodhi et al., 2022).

The results (see Table 1) show that the participants rated their knowledge of working with students with special needs higher than their experience thereof. Comparing the participants by country, the respondents from

India assess their knowledge more highly than that of their Bangladeshi counterparts. This study uses a self-assessment method, so it is not possible to say at this stage whether the respondents' self-assessment is the same as their actual knowledge. At this point, we can only speculate that, given that HE in India includes very few students with special needs, the respondents are optimistic and think that their knowledge is sufficient. On the other hand, the respondents from Bangladesh, where HEIs include relatively more students with various special needs, are aware that their knowledge is insufficient. Whether this speculative conclusion is correct or whether the data should be interpreted differently, it is clear that knowledge about inclusive education needs to be improved so that students can receive the support they need.

When asked if they hold a degree or if they have attended a special course in special education, 26 of the Indian respondents and 17 of the Bangladeshi respondents indicated that they had received such an education, and a very small number indicated that they had received this knowledge on additional courses or were currently studying (see Table 2). These data confirm the need for the activities planned in the DIVERSASIA project, which foresees the development of training materials on inclusive education and the organization of workshops for HE on inclusive education.

Table 1. Case Summaries

Country		How do you rate your knowledge in the field of inclusion, equality and access for students with disabilities in HEIs?	What is your experience of working with students with disabilities in HEIs?
India	Mean	3.16	2.59
	Variance	1.537	1.496
Bangladesh	Mean	2.44	2.26
	Variance	1.319	1.024
Total	Mean	2.85	2.45
	Variance	1.567	1.317

Table 2. Number of respondents with a degree/diploma in special education

		No	I am studying now	At the level of additional courses	Yes	Total
Country	India	158	1	7	26	192
	Bangladesh	135	8	4	17	164
Total		293	9	11	43	356

2. Inclusive policies and practices

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a number of statements applied to their institution by evaluating them on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 = Unaware, 2 = Not addressed, 3 = Yes (partially addressed), and 4 = Yes (fully addressed). The data analysis (see Figure 6) shows that there is a slight difference between the two countries in all statements, which is interesting, bearing in mind that the percentage of students with special needs is higher in Bangladesh.

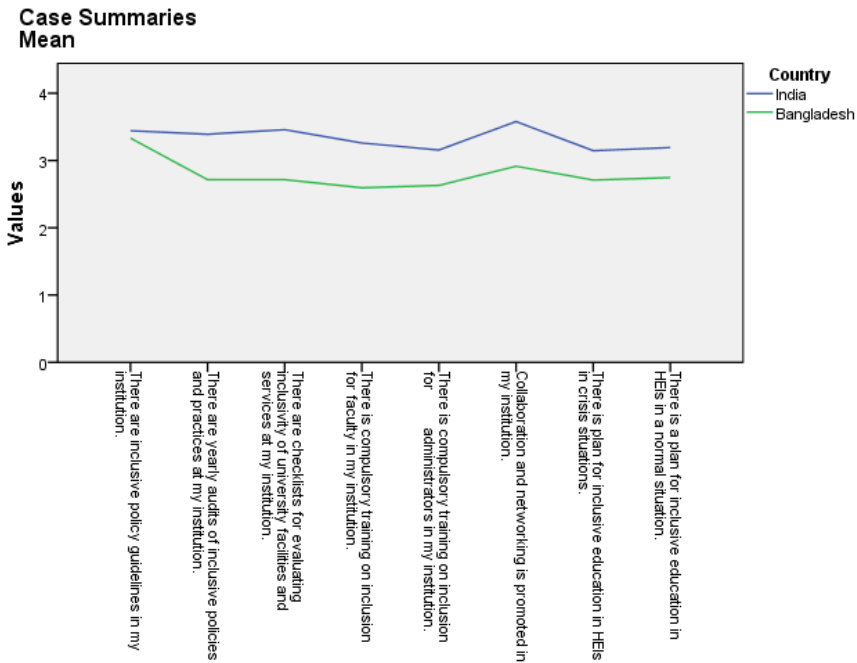


Figure 6. Parameters of Inclusive policy in both countries

The results for the statement ‘There are inclusive policy guidelines in my institution’ are almost the same, but all other statements are evaluated at a lower level by the respondents from Bangladesh. The highest evaluations from both countries were for the statement ‘Collaboration and networking is promoted in my institution’, with higher results from India.

The respondents were not asked to provide information on all the documents they mentioned. Further research is therefore needed to find out why there are such differences in answers about internal documents and in the percentages of students with special needs who are enrolled in HE in both countries. It can be seen from Figures 3 and 4 that there are more students with special needs enrolled in HE in Bangladesh, but when

respondents evaluated the statements about internal documents, higher results on internal policies were obtained from India.

We can make some speculative conclusions at this point about why the Indian respondents' evaluations of documents ensuring inclusive policies were higher:

1. The Supreme Court of India ruled that all HEIs should ensure that HE is accessible for disabled students, which is why institutions have developed such policies, even though not many students with special needs are enrolled yet because long-term traditions hold them back from entering HE.
2. There is a tradition of preparing documentation that states that services are being provided, but in reality, the situation is different.
3. There are different understandings about what is meant by the statements on inclusive policy.

Despite what these findings indicate, researchers should carry out additional data analyses to investigate them in more depth in further steps of the project's development.

In answer to the open-ended question of whether there was *anything the respondents wanted to add regarding inclusive policies and practices in your institution or higher education in general*, some participants talked about what was still needed, such as a separate special education curriculum, a more individual approach to the learning process, and assistive technology. However, some mentioned that several effective practices are already being implemented in their educational institutions, such as club activities based on students' interests, providing additional security facilities for girl students, encouraging all students to take part in sports activities, and reducing the fees. Not all respondents answered unequivocally negatively, and, in some HEIs, pedagogues were even able to name positive aspects of inclusive education that are already being implemented.

In the next open-ended question, participants were asked about *the biggest challenges in their experience in the learning process with students with disabilities*. Such answers as the following stood out very clearly: "to make them understand the content", "to ensure joy of learning", and "to teach the engineering concepts". In some sense, this may indicate the cause of the challenge; perhaps the teachers do not know the correct pedagogical methods to work with students with special needs, or perhaps there is no special curriculum. However, when evaluating all the answers submitted in general, it can be said that all kinds of challenges are mentioned regarding the environment, technologies, and the general cognitive, mental and emotional aspects of the implementation of special and inclusive education.

In the next step, participants were asked *what their best achievements were in the teaching process with students who have special functional needs*. Several educators mentioned that their best achievement is the achievement of their students passing tests or gaining knowledge. This required them to invest more time in studying, providing an individual approach, and giving additional explanations or understanding.

When asked if they had *any further comments on the biggest challenges for HEI in the area of disability*, the respondents viewed the nature of special needs and the varying levels of support that may be needed from a country-level perspective as well as from the position of providing basic environmental improvements. The problems mentioned by the respondents included issues concerning teachers and teaching methodology, as well as financial issues relating to technological provision. For example:

- There should be laws that promote equal opportunities on a national level that will open the door to creating jobs for people with various disabilities.
- Improvements should be made to environmental accessibility as many places and buildings are not accessible to those with special functional needs.
- Technological developments should be worked on, and the latest tools and equipment should be provided to support students with special educational needs.

3. Support needed to provide inclusive education and remote learning in HEIs

There were also questions about support tools and other measures that can be used in the learning process to support students with special needs, and a list of options was provided:

- Guide dogs for mobility and orientation
- Google Chromebook (for audio-visual assistance)
- Microsoft Surface Pro (for assistive technology, including text-to-speech software, word prediction and settings that allow screens to be adjusted for students with epilepsy and colour blindness)
- Word prediction
- Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC)
- Eye recognition software

Participants were asked to indicate if they knew how to use them, and there was also the possibility for them to add other tools they used in the teaching and learning process. A large number (100) indicated that they did not know about such tools and support measures, and no one gave another example of another option not mentioned on the list, which means that more information about such options may be needed.

Discussion and conclusions

It must first be stated that the data obtained are only preliminary results, and the researchers need to analyze the situation further, taking the national context into account. The traditions, financial situation and education levels of previous generations in a given country are relevant to inclusive education as they all interact and influence the extent to which the planned support measures will reach the target group. Furthermore, there are researchers who believe that the Western concept of inclusive education is not directly transferable to the educational environment in Asian countries and that specific solutions need to be found (Kalyanpur, 2020; Panicker et al., 2018).

Differences in the data emerged when comparing the results for India and Bangladesh regarding academic staffs' understanding of working with students with special needs, with Bangladeshi lecturers more likely than their Indian counterparts to indicate that they had insufficient knowledge of working with this group of students.

Currently, it can be concluded that lecturers and administrative staff lack the necessary knowledge on inclusive education, and this in turn could affect the provision of inclusive education. This has been pointed out previously by various researchers who have analyzed the most important factors in the provision of inclusive education (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018; Ambia & Rahman, 2021; Bodhi et al., 2022; Dongre et al., 2022).

It is evident from the data that there are more students with different special needs in HE in Bangladesh than in India, but this cannot necessarily be taken as evidence that the situation regarding inclusivity in HE is better in Bangladesh as the study participants from India were more dispersed among cities of different sizes, whereas most of the participants from Bangladesh were from the national capital and the situation is probably different in other regional centres. However, there may be another reason for this distribution of the data: it is possible that the two countries have different definitions of what constitutes special needs, which is why university staff in India reported there being fewer students with special needs.

Finally, participants were not familiar with the different technological tools and other types of assistance that can be used to support students with special needs, so there is a need for education to raise awareness of the different options. Given that digitalization enables both the use of digital learning tools to support students with disabilities to access learning resources remotely and the use of assistive technologies to support students in their everyday learning, there is also a need to develop technological solutions that can be used in HE and improve accessibility and thus make HE more inclusive.

The development of such solutions is one of the DIVERSASIA project's deliverables, and in the next stages of the project, the researchers intend both to analyze the factors that influence the extent to which inclusive HE is provided further and to propose different digital solutions to reduce the impact of special needs barriers on students' access to education.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest and that no financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct application of their research.

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