

Issues of Inclusion and Exclusion in Indian Higher Education: A Study of Students with Disabilities

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<https://doi.org/10.61703/RE-Ps-Vyt-710-24-5>

Abstract

Education of students with disabilities has been a matter of concern for a long time in India and around the world. From birth, they are confronted with exclusion at the family, social, educational, political and economic levels. At the school level, students with disabilities are excluded from the general education system and sent to special schools. While their access to higher education remains almost limited due to various educational problems, students entering higher education also face various barriers such as structural, physical, social, emotional, resource, curriculum, and assessment issues. India's higher education system is a powerful tool for building a knowledge-based society. India's higher education system is a powerful tool for building a knowledge-based society. Access to higher education institutions is as important for persons with disabilities as for any individual, as they can provide them with employment opportunities, poverty alleviation and social inclusion. Various laws and policies have been made for persons with disabilities at the international and national level such as 'The Mental Health Act 1987, The Rehabilitation Council of India 1992, The Persons with Disabilities Act 1995, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, etc. The 'Department of Human Resource Development' (MHRD) has often issued several orders to all centrally funded educational institutions to provide an accessible environment. The Disabilities Act mandates the construction of buildings, ramps, platforms, lifts, wheelchairs, and disabled toilets. But even today, minimum services like ramps, tracks, and elevators are not available in various universities and institutions of the country. This article is an attempt to examine disability with a focus on higher education in India. Its objective is to study the policies and regulations specifically designed for students with disabilities in higher education in India and analyse their problems and solutions. Research data has been collected by using the case study method for primary data, and through books, research papers, articles and newspapers for secondary-level data. The article will try to find out the best practices involved in the process and suggest recommendations.

Key Words: Disabilities, Inclusion, Exclusion, Inclusive Education, Accessibility and Opportunities.

Introduction

India's higher education system is a powerful tool for building a knowledge-based society. Access to higher education institutions is also important for people with disabilities as it can provide them with employment opportunities, poverty alleviation and social inclusion. The motivation for writing this article is rooted in the widespread belief that an

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inclusive approach to teaching and learning is a productive way to increase participation and achievement for all students. In particular, the study is based on theories of inclusion and on the idea that disability as a social construct recognizes the challenges that exist in the social context. Access to the university is open to everyone, But access to higher education for people with disabilities remains a formidable challenge.

The global literacy rate for people with disabilities is about 3%, and it is only 1% for women with impairments, according to the "United Nations Development Programme." The world's largest minority, consisting of one billion persons with disabilities, makes up around 15% of the global population. They must thus be completely assimilated into society, beginning with equitable access to high-quality education. However, people with disabilities are still underrepresented in higher education and are among the most vulnerable, excluded, and marginalised populations on campuses. They encounter numerous sorts of prejudice and stigma, as well as challenges to exercising their rights, when trying to locate educational institutions. Inclusive education is not only important for students, researchers and persons with disabilities, but also for the societies in which they live, as it helps to combat discrimination and promote diversity and inclusion.

The research paper, studies various parameters of inclusion and exclusion of disabled persons in higher education, for which case study method is used. Our research paper is divided into four parts. The first part, discuss the research objectives, research questions and methodology and the second part review the literature on inclusive education for Persons with Disabilities. The third part describes the policy and provisions for persons with disabilities in India. The fourth part of the paper throws light on the challenges and problems faced by persons with disabilities in higher education and the fifth part of the paper provides constructive suggestions for inclusive education for persons with disabilities.

Research Objectives

- To understand inclusive education regarding disability.
- To analyse the nature of exclusion of persons with disability in higher education
- To find out the challenges involved in inclusive higher education in respect of disability.
- To suggest recommendations and solutions for inclusive higher education for persons with disabilities.

Research Questions

- What are the challenges faced by persons with disability, which stands as a barrier towards inclusive higher education?
- What are the provisions for disabled students in higher education in India?
- What led to the exclusion of students with disability from the higher education system?
- What strategies can be devised for acknowledging and removing obstacles that people with impairments have while trying to attend education and creating more inclusive higher education in India?

Research Methodology

It is an analytical, descriptive, qualitative study. The primary data has been collected using unstructured interviews and case studies. Interviews have been conducted with different university students, out of which four have been mentioned here, that is of each from 'Delhi University (DU), 'Jawaharlal Nehru University' (JNU), 'Banaras Hindu University'(BHU) and 'Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University'(BBAU). Secondary sources such as books, journal papers, newspapers, online articles, reports, research papers, etc. have been utilized to analyse the subject.

Literature Review on Discourse on Inclusive Education, Exclusion and Disabilities

The literature on access and participation of students with disabilities in higher education is not as rich as other subjects, with very few people addressing the problems faced by this section of society. This article, studied the problem of disability through the lens of Inclusion and exclusion. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Inclusion means "The act of adding or adding a person or thing to a group." According to 'Hillary Silver', 'Exclusion means the lack of participation in the functioning of society and access to information, resources, social recognition and identity, and lack of self-esteem and personal potential to achieve personal goals'. (Silver, 2011,p.3) On the other hand, social exclusion is an activity that makes certain groups of people feel isolated and unimportant in society, which can vary from time to time depending on the environment. 'Amartya Sen' describes the diversity of exclusion and the corresponding policies. Sen says it is necessary to understand the language of exclusion – 'involuntary integration, as well as exclusion', 'exclusion by equal integration or exclusion by recognition of integration'. (Sen, 2004, p. 11-12) The solution to exclusion is not only inclusion but equal inclusion. For the inclusion of individuals and groups, it is necessary to challenge every level of exclusion, change in a social system and institutional law, and active law-making is necessary.

According to the 'World Health Organisation', barriers to inclusion are any physical, social and behavioural factors that prevent or limit a person's full development. Authors like 'Darrow' categorize barriers into three areas: organization, attitude and knowledge. The first is organizational barriers, with tools defining goals for students with disabilities and building classrooms, as well as teaching strategies and methods of conducting classrooms. Second, behavioural barriers refer to beliefs and attitudes teachers may have about educational services for students with disabilities, including curriculum, interactions with students, and participation in institutional and social activities. In contrast, tools, support or facilitators are elements of the educational context that contribute to the social and academic integration of students in educational contexts. (Darrow, 2009, p. 29-31)

The 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' (CRPD), article 24, seeks to promote inclusion by enabling States to reform their education systems and take action to protect the rights of persons with disabilities to quality and inclusive education. (United Nations, 2006). India became a signatory to 'United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in September 2007. New Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the importance of the inclusion of children with disabilities from early

childhood education to higher education by providing them with tools and materials for teaching and learning. (UNICEF, 2020) Key elements of inclusive education are: inclusion, access, non-discrimination, reasonable accommodation, physical access, accessibility, acceptance and adaptability.

The ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs) take a giant leap in integrating disability into the reform goals agreed upon around the world. The SDGs, which consist of 17 goals and 169 sub-goals, emphasize "leaving no one behind". The agenda includes several references to people with disabilities, including in the field of education. The Sustainable Development Goals' Goal 4 (Quality Education) directs states to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education and support opportunities for lifelong learning for all. Goal 4 includes a commitment to provide equal access to all levels of education and training for people with disabilities by 2030. (United Nation)

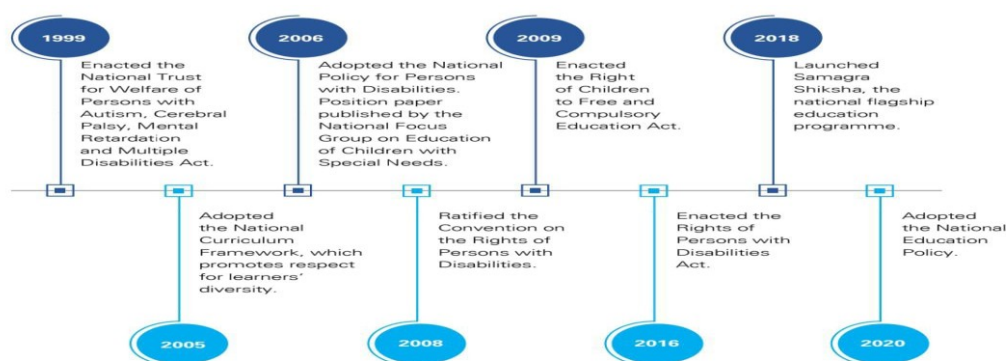
‘Fuller et al.’ (2008) show that students with disabilities were particularly likely to take art and design subjects and were underrepresented in career fields such as medicine, teaching, and nursing, where professional organizations generally set fitness and performance standards for students with disabilities reported worse than non-disabled students. (Fuller, 2008)

‘European Agency for Special Needs’ and the ‘United Nations High Commissioner’ has identified inclusive education as a way to remove barriers to learning and participation for all students. (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020) However, the practices of school exclusion and discrimination are still present in all education systems today and represent real obstacles or barriers to development. (Lacono et. al., 2009)

Policy and Provisions for Persons with Disabilities in India

Article 21 (A) of the Indian Constitution guarantees education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years, Article 15 prohibits discrimination "on grounds of religion, language, race or any of them" and Article 29 (2) Prohibits discrimination in respect of access of a person or person with a disability to State or State-aided educational institutions. (Mistry, 2012). The growing popularity of inclusive education has, over the years, led to cultural shifts and the development of new policy agendas that include students at all levels of education.

Figure 1- Laws and Policies for Persons with Disabilities



(Source- Grimes, 2021)

Provisions Related to Higher Education- According to the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995, people with disabilities should have access to education at all levels. The University Grants Commission (UGC) supports institutions across the nation to participate in special education initiatives to empower people with disabilities in the higher education sector. The Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (Differently Abled Persons) (HEPSN) and Teacher Preparation in Special Education (TEPSE) schemes were initiated by the University Grant Commission during the Ninth Five-Year Plan and continues in the Tenth Plan. The three important components of this scheme are: The first was the creation of Disability Units at a number of Indian universities and colleges, which facilitated the admission of students with disabilities and offered them advice and counselling. The second goal was to make higher education institutions' infrastructure, design, and teaching and learning spaces more accessible and barrier-free for people with disabilities. The third was the provision of specialised tools, such as assistive and adaptive technologies, to enhance educational services for students with disabilities in higher education. (UGC Guideline 2012-2017)

The eleventh five-year plan also included projections for key developmental steps needed for students with disabilities who are pursuing higher education. Initiatives like, creating better accessibility and a barrier-free environment, promoting disabled-friendly education at all levels by 2020 in different educational institutes and organizations like UGC, AICTE, NCERT, SCERT, KVS and all other apex education institutes, Special financial supports like scholarships/ fellowships, residential education facilities, remedial coaching, and other appropriate needful measures to institutes having a greater number of students with disabilities. Creating an "Equal Opportunity Cell" in every university to bring all programs together and benefits relating to students with disabilities at higher education under one umbrella for effective implementation, Creation of National and State Funds to provide financial support to the persons/students with disabilities, provision of inclusive education in the Government aided and recognized higher education institutions to the students with disabilities.

The National Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) 2005 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development deliberated on the issue of inclusive education for students with disabilities. To ensure the rights of persons with disabilities, the 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act' (RPWD Act) was passed in 2016. It revised the number of existing disabilities from 7 to 21. As per section 32 of the RPWD Act, all public universities are mandated to reserve at least 5% of study places for the "accessibility disabled". Section 16 (ii) of the 2016 Act states that the premises, buildings and other facilities of educational institutions should be accessible to children with disabilities. All publicly funded and recognized educational institutions provide inclusive education to students with disabilities and make their premises accessible. Unfortunately, because of their incompatibility, these two measures have not solved the problem of systemic and structural exclusion of people with disabilities from higher education. Education officials say you are not required to provide your facility if students with disabilities are not enrolled. The issue with this matter is that universities without suitable and accessible infrastructure do not accept applications from students with impairments. As a result, even with a 5% allowance, the enrolment percentage for students with impairments is low. To attract students

with disabilities, higher education institutions need to provide adequate and accessible infrastructure.

In *Disability Rights Group vs. Union of India* and *Rajeev Raturi vs. Union of India*, the Supreme Court of India has ordered all tertiary institutions to reserve 5% of their places for people with contextual disabilities and make them available to the institution as required by law. It was noted that the RPWD Act's stipulations are not implemented by even large educational institutions. (Bansal, 2019)

But despite all these guidelines, many universities are not equipped with wheelchairs, roads and lifts etc. (Kumar & Dr Singh, 2022). Among all other institutions, the need to rebuild educational institutions, public or private, is greater than ever, especially when we recently observed the 30 years of *Unni Krishnan vs. The State of Andhra Pradesh*, wherein the Right to Education was included within the ambit of Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. Section 15 of the Constitution Article 21 implies that denial of access to educational institutions by persons with disabilities is a violation of their fundamental rights.

Disability and Higher Education: Issues and Challenges

Although initiatives have been taken to include disabled students in higher education institutions, there are still very few overt indications that the education of children with disabilities has improved. In India, there are 2.21% of persons with disabilities, and many of them experience marginalization and prejudice when seeking higher education.

Higher education presents special challenges for students with disabilities, including concerns with program adaption, accommodation, instruction, learning, and evaluation, in addition to physical access to facilities. A study by Chataika (2010) found that students with disabilities still face behavioral, physical, and institutional barriers in higher education, but they also have the ability to develop coping mechanisms that allow them to achieve their educational goals. (Chataika, 2010)

Here are some interviews of disabled students from different universities in India.

Case-1: Dinesh who is a student of the Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi, being visually challenged faced a lot of problems in his education.

“I have done my graduation from Satyavati College of the University of Delhi. After graduation, very few of us go for a master's degree, MPhil and Ph. D. There are many innovative technologies available to us in big cities like Delhi which can make our life easier but the technology is also very expensive so people from lower-class families like us cannot afford it. However, some special facilities of Delhi University like the special library by Equal Opportunity Cell, the availability of study materials and technology have played an important role in our educational life. But structural accessibility, limited resources, non-availability of information, expensive technology and behavior of teachers related problems like these create hurdles in our way of becoming self-reliant.”

Dinesh who has completed his higher education from Delhi University and is suffering from a visual disability is facing various problems in his education like – a lack of lift, ramp, and toilet, lack of braille study material, language problems, and uncooperative behavior of teachers etc. Along with this, special steps have also been taken for them as the Delhi government exempted them from bus tickets, Hansraj College of Delhi University developed special structures for the disabled and Kirori Mal College has written names plates outside the room in Braille script, similar steps need to be taken by all institutions so that inclusive education can be established.

Case-1: Shorya Shood is a Ph.D. student at JNU and suffers from a disability.

“ During my Masters at Delhi University, I used to face a lot of problems in attending my class due to the lack of a ramp facility on the south campus. As a result of my hard struggle, I was able to build a ramp there. I started contacting the student union and asking how they were going to solve the problems of students with disabilities. In my MPhil and Ph.D., I’ve struggled with the JNU campus unavailability issue for a long time. The campus streets are built unevenly, making it difficult for my wheelchair. I come to the library very often, but due to accessibility, I encounter many problems here. Not just the library, but the entire campus has similar inaccessibility issues. Another problem is that my department canteen is in the basement. The elevator does not go there and there is no ramp for my wheelchair. It affects my morale and confidence and I can't concentrate on my research. I came to this university with high hopes of getting into the best university in India. I had hoped for an inclusive university that is sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities passes per day. But unfortunately, I am very disappointed with the situation at the university.”

Shorya Sood has done his Bachelor's and Master's from Delhi University and MPhil from JNU and pursuing Ph.D. from JNU. He is also facing various problems in his education like lack of lift, ramp, toilet, inappropriate behavior of teachers etc. To make Higher education institutions, accessible to the disabled he struggled to build ramps in Delhi University's South Campus. At JNU, they have been fighting to remove structural barriers like roads, ramps, and lifts and make the JNU campus accessible to the disabled.

Case-3: Poonam Lakra, a Ph.D. scholar in the Department of Hindi, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, being visually impaired, faces challenges in his studies.

“There are problems in practical life. I often didn't get access to information. People should become more sensitive to disabilities. Peers and teachers should offer assistance to those with disabilities. The university has a computer lab where software designed to help us has been installed. However, the lack of accessible book formats puts a barrier in the way of my education. While there is a language barrier too, I couldn't find many Hindi materials. I need to hire a reader, which increases the cost of our study. To accomplish inclusive education, further actions are required. People must be made aware of and made sensitive to disabilities.”

From this case, it is evident that persons with disabilities have limited access to information and resources. Also, there is an extra financial burden on this disadvantaged group for affording facilities like accessing technology, reading, etc. There is a lack of

sensitivity and awareness towards the disabled. So, there is a need to work on the attitudinal and institutional level.

Case-4: Manjeet Sharma, pursuing Master's in Hindi from Banaras Hindu University, suffers from visual impairment and wants better provisions for the disabled.

“Every move we take involves challenges. Basic amenities like a lift, a ramp, braille books, recording equipment, etc. should be available. Universities should have special educators to look at our specific needs. Even though we get cooperation from our friends and teachers, people with disabilities in many places, frequently encounter issues. For example, if any disabled student has to write a paper, he or she does not get writer easily. The execution of measures for the disabled is lacking. Facilities for the less fortunate should be demanded by institutes from the UGC. There is, however, apathy. For those with impairments, there must be sufficient reservations.”

From the above case, it can be said that there is still the existence of apathy and disinterest among institutions in providing accessibility and opportunity to differently-abled students. Special facilities are needed for differently abled persons, like special educators, accessible infrastructure, etc. There is a need to make efforts to implement schemes and policies available for persons with disabilities.

Major Challenges for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

A person with Disability faces various challenges in their educational journey such as –

Physical Accessibility: Students with disabilities may encounter physical obstacles while trying to access educational services, such as multi-story buildings without ramps or elevators, heavy doors, inaccessible restrooms, and difficult access to and from facilities. Manjeet (BHU) points out that the lack of lifts and ramps makes it difficult for students with locomotive disabilities of movement.

Unavailability or Lack of Accessible Study Materials - According to Dinesh (DU), “The challenges they face, being from a lower family, are different from those of an upper-class person as they have limited access to expensive technology and resources. In a university like Delhi where higher education is mainly available in English language, language problem remains a big challenge. Being visually impaired, he has to face a lot of challenges in the availability of study materials.

Lack of Awareness- Due to limited activation and access, students with disabilities are often left unaware of important information. According to Dinesh (DU), today where everything is happening online, students like us have to face various problems, I could not get the information about my MPhil Viva-Voce because the department mailed me, which I could not check. The department and the university must provide timely information to us so that we do not face other challenges.

Placement Process: At various points during the placement process, students with disabilities frequently encounter delays. Application processing for grants and concessions is problematic. Business evaluations are frequently not finished on schedule. The provision of special education services and programmes is also delayed.

Lack of Individualization: Some financing plans to place more emphasis on students' "weaknesses" than their "strengths" and rely on pre-determined classifications and designations. Policies for suspension and expulsion are occasionally strictly imposed and fail to consider the circumstances of a student. There has to be more awareness of the environment in which prejudice happens at all educational levels.

Negative Attitudes and Stereotypes: The educational system still harbours unfavourable attitudes and prejudices towards students with impairments. Equal access to educational services for students with disabilities may be hampered by certain professors, staff, and students' ignorance of and insensitivity to disability concerns. According to Dinesh (DU), his supervisor in MPhil refused to take him, she said would not be able to handle them.

Need for Financial Assistance- For people with disabilities to enroll in higher education and to maintain proper operation and continuation of the existing higher education programs, financial-related resources become crucial. In the lack of financial-related policies and schemes, it becomes difficult for them. As, according to Poonam (BBAU), there involves an extra cost to access material, equipment, and support systems like readers or writers, which need to be cared for.

Like all people, a disabled person also has the full right to get equal education and respect. But all these challenges create obstacles in their path, so it is our duty to work together to create an inclusive environment for them.

Suggestions for Accessible and Inclusive Education

The study has focused on the different barriers encountered by students with disabilities during their studies at university. However, the most common barriers include architectural barriers, lack of information, inaccessible technologies, or regulations etc. It should be noted that students with disabilities recognize the value of universities for their social and educational inclusion, but at the same time, they consider that their experiences in this institution are not always positive and encouraging.

Any public-funded or government-accredited institution, be it a school or a university, must receive a "green signal" from the regulator. For private institutions, the Union and State Governments can develop concrete programs to allocate resources for modernization and adaptation. As a first step, the program will encourage and help schools and colleges to follow the guidelines of the regulator. The regulatory mechanism may include provisions mandating the purchase of special reading materials for students with visual impairments. Each hall of residence shall have special rooms adapted to the needs of students with disabilities.

Educational institutions should be inclusive of students with disabilities. Three interventions can be made in this regard. First, there has to be appropriate and accessible infrastructure. Second, in order for academic and non-academic staff and students to comprehend the requirements of students with disabilities, ongoing awareness and training are required. Third, the RPWD Act's duties need to be effectively monitored for compliance.

The National Ombudsman and the Supreme Ombudsman for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are obligated to keep an eye on how the legislation is being applied and to evaluate its protections in this respect. They have failed in their endeavour thus far. It reduced the booking benefit for students with disabilities to 5% while maintaining the promise of social inclusion and equality for students with disabilities. (Bansal, 2019)

Active involvement and partnership with families of children with disabilities and their communities are part of several national strategies and programs. Holistic education places an emphasis on community mobilization and the development of parent and family capacity to provide care and education for children. It guarantees that children with disabilities participate independently in school regardless of their impairment and background. Raising awareness and gathering evidence on prevalent attitudes towards disability are two main goals of some national legislation and programmes. The National Disability Policy and the RTE Act give the relevant government organisations the authority to spread awareness of the rights of children with disabilities. The emphasis of the RTE Act is on fostering inclusive ideals and respect for diversity as well as improving the capacity of students, the school community, and other educational stakeholders at all levels by providing counseling and awareness-raising seminars. But it is very important for the government to include the following suggestions in order to implement these efforts and measures in more and wider areas-

- Universities and departments should be made disability friendly and accessible to them. Facilities of lift, ramp, toilets and hostel should be provided.
- Review of legislation to ensure alignment to promote inclusive education.
- Establishment of an inter-sectoral committee for the implementation of inclusive education.
- Ensure that national professional standards for teachers include knowledge, skills, and attitudes for inclusive education.
- There is a need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach while formulating policies and guidelines for persons with disabilities at the central and state levels. There is also a need to formulate an inclusive policy in coordination with the Department of Higher Education as well as the state planning department, Transport Department etc.
- In higher education too, there is a need to have special professors who can take care of the problems and needs of disabled students, special courses and job facilities should be provided for them.
- A helping cell should be created in every department for a disability, which would solve their problems.
- During the admission to higher education, in the orientation program, students should be taken on a tour of the university and department so that he or they can easily move in those places.
- To assist students in choosing their future path, a clear transition mechanism should be established at the educational level and a comprehensive career plan should be developed.

- To guarantee proper evaluation, a review of the monitoring and evaluation system in disability-sensitive development education is required.

According to 'Hockings', Teachers from universities must create instructional strategies and curricula that reflect the different needs and interests of learners at all levels. The study contends that pedagogies that are centered on the needs of the individual student and take into account subject-specific characteristics are more likely to increase possibilities for academic engagement for a wider range of students. (Hockings, et al.2008)

Conclusion

In the context of higher education, inclusion is multi-dimensional, not a technological quick fix. It is important to consider cultural expressions, to recognize each person as an individual and to accept that the ideal of consistently reaching everyone may not be realizable. (Kioko & Makoelle 2014) While it is clear from the above findings that the university needs to make buildings more accessible, it also needs to have the commitment to engage in a process that can lead to cultural change because inclusion cannot be a state. But the process of creating this inclusive environment is very limited in practice, for this the state as well as the society and every individual need to take appropriate steps. Therefore, it is not enough to guarantee access, but rather it is necessary to establish policies and plans to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, remain and succeed in their studies and placement.

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