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Equity in higher education:
Identifying critical gender concerns
This policy brief is an effort to highlight key policy recommendations to address critical gender concerns in the higher education sector. Equity in Higher Education is arguably one of the most significant and urgent issues facing India today; given that it is among the most unequal societies in the world. Gender inequalities do not stand alone but work through their interlocking effects with other dimensions of inequality. Though the Eleventh Five Year Plan marks a watershed in the history of Indian Planning in terms of increased outlays to education overall and especially to higher education, very little measurable change, by way of reducing inequalities between groups, is discernible. Only modest variation has occurred and there is considerable tokenism in the nature of the schemes available that explicitly address equity issues. Therefore, the Twelfth Plan offers the opportunity for taking stock of the progress made so far, the nature of the problem and the way forward.

The explicit focus of this policy brief is to examine the policy options undertaken during the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) as well as those under consideration for the Twelfth Five Year Plan. It is very important not to minimize the efforts of the Eleventh Plan to provide a major push to education overall, and to higher education in particular, visible in the huge outlays provided to this sector, and specifically a nine-fold increase in outlays to higher education.

This policy brief argues that a two-fold strategy is needed: on the one hand, to identify specific schemes and strategies to address particular groups and regions that are overwhelmingly excluded from higher education; and on the other, to consciously implement an intersectional approach (by combining more than one dimension of inequality).

II. The Context

The recognition and redressal of inequalities in higher education has become a matter of considerable urgency in contemporary India. Recent global data, comparing inequalities in educational attainment, places India at the very top of the list, easily overtaking countries such as China and Brazil. Access to higher education opportunities continues to bear the stamp of multiple dimensions of inequalities – gender, caste, religion, class, locality and disability – that characterize our society. Arguably, education is the principal channel in contemporary India for transferring inequalities based on accident of birth from one generation to the next. The nature of extent of these inequalities, often compounded by mutual interaction, violates the constitutional promise of equitable opportunity. Given the limited possibilities of redistributing economic resources like land or capital, higher and technical education is perhaps the only productive resource that the state can in fact hope to redistribute. Studies among first generation entrants into higher education from among the most deprived groups such as women from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have shown that it is precisely their capacity to go beyond schooling that has enabled them to break the cycle of exclusion. Another study on Muslims in the wake of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee Report also places critical emphasis on access to higher education for

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1This policy brief draws on valuable inputs provided at a Centre for Women’s Development Studies and UN Women organised national consultation on “Equity in Higher Education” held in New Delhi on March 3, 2012. It brought to the table eminent educationists, women’s studies scholars, and others along with representatives from the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Planning Commission.

2Yogendra Yadav. Equity and Higher Education; presentation made at the Consultation, 2012.

3A. Namala, S. Kumar, R. Kurlan, (n.d.) “Quest for Equity: Urban Dalit Women Employees and Entrepreneurs” was supported by Justitia et Pax, Netherlands and completed in 2010; presentation made at Consultation, 2012.
in the age group 18-22 years stood at an average of 17 per cent, up from 14 per cent in 2004-05. However, within this average, Scheduled Tribe men are 8.7 per cent compared to 6.4 per cent ST women; rural men are 9 per cent compared to 5.6 per cent women; Muslim men are 9 per cent compared to just 6 per cent for Muslim women. Compare these figures with 38.7 per cent GERs for urban upper caste men and 37.7 per cent urban upper caste women!

III. Critique of Policy Option(s)

During the Eleventh Five Year Plan, a number of initiatives were undertaken with a view to reducing regional and social group imbalance. Some of the pre-existing schemes were merged and new schemes launched. Most of the focus was on measures to reduce regional inequalities by setting up model colleges, universities and colleges in backward districts; special development grants for old and young institutions; embarking on schemes for student loans; and also attempts to address specific inequalities for women, scheduled castes and tribes, and the disabled. Given the recentness and slow pace of the launching of these schemes, a review of these schemes has not yet been undertaken. It would therefore be a priority to conduct such reviews at the earliest.

Redressing these identifiable inequalities in order to move towards the Constitutional ideal of equality of opportunity in higher education should be a key objective of the Twelfth Plan. Seriousness towards this would require that we move beyond the tokenism that often characterizes such schemes. Most importantly, instead of following a uniform strategy for all the disadvantaged groups, it is useful to evolve differentiated strategies for different groups as well as an intersectional strategy that recognises the inter-related nature of inequality.

This does not imply that there need not be any targeted strategies for a particular group. Taking the case of women, for instance, the Twelfth Plan Working Group Report suggests women’s studies centres, women’s hostels, women’s universities, and scholarships as special schemes. Of these, the need today of women’s universities can surely be questioned, given the data. Women’s hostels are an acute need, but there is every reason to consider a diversity index to enable rural, minority, lower caste, and disabled women, who are currently the most excluded, to gain access.

On the other hand, there are schemes that only target minority groups, backward regions, and disabled groups. While there is no doubt that special schemes are required for those communities (such as denotified tribes, manual scavengers and so on) who are overwhelmingly excluded from higher education, equal emphasis needs to be placed on those schemes that can address more than one dimension of inequality. Gender is particularly critical here, since it does not stand alone but acts together with dimensions such as class, caste, minority status, disability and so on.

Budgetary Allocations for Higher Education

The Eleventh Plan had set ambitious targets for promoting higher education by enhancing public spending; encouraging private engagement; and initiating institutional and policy reforms. Inclusion was an essential thrust of the Eleventh Plan. Various schemes along with a special plan were envisaged for higher education in the Eleventh Plan.

If we look at the trend in Central Plan Outlay for Higher Education over the last 5-6 years, it has increased significantly (as shown in Figure 1).

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1 See Bhattacharya, 2012; Niranjana, 2012; See for special study of Muslims, Bhushan, 2011.

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The Working Group on Higher Education for the Twelfth Five Year Plan has made projections for various interventions under Higher Education. As the figure below shows, 9 per cent of the total projections have been made to ensure equity in higher education, which includes interventions to ensure gender equity and equity across social groups. It is important that these projections are realized in the Twelfth Plan period.

### IV. Policy Recommendations

Many concrete proposals for improving existing schemes as well as planning for new interventions were discussed at the Consultation. Here are some of the policy recommendations:

- **Divide between ‘gender’ budgets which exclusively target ‘women’, and ‘social group’ equity budgets, where gender is absent as a criterion.** Secondly, the allocations for scholarships for various marginal social groups as suggested in the Twelfth Plan Working Group Report are of the order of Rs. 200 Crore per group in an overall budget that is almost Rs. 2 Lakh Crore, and is therefore clearly inadequate.
- **Enhancing the density of higher education institutions in the backward states and a**

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Table 1: Status of the initiatives envisaged in the Eleventh Five Year Plan

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting up a Refinance Corporation/Students Loan Scheme</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Loan Interest Subsidy</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>National Mission in Education through ICT</td>
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<td>368.44</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>450</td>
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<td>Assistance to State Governments for Degree Colleges</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incentivising States for Expansion, Inclusion and Excellence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>0.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of Tribunals, Accreditation Authority, NCHER and National Finance Corporation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship for College and University Students for Distance Learning</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship to Students from Non-Hindi speaking States/UTs and other scholarships</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.41</td>
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Source: Expenditure Budget Volume II, Department of Higher Education, Union Budget 2008-09 to 2012-13, Notes: BE-Budget Estimates; RE-Revised Estimates

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* Amitabh Kundu; Satish Deshpande; presentation made at the Consultation, 2012.
substantial boost to enrollment in the Eastern states. However, this emphasis needs to be approached with considerable care and a review of some of the new central universities that have been set up in the Eleventh Plan period is urgent. While the idea of setting up a university in a remote area may be well intentioned, the question of its feasibility has to be addressed in order to ensure that quality faculty will be willing to work in such areas.

• A substantial increase in the presence of rural students in general, in a similar vein to the point made above, it may be wiser to tackle the huge urban-rural disparities in access to higher education by building institutions in urban areas that cater to the needs of rural students rather than setting up universities in remote rural areas.

• Closing the gender gap in urban India and a substantial reduction in the gender gaps for girl students from rural areas, poorer families and deprived social communities is of utmost importance.

• Increasing the participation of SC, ST and Muslim students must be a priority.

• Special boosts to most deprived SC communities, Specially Vulnerable Tribal Groups, most backward Social and Educationally Backward Communities, Denotified Tribes, other nomadic communities and the dalits among Muslims and Christians must also be provided.

• It is crucial to provide a level playing ground to students from poorer families, especially in rural areas, so that those who reach the entry point of higher education are no longer constrained by lack of resources.

• Ensuring a qualitative change in the availability of institutional infrastructure and personal aids and opportunities available to the disabled students must be stressed upon in all policy action.

V. Conclusion

These are modest aims for any country that wishes to move towards equality of opportunity. Yet, given the existing levels of inequalities and the record of schemes so far, achieving these goals would be a stiff challenge. This calls for a break with the approach followed so far. There is a need to move beyond token scheme-based approaches to an integral view of the existing inequalities to find the way forward. This would require umbrella initiatives, building capacity and improvement of infrastructure, providing proactive measures through proper implementation of reservation, increasing incentives to differently-abled and other marginalised students, and so on. Given that a part of the gap that is observed between social groups and gender at the level of higher education is due to lower numbers and quality of pass-outs from the school system due to high drop-out rate and segmented quality, there is a need to improve the quality of schooling and retention of students from the marginalised sections through enhancing the performance of the schooling cycle.

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