HIGHER EDUCATION OUTREACH

WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

MODULE MANUAL

Higher Education Outreach: What it means and why it is important

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Accompanying resources for the project:

In addition to this module, other resources about the project are available on the project website: www.warwick.ac.uk/WAHEI. This includes various project outputs such as project reports, training materials, and presentations, as well as other information about the project and the people involved.

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Introduction

This manual:

1. Provides background information for Faculty Members (FMs)who participate in the *Higher Education Outreach: What it means and why it is important?* module. The module:
    - introduces FMs to the significance and rationale of higher education (HE) outreach for access and its social benefits for the institution, faculty, students, and the wider community;
    - encourages FMs to recognise their role in HE outreach and the challenges that they, as FMs, may encounter in their engagement with HE outreach; and
    - enables FMs to comprehend the core components of effective outreach programmes, focusing on FMs as ambassadors of HE knowledge outreach.
2. The material presented here is extracted (with some additional material) from a longer report relating to the module topic which participants can access using the link below:

Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Emily F. Henderson, Ann Stewart, Denisse Lillo Sierra, Ragini Khurana, S. Arokia Mary, Arushi Painuly (2025) *The Role of Higher Education Institutions and Faculty Members in Higher Education Outreach in India*. **CPRHE Research Papers Series, CPRHE RPS 20**.

Understanding the HE outreach context: The current landscape of HE in India

Higher education (HE) in India is currently in the massification stage, which means that many young people from families and communities that have historically not completed schooling are now considering applying for HE. Although enrolment rates have increased, social disparities in HE access persist, as do variations in course and institution choices. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on expanding HE access for socially excluded groups. The policy acknowledges that students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) face significant barriers in accessing HE, including a lack of information about the college-going process and making informed choices.

The importance of HE outreach in general for students and for HEIs

HE has many purposes and functions in society: providing specialist training and skills for specific professions; imparting general or soft skills to learners; and, within a democratic society, is designed to lead to an opening of the mind and to create active citizens. There is a proven connection between attending HE and social mobility of HE graduates.

Extending access to HE to students from historically underrepresented groups has general economic benefits, by for instance filling labour shortages, reducing skills gaps in high tech fields and generally providing a more skilled labour force; therefore enhancing the human capital of the nation. This is the *business case* for promoting HE access and choice. But providing opportunities for young people from non-traditional groups to access HE and to feel able to make informed choices about what they wish to study has other benefits. It can reduce systemic inequalities and produce intergenerational mobility. Importantly, it fulfils the commitment to provide education as a basic human right. It can transform universities from exclusive gatekeepers into enablers of social equity, so that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) enact a public service mission. This is a *social justice argument* for widening access to HE and enhancing HE choice.

In terms of HE outreach, individual HEI may want to attract more students generally to ensure that they can provide a full range of courses or even to ensure that their institutions remain viable. There may be, therefore, good business reasons for undertaking HE outreach However, even HEIs which are over-subscribed arguably have a public duty to undertake HE outreach based on the social justice case for HE outreach: acknowledging the *social importance of degree-level education*, and secondly, recognising that *a person's background and life circumstances should not prevent them from knowing about their potential HE options or how to apply*. HEIs are well positioned to engage in HE outreach to enhance informed choice of prospective HE students. NEP 2020 has also highlighted the important role of HEIs in expanding access to high-quality and localised HE provision, including through strengthening HE outreach practices (MHRD, 2020).

Defining HE outreach

To address these information gaps and access barriers effectively, we must first establish a clear understanding of what constitutes HE outreach. In this context, ***HE outreach refers to a specific set of practices which are defined by the shared aim of ensuring that potential applicants to HE are aware of the options that are open to them and the processes they need to follow***. This definition of HE outreach is situated in the international agenda known as 'widening participation' (WP), which aims to open up HE to people who have not historically been able to access HE or fully participate in HE during their studies. The explicit aim is *to encourage young people to consider enrolling in HE, or for families to support their children to do so.* But further it is *to enable young people and their families to make **informed choices** about HE pathways*.

HE outreach activities include opening the doors of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) for prospective students and their families to visit the institution and understand more about what HE involves. It also includes students and/or staff members from HEIs visiting community settings such as schools or community groups to explain HE options and processes. Underlying HE outreach is the knowledge that many young people are considering attending HE ***without being able to access reliable and accurate information about HE***, due to the fact that they are among the first generation in their families and communities to be able to apply for HE.

Challenges faced by first-generation learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Young people may miss out on the chance to attend HE or to make informed choices about HE due to several different factors:

- Locational constraints—particularly in relation to the rural-urban divide and geographically difficult terrains (flood prone areas, forest areas)—have meant that more isolated communities have had reduced access to schools and colleges.
- Material constraints faced by both families and the state play an important part, due to the lack of resources to invest in schooling and HE.
- Social constraints also play a role due to the difficulty of gaining accurate information about HE options when students from disadvantaged social background are the first generation in their families to apply for HE.

In India, young people in semi-urban, rural, and geographically isolated areas are not getting the support they need to make well-informed choices about accessing HE. Students from rural backgrounds may have to make HE choices on their own, as their parents are often less able to advise

on HE options. Rural students' plans are less likely to be achieved, and those students experience a rural-urban divide once they enter HE.

Many young people who are reaching the end of high school in rural and semi-urban India are in urgent need of informed guidance on post-school options for HE, but much of the guidance they are currently receiving is informal and not issued from sources with direct experience or expertise in HE.

Intersectionality dimensions

In India specifically, access to HE has historically been limited for marginalised caste, minority communities, and tribal groups due to interwoven material and social constraints. The combined effects of gender, caste, and rurality are related to a reduced likelihood of accessing HE.

Gender impacts upon young people's chances of accessing HE and making informed choices. Gender manifests in HE access, where young men do not attend HE because it is not considered the 'manly' option or where they want to earn sooner, and where young women do not attend HE because it would conflict with the expected age of marriage. Gender manifests in HE choice, where some subjects are seen as more suitable or appealing to young women or to young men. Also, young men choose subjects that will enable them to be breadwinners for their families, and young women may choose subjects that reflect caring attributes and that are known to lead to jobs that are flexible for childcare duties.

Decision-making is also affected by the notions of HE and its connection with job and employability. Parents and students may feel that there is no guarantee of a job after completing HE especially in streams like humanities, science, and commerce. Hence, they prefer to continue with their family business or seek employment to contribute to family income.

Current status of HE advice received by students

Research (see CPRHE report cited above) has confirmed that college teachers were identified as being one of the groups having the least influence on young people's HE choices. Only 10.1% (N=33) survey respondents indicated that college teacher/s had influenced them to apply to HE and/or helped them to find out about the college, as opposed to 79.1% (N=258) respondents indicating that their father had influenced them to apply, and 69.6% (N=227) indicating their mother had influenced them.

HE outreach significance for HEIs, faculty, and the wider community

Research has also identified the role that rural-serving state universities and government colleges based in rural and semi-urban areas may play as HE knowledge hubs and thereby to strengthen the efforts of HEI in delivering on the equity and social justice agenda for HE in India.

A study, undertaken by the 'Widening Access to Higher Education in India' Project, found that 91.4% of 464 Faculty Members (FMs) surveyed said they guided prospective undergraduate students on their HE-related choices. The advice and guidance provided by FMs ranged from assisting students in deciding whether to opt for HE for further studies, choosing the right college, course, or subject, and guiding them through the admission process. ***But these activities largely took place informally and within FMs' personal networks, rather than being embedded within structured institutional practices. This meant that only some students were benefitting from the guidance.***

Focus on the role of faculty in engaging in HE outreach

This brings us to the role of FMs, for spreading information about HE and facilitating HE outreach. Generally, FMs within HEIs are, and can be, a very important source of knowledge. However, FMs within HEIs in rural and semi urban areas are a vital source of college knowledge. Rural-serving state universities and government colleges have considerable potential to become HE access knowledge hubs, but this potential is currently underutilised in these settings.

The nature of faculty involvement

FMs' involvement in HE outreach may take the form of specialist HE outreach activities or be situated within community and civic engagement efforts. The involvement of FMs in HE outreach entails different activities depending on the goals set by each HEI and their respective WP agenda. These activities may include:

- the delivery of a 'taster' lecture to illustrate what HE looks and feels like;
- designing pre-degree courses at HEIs which serve to enhance students' preparedness for degree-level study;
- participating in comprehensive programmes that may include multiple types of activity and support;
- being involved in outreach programmes delivered throughout the academic year; and/or
- leading sessions during long vacation HE outreach programmes.

The challenges faculty face in engaging in HE outreach

FMs participating in HE outreach is not necessarily a straightforward endeavour. While attempting to engage in HE outreach activities, FMs may face several institutional challenges:

- academic workloads and distribution of tasks;
- allocation of financial resources and the need for capacity building;
- lack of identification with local communities—FMs may be employed in HEIs in locations that are often unfamiliar to them and may not have local knowledge or identification with local communities;
- inequalities in the academic profession—many reserved posts remain unfilled, and FMs may be from privileged groups with little connection to the marginalised groups who would be the intended beneficiaries of HE outreach; and/or
- currently, neither the training infrastructure nor the Academic Performance Indicator (API) includes reference to HE outreach activities.

Institutional HE Outreach Planning: Core components in designing HE outreach programmes and implementing strategies with faculty engagement

Assessing Student Needs

It is important, in creating institutional awareness and readiness to undertake any HE outreach activity, to identify the challenges that potential students face. These include:

- Information gaps: Many students lack reliable information about HE options and application processes.
- Social constraints: First-generation learners need support understanding HE culture and expectations.
- Gender-sensitive support: Stereotypes and identity-based judgements about educational potential need to be addressed.
- Rural-urban divide considerations: Locational constraints and transport issues must be understood.

Assessing FMs' role and involvement

It is important to identify faculty attributes that support outreach potential. These include:

- Professional attributes: Going beyond basic duties, showing motivation to teach.
- Pedagogical attributes: Being recognised as 'good' teachers with proper qualifications.
- Values-related attributes: Acting as principled advocates for students.
- Personal/character attributes: Being supportive, approachable, and friendly.

Choosing outreach formats and developing accessible and engaging content

There are many ways of undertaking HE access. These can involve outreach activities (undertaken outside the HEI—either physically or virtually) and inreach activities (undertaken within the HEI—either physically or virtually).

> **Examples of HE outreach**
>
> - HE outreach activities with schools, including visits, developing more sustained links with schools serving underrepresented groups such as potential first-generation learners.
> - HE outreach activities added to a community-based event.
> - Mentorship programmes for underrepresented school students involving current students.
> - Virtually provided activities with schools.

Examples of HE inreach

- Physical campus visits: Opening HEI doors for prospective students and families.
    - *Open days or fairs* tend to be larger-scale, promotional events, offering general information and open to all.
    - *Taster days (or sessions)* are smaller, invitation based and more targeted interventions, often aimed at students who may not yet see themselves as 'university material'. They offer first-hand experiences that demystify university life, making it more accessible and tangible to those who may otherwise perceive it as an alien or exclusive space.
- Summer programmes: Extensive sessions during school holidays conducted at the HEI.
- Academic enrichment programmes such as pre-degree courses: Foundation programmes to enhance student preparedness
- Virtual campus tours and provision of online resources.

Examples of HE Activities

The following examples are drawn from the Widening Access to Higher Education in India (WAHEI) research project which was undertaken across 5 states.

Assam

School based HE outreach: FMs organise school visits and interaction with potential students and their guardians, to provide subject knowledge through lectures and information on HE courses, admission process, reservation, and scholarships schemes etc.

Community based HE outreach: In one government college, almost all the departments have adopted one village each where, along with other activities, *information on HE courses, admission etc. are provided by FMs* (during the course of their year-long visits). Information about the courses and programmes, admission processes, etc., are provided during the admission time.

School based virtual inreach: Another government college has set up a webpage known as 'TARANG' where the FMs/teachers from nearby rural schools and the Higher Secondary section can seek assistance for training, additional classes, information etc., on the basis of their subject or for any academic matter. Through TARANG, students of nearly schools obtain permission for free college science lab facilities, library facilities, sports trainings etc.

Chhattisgarh

Community based HE outreach: Involves a seven-day special camp in schools, where FMs, accompanied by National Service Scheme student volunteers, stay at the school and organised multiple programmes including cleanliness drives, plantation drives, health camps, social awareness campaigning, etc. and *activities meant for school children which includes providing information on HE courses, admission, etc.*

Kerala

In reach HE open event: The University of Calicut provides a three-day Open House organised under SHASTRAYAN (the annual festival of science). The community nearby schools and students of affiliating colleges are invited. The whole staff of the University showcases itself in terms of departments, courses

offered, labs, infrastructure, and research accomplishments. Students are fully involved as volunteers for the event. Every department is allocated funds.

Haryana

School based inreach: Involves a twinning programme whereby government schools visit other schools (in the vicinity) for improved interactions. This also involves the schoolteacher in-charge taking the students to nearby government colleges.

Focused in reach activity: A schoolteacher with a Fine Arts background organised for students to come to the university to learn about Fine Arts in order to encourage students to consider a subject which is not well known.

Maharashtra

School based inreach: In one government college, activities like 'Fun in Chemistry' and 'Science Open Day' are organised, and school students in the locality are invited to visit the event. This gives them a good chance to see the infrastructure of the HEI and also the activities carried out in the science laboratories. It inspires them to take admission in the HEI.

School based outreach: In another government college, FMs as a group visit higher secondary schools in the nearby rural local places and speak to students in the institutions about the availability of career opportunities in HE. They inform the school students about the admission process, employability, and other facilities available with their institution.

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