HIGHER EDUCATION OUTREACH

WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

PROJECT BRIEF

Towards Informed Higher Education Access and Choice for Prospective Undergraduate Students: The Role of Higher Education Institutions and Faculty Members as Local Knowledge Hubs

National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration

University of Warwick

Towards Informed Higher Education Access and Choice for Prospective Undergraduate Students: The Role of Higher Education Institutions and Faculty Members as Local Knowledge Hubs

1. Introduction

India's higher education (HE) landscape has expanded rapidly over the past few decades. Yet, this numerical expansion has not always translated into fully informed choices when students select their institution, course or subject. The systems of meaningful HE outreach and guidance on HE options for prospective learners are, at best, still in the process of evolving. *HE outreach* refers to a specific set of practices defined by the shared aim of ensuring that potential applicants to HE are aware of the options available to them and the processes they need to follow.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have considerable potential to strengthen structured engagement with the communities they serve through advice and guidance on higher education options and processes. At present, however, many continue to operate largely as academic islands with limited sustained engagement of this kind. HE outreach activities do occur—such as occasional campus visits, or assistance during admissions—but these remain largely unnamed as a specific activity (i.e., HE outreach), unplanned, and under-resourced by institutional systems.

Students—especially those from rural, first-generation, low-income, or marginalised backgrounds—enter the HE system with limited exposure to academic pathways. Many may have never interacted with faculty members before admission, or visited a college campus, and received systematic guidance about courses, admission processes, or career trajectories. While considerations such as affordability, safety, distance, and commutability are important, many students make HE choices with limited access to reliable information and a broader understanding of available HE opportunities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognises the importance of equitable access and highlights the need to make HE information more accessible, HEIs have yet to fully develop the institutional mechanisms required to give effect to this vision.

The brief highlights the need for concerted efforts by rural-serving institutional leaders in HEIs and faculty members to strengthen pre-admission engagement, informed decision-making, and equitable transitions into HE by developing HEIs as local HE knowledge hubs.

2. The Current State of HE Outreach

HEIs, particularly rural-serving state universities and government colleges, play an important role in expanding educational opportunities in their regions and remain one of the closest and most reliable institutional points of contact for many first-generation learners. However, the potential of these institutions to support informed pathways to HE access and choice has yet to be fully developed in a systematic manner.

Formal coordination between schools and colleges is often limited, and HE outreach activities tend to depend on individual initiative rather than institutional structures. While there is growing recognition of the importance of HE outreach and informed guidance, institutional mechanisms to support systematic engagement are still evolving. Many HEIs do not have dedicated HE outreach units, staff, or financial provisions. Without an organised framework, HE outreach becomes dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional commitment.

Faculty members hold the deepest knowledge of disciplines, academic pathways, and institutional processes. They are the logical link between the world of HE and the communities around their colleges. However, their potential contribution to widening access and choice remains constrained by a combination of structural and professional factors. Heavy teaching loads and other duties, insufficient funds, and the absence of recognition, support, and training all limit their ability to engage consistently in HE outreach.

Despite this, some individual HEIs are undertaking HE outreach on the basis of institutional leader priorities, and faculty members do informally guide neighbours, local youth, and school students and their families. These efforts, however valuable, remain invisible and unsupported.

Limited HE outreach means that many prospective students enter college with little or no contact with HEIs or faculty members before stepping onto campus upon admission. Their decisions are heavily influenced by family expectations and hearsay rather than by access to reliable information and informed guidance on HE opportunities. In the absence of institutional and faculty guidance, misinformation and guesswork often shape subject and institutional choices. These patterns reproduce existing social inequalities even as enrolments rise.

3. The Cost of Limited HE Outreach: Effect on HEIs, Faculty Members, and Students

When HEIs are not visible or accessible to prospective students and families in their local areas, they struggle to fulfill their public purpose. Institutions miss the opportunity to shape aspirations, attract students, or establish themselves as trusted educational anchors. The broader equity mandate of NEP 2020 to democratise access, that is, achieving a GER of 50% by 2035 may take longer to achieve when HE outreach is not embedded in the institutional mission. Moreover, without HE outreach, many prospective students may remain unaware of new courses and key provisions introduced under NEP 2020, limiting informed higher education choice.

This limited engagement between institutions and surrounding communities means that many prospective undergraduate students continue to remain disconnected from the knowledge, guidance, and experience that faculty members in HEIs can offer. Faculty expertise remains confined to the classroom, rather than being shared with communities where it can also make a transformative difference. Limited awareness about HE outreach also means that faculty members' academic identity is often shaped more by classroom teaching and institutional duties than by a wider sense of civic responsibility towards the community.

As a result of limited contact between faculty members, HEIs, and surrounding schools and local areas, many students often make important HE decisions with limited reliable guidance or exposure to available options. Students often make suboptimal choices—enrolling in institutions or courses that do not align with their strengths or aspirations. They therefore may struggle with academic expectations, experience lower confidence, and face a higher risk of disengagement once they enter college. Inequalities based on social, economic and locational disadvantage are acutely in evidence at the transition point from school to college.

Over the longer term, the HE system bears the consequences of these information inequalities. When students do not receive adequate guidance and exposure to available opportunities, uneven patterns of urban–rural inequalities and participation continue even as

overall enrolments expand. The equity goals of the national policy framework can be meaningfully realised when HEIs and faculty members engage actively with schools and local communities to bridge information gaps and support informed HE choices for students.

Evidence of Existing HE Outreach Practices

Across selected institutions in states, HE outreach is taking place but largely informally and through individual effort. The practices below reflect what exists and what can be built upon.

School Visits and Community Engagement

- Department-led adoption of neighbouring villages with HE outreach community engagement (Assam).
- Regular faculty visits to nearby schools to share information on courses, admissions, and career pathways (Assam).
- Faculty-led door-to-door HE outreach and home visits in rural areas to build trust with parents, particularly for first-generation and girl students (Haryana).

Campus Exposure and Pre-Admission Activities

- Open days on campus for prospective students and families to experience campus life and learn about admission processes (Maharashtra).
- Campus visits enabling school students to access libraries, science laboratories, and sports facilities (Assam).
- Subject expert-led laboratory and facilities tours to build aspiration and familiarity with HE environments (Chhattisgarh).
- Science fairs, essay competitions, and motivational talks providing early and meaningful exposure to academic culture (Maharashtra).

Guidance and Counselling Structures

- Pre-admission committees established within colleges to coordinate student guidance on courses and admission (Haryana).
- Counselling committees linked directly to junior colleges, providing structured guidance for Class 12 students (Maharashtra).
- Peer counselling programmes training current students to advise rural school students on HE options (e.g. *Vazhikatti,* Kerala).
- NGO partnerships and community settings used by institutional leaders to extend guidance reach in rural and tribal areas (Kerala).

Digital and Media HE Outreach

- WhatsApp groups, community radio, and local media used to disseminate HE information to prospective students and families (Maharashtra).
- Interactive digital platforms linking HEIs with local schools (e.g. *TARANG*, Assam).
- Faculty contact details placed on campaign posters, making guidance accessible year-round beyond formal admissions periods (Haryana).

Institutional and State-Level Initiatives

- State-level feeder school HE outreach campaigns connecting schools and HEIs systematically (e.g. *Poshak Vidyalaya Sampark Abhiyan,* Chhattisgarh).
- Institution-developed HE outreach modules formalising local guidance practice at the college level (Assam).
- NSS camps and Earn and Learn schemes used as vehicles for HE outreach, awareness, and student support (Maharashtra).
- Twinning of Schools Programme promotes collaboration between schools and higher education institutions (Haryana).
- Scholarship and financial aid awareness programmes integrated into HE outreach activities at both levels: State Universities & Government Colleges.

4. Strengthening HE Outreach: Areas for Consideration

NEP 2020 recognises the centrality of HEIs in delivering on the equity agenda — and it is faculty members, as the most accessible and knowledgeable actors within these institutions, who are best positioned to give practical effect to that vision. Pre-admission engagement with students must be structured, consistent, and targeted, especially at those most likely to be excluded from making informed choices about HE.

HE outreach activities also need to be more formally recognised as an important part of existing extension, community engagement, and faculty professional development initiatives within HEIs. Building an HE outreach culture begins with HEIs moving beyond being passive admission points and positioning themselves as active knowledge hubs for the communities around them by:

- Establishing dedicated HE Outreach Cells within state universities and government colleges.
- Allocating sustained resources for HE outreach activities.
- Building formal partnerships between HEIs, local schools, and local *panchayats* and other community groups and organisations to strengthen community-level HE outreach and awareness on HE opportunities.
- Integrating HE outreach activities within existing institutional extension and community engagement platforms such as the National Service Scheme (NSS), *Unnat Bharat Abhiyan* (UBA), and National Cadet Corps (NCC) to strengthen informed access to higher education.
- Organising structured pre-admission initiatives: campus visits, taster sessions, subject orientation days, and interactions with faculty for high school students but also for younger school students to pave the way towards HE.
- Offering clear, accessible information in print and digital formats on admissions, financial aid, scholarships, and academic expectations, and disseminating information via local media channels.
- Complementing digital HE outreach activities with support for students and families in navigating digital information systems, admissions procedures, and scholarship application processes.
- Supporting high schools to help students develop college readiness skills, including confidence, awareness of HE opportunities and preparedness for the transition to college life.
- Creating transition pipelines between schools and HEIs with targeted support for first-generation learners and students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Empowering faculty to engage in HE outreach activities, including providing structured professional development through MMTTC Centres, and delivering a dedicated HE outreach faculty training module (https://www.niepa.ac.in/WAHEI_HE_outreach_module).

Together, these potential areas for action can help create a more equitable HE landscape by improving access to reliable guidance, strengthening informed student choice, and supporting smoother transitions into HE.

5. Conclusion

For HE in India to realise the equity commitments of NEP 2020, existing HE outreach efforts need to be strengthened and more systematically supported in ways that promote informed student choice and help reduce information inequalities by bringing

institutions, faculty, schools, and communities into closer engagement.

This commitment must be anchored in the role of faculty members. Faculty members are at the heart of students' transition into HE, particularly for first-generation learners and those with limited prior exposure to HE pathways. Faculty members' expertise, respected standing in the community, and deep understanding of academic pathways make them indispensable actors in supporting young people's choices. When their HE outreach work is recognised, supported, and embedded in institutional culture, they become powerful agents of equity.

Students, in turn, benefit the most when they have early, meaningful, and reliable engagement with HEIs and faculty members. Such engagement provides confidence, clarity, and a sense of potential belonging in HE—factors that are especially crucial for students who are first-generation learners, from rural areas, and students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Strengthening this HE outreach ecosystem can support more informed HE access and choice, enable HEIs to function more effectively as local HE knowledge hubs, and improve educational transitions for students from diverse socio-economic and geographical backgrounds.

This project brief is prepared by Nidhi S. Sabharwal (ORCID: 0000-0001-8089-2624), National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), New Delhi, and Emily F. Henderson (ORCID: 0000-0002-5723-9560) and Ann Stewart (ORCID: 0000-0002-2357-2322), University of Warwick, UK.

This project brief is primarily based on a large-scale NIEPA-Warwick collaborative research study (www.warwick.ac.uk/WAHEI) employing a questionnaire-based survey of 2890 students and 474 faculty members, 157 interviews with institutional leaders and faculty members, 18 focus group discussions with students and 54 interviews with students, 50 faculty members' diaries and 254 diary entries by faculty members in HEIs across states, namely, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Kerala and Maharashtra.

To cite this project brief:
Sabharwal, N.S., Henderson, E. F., Stewart, A. (2026). Towards Informed Higher Education Access and Choice for Prospective Undergraduate Students: The Role of Higher Education Institutions and Faculty Members as Local Knowledge Hubs. New Delhi; Coventry: National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration; Doctoral Education and Academia Research Centre, University of Warwick. Available at https://www.niepa.ac.in/collab_university_of_warwick and https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/201283/.