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Understanding Inclusion and Accessibility in Higher Education: A Case Study from Bhutan

Sehyun Liz Hwang
University of Minnesota

Christopher Johnstone
University of Minnesota

Matthew J. Schuelka
Fora Education & University of Minnesota

Research Aims & objectives	Key Findings	Implications
This study sought to understand Bhutanese higher education stakeholders' own understanding and best practices around inclusion and accessibility. We asked Bhutanese higher education practitioners the following questions: • What strategies or activities do you do to facilitate accessibility and inclusiveness in your college? • What consideration do you take into account when thinking about accessibility and inclusiveness? • What would you consider to be the most important practices for accessibility and inclusiveness?	Through a Delphi-design, we found the following: • Accessibility could be promoted through utilizing a variety of teaching and learning strategies to engage students with different learning needs. • Accessibility could be promoted through recognizing the barriers for students with disabilities during admissions processes and time to graduation expectations. • There are many considerations needed to practice accessibility and inclusiveness.	• Increase flexibility in higher education structures, policies, and requirements. • Consider inclusion at the very beginning of program and curriculum design. • Embed inclusion and accessibility policy at the institutional and national policy levels. • Support students through instructor pastoral, interpersonal care; as well as foster and sustain peer supports. • Offer a variety of teaching and learning modes and styles, emphasizing assessment based on growth mindsets and a diversity of presentation options. • Celebrate and demonstrate diversity and inclusion at the institutional leadership level.

Introduction

This study sought to understand the strategies used by instructors in higher education institutions in Bhutan that promote inclusion and accessibility. In this case, 'inclusivity' was defined broadly as an approach that enhanced opportunities for all students participate and benefit from higher education opportunities. Because there is little written on this topic in Bhutan, the study sought to gain perspectives from those who are most engaged with the work of accessibility in higher education. A Delphi method was used to help build consensus across participants in the study.

Delphi Studies are a structured approach to building consensus among experts on a particular topic.[i] These types of studies are often used when new ideas are being practiced but there is little empirical evidence available to practitioners, and effective within a project that involves participatory action research,[ii] which is the case with this study. Delphi studies rely on *expert knowledge*, i.e., they solicit and then combine experts' responses to questions, allowing all experts in the study to comment on one-another's responses. Through numerical rating a consensus around particular ideas is generated, thus providing experts and all readers of the study with an idea about what is most important, or most frequently practiced, for these experts.

Bhutan is a small country in the Eastern Himalaya with a relatively new, formal, secular, higher education system. The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) – with 9 integrated colleges and 3 affiliated private colleges spread throughout Bhutan – was founded in 2003. Previously higher education was located within government ministry structures and accredited by Delhi University, India. RUB is one of only two universities in Bhutan, the other being the specialized Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB). Higher education institutes of Buddhist studies also exist in Bhutan and have so for over a thousand years, but only serve those in the monastic body. Other post-secondary education options in Bhutan include a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system. There are no formalized inclusion and accessibility policies or provisions provided in any of the higher education systems in Bhutan.[iii]

Methodology

Participants. As Delphi studies are meant to be conducted with participants who have expertise on the topic of the research, the participants for this study were a small sample of experts who provided in-depth knowledge of accessibility in Bhutanese higher education. A total of 23 participants were nominated and invited to participate in the study, of which 10 experts agreed to participate in the study. The participant group consisted of faculty members, staff, and senior administrators from multiple universities and educational institutions in Bhutan.

Procedures. The study was conducted with three rounds of *Qualtrics* surveys that were sent to participants by email. The first round consisted of three qualitative questions: 1) What strategies or activities do you do to facilitate accessibility and inclusiveness in your college? (Either for students with specific disabilities, or general students that may be struggling mentally or academically?); 2) What consideration do you take into account when thinking about accessibility and inclusiveness?; and 3) What would you consider to be the most

important practices for accessibility and inclusiveness? The participants were asked to share their responses freely, without any restrictions or limitations on word count or format.

After all participants submitted their responses to the first round of survey, we then gathered all responses for each question and asked participants to numerically rate these responses for their usefulness in their colleges. The four-point Likert scale included ratings of: (1) not useful in my context; (2) a little useful in my context; (3) somewhat useful in my context; and (4) very useful in my context. Additionally, participants were also given an opportunity to provide any additional comments on responses they rated.

For the final survey, we asked participants to provide any final feedback on the responses that were rated with mean of 3.8 or higher and additional comments from second survey participants. The 3.8 average reflected near unanimous agreement that a strategy was "very useful."

Findings

The section below presents highlighted findings from the first and second survey, including qualitative and quantitative data on participant responses that were identified to be most useful in their work. This section highlights participant comments that were rated most useful. A full overview of comments and mean responses is found in the endnote appendices.[iv]

Question 1 asked "What strategies or activities do you do to facilitate accessibility and inclusiveness in your college? (Either for students with specific disabilities, or general students that may be struggling mentally or academically)?" The response with the highest peer ratings was (Mean 3.83):

> *For general students, I always try to use a variety of teaching-learning strategies to make sure that all students in my class participate in learning. I attend to some students by providing extra materials to read and explore. Use social media for communication.* (Respondent 3)

This statement appeared to resonate with instructors across institutions, and several participants made qualitative comments mainly related to the use of "buddy systems" and the relevance of strategies related to students with disabilities. Instructors noted in additional comments that:

- *Buddy system works better than tutoring. Providing time flexibility especially in submitting their assignment.*
- *It becomes useful depending on what physical challenges are there in out students, sometimes we have hearing/visual impairment, and other times physical movement disabilities.*
- *The buddy system, which I called as special friend or mentor system is found to be the most useful in my context.*

Quantitatively, instructors reached consensus on that **accessibility could be promoted through utilizing a variety of teaching and learning strategies to engage students with different learning needs.** Some of these students may require supplemental or alternative materials such as additional readings. Instructors also suggested that the use of social media may help with student communication. Qualitative comments also suggested that one flexible teaching style is a 'buddy system' that matches students with one another. Finally, one

commenter stated that instructors also need to consider the specific learning considerations for students with disabilities.

Question 2 asked "What consideration do you take into account when thinking about accessibility and inclusiveness?" The response with the highest peer ratings was (Mean 3.8):

> *One common problem that students with disabilities face is they are often academically disadvantaged and cannot compete with the rest of the students. For many it is a struggle to meet the admission criteria which is pretty fixed by the university. We need to be more considerate when it comes to admission criteria as well as allow more time to graduate, if needed. When it comes to accessibility, conducive and friendly physical infrastructure needs to be in place. This is not generally the case with Bhutan. We need to work on this pretty urgently.*

The strategy above advocated for the creation of a safe and sensitive environment, but also critiqued existing institutional barriers for students with disabilities. The qualitative comment of the question highlighted the importance of ensuring well-being and dignity of students with physical disabilities as part of a broader inclusion strategy.

> If we take care of the welfare of students with physical challenges, it will promote the wellbeing of individuals with such challenges, thus they can live a dignified life. Or in other words, if we treat students with physical challenges with dignity, it will lead to better wellbeing, and such a student can reach a potential to create his/her own welfares.

Quantitatively, instructors demonstrated agreement with the comment that **accessibility could be promoted through recognizing the barriers for students with disabilities during admissions processes and time to graduation expectations.**

Question 3 asked "What would you consider to be the most important practices for accessibility and inclusiveness?" The response with the highest peer ratings was (Mean 3.83):

> *Involving people as much as possible: Frequently asking / talking with people about their ideas, suggestions, and concerns when making decisions (not just those with disabilities or accessibility limitations, but others around their spheres of interaction as well). Setting expectations of promoting accessibility and inclusiveness from the management side. Designing for accessibility and inclusion from the start (building-in institutional structures to promote and consider accessibility). Celebrating inclusiveness. Garnering public/community support for accessibility and inclusiveness. Having a policy structure in place at the national level to support accessibility and inclusiveness.*

The comment above provided similar information and posited that inclusion is a comprehensive endeavor that requires both policy-level interventions and interpersonal sensitivity. Other comments included and supported part of this responses and provided more in-depth example such as celebrating differences and differentiating the instructions, signage around campus, captioning, use of sign language interpreters, encouraging person-first language, and modification and adaptation in teaching and learning. One comment was shared for the question:

> *This is what we aspire for.*

From quantitative data, it is clear that instructors agreed that **there are many considerations needed to practice accessibility and inclusiveness.** The participant's comment above was the highest rated comment for the question. It highlights that consideration needs to be made not only in the classroom by encouraging involvement of all in discussions, but also as institution by designing inclusive and accessible policy and structures. The single qualitative comment does not provide any additional context but shows support for the answer by another participant.

Conclusions

This study of higher education in Bhutan sought to identify ways in which experts (instructors and administrators) conceptualized and enacted accessibility and inclusion. Findings indicate two major themes:

- **Interpersonal care.** Instructors demonstrated a sense of compassion and empathy for their students and considered including flexibility and peer support opportunities to broadly promote inclusion in their classrooms.
- **Systemic constraints that participants identified.** Rigid admissions and time-to-graduation policies, for example, were notable constraints to inclusive universities. Participants largely agreed that the way to address these constraints is through conversations with stakeholders and pushing management to promote inclusiveness.

Therefore, in order to increase, support, and sustain inclusion and accessibility in higher education in Bhutan – and elsewhere – we suggest the following:

- **Increase flexibility in higher education structures, policies, and requirements.**
- **Consider inclusion at the very beginning of program and curriculum design.**
- **Embed inclusion and accessibility policy at the institutional and national policy levels.**
- **Support students through instructor pastoral, interpersonal care; as well as foster and sustain peer supports.**
- **Offer a variety of teaching and learning modes and styles, emphasizing assessment based on growth mindsets and a diversity of presentation options.**
- **Celebrate and demonstrate diversity and inclusion at the institutional leadership level.**

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End Notes

[i] Brown, Bernice B. 1968. *Delphi Process: A Methodology Used for the Elicitation of Opinions of Experts.* Report AD0675981. The Rand Corporation. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD0675981.pdf

[ii] Fletcher, Amber J. and Gregory P. Marchildon. 2014. "Using the Delphi Method for Qualitative, Participatory Action Research in Health Leadership." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 13(1): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691401300101

[iii] This was a *very* brief overview of the context and education system of Bhutan. For more information, we encourage you to reference the following:

- Schuelka, Matthew J. and T.W. Maxwell. 2016. *Education in Bhutan: Culture, Schooling, and Gross National Happiness.* Springer.
- Karma Phuntsho. 2013. *The History of Bhutan.* Vintage Press.

[iv] Appendices below (next page):

Appendix A1. Response to Survey 1 Question 1 and its mean

Q1.	What strategies or activities do you do to facilitate accessibility and inclusiveness in your college? (Either for students with specific disabilities, or general students that may be struggling mentally or academically).	Mean
1	These are still quite limited. In our experience, in has had to be a customized support plan for students with physical disabilities, e.g., for persons with visual impairment, mobility challenges. This has included some awareness building/sensitization for the students' common contacts (rommates, classmates, faculty members of the student's academic departments, student services officials). For those with mobility challenges, our classroom scheduling attempts to allocate the most conveniently located rooms. Academically, we attempt to provide basic resources for better accessibility (e.g., text-to-speech for visually impaired students). When opportunity allows, we try to more actively engage with students with disabilities to help them feel as involved in campus life as others. We have counseling facilities for those with mental health challenges, but have no formal mechanisms to support students with learning disabilities. In general, we have academic support for all students that includes faculty advisers for all students in the first year or struggling students in the upper years (having prior course failures), and a Learning Resource Centre for academic skills and English support.	2.67
2	I use classroom accommodations like tutoring providing extra help and encourage buddy system.	3.00
3	For general students, I always try to use a variety of teaching-learning strategies to make sure that all students in my class participate in learning. I attent to some students by providing extra materials to read and explore. Use social media for communication.	3.83
4	Currently, we don't have any students with any kind of disabilities. For the General students whos truggle mentally or academically: i. Counseling ii. One-to-oone support (students are given support individually on a one-to-one basis) iii. Raise awareness and address stigma iv. Through these activities creating a culture of wellbeing	3.20
5	Use differentiated instructions, UDL, providing accommodations and moditications where necessary, counseling.	2.60
6	We create awareness among faculty and staf about any student with disabiilities who has taken admission in the college. We ask staff to assess the need of such a students and provide support needed. For example, we assign a room on the ground floor with those needing support to walk. We allot more time to complete assessments to those with learning difficultie; we have agreement signed with individuals/institutions who can develop brail for visually impaired, etc.	3.20
7	Some strategies I tried and am trying: 1. Tiered lesson (did just once with students with vision impairment) 2. Differentiated lesson 3. Creating tiem flexibility for assessment/assignment 4. Gave choice (choose assignment topics of their interest and present their products using different mode) 5. Students adop friend called 'special friend' 6. Shared or read the stories (local, regional, or international) on inclusive themes in the beginning of the clas by tutor and students	3.40
8	For students struggling mentally or academically, the college provides counseling services, academic support in terms of academic writing. For students with mild to moderate visual impairments, accommodations are made by the respective tutors and examination unit. Similarly, for complete blind students, Braille facilities and other menas of accommodation (recodings, JAWS software) are provided. Howeve, the college hardly received students with disabilities for enrollment	3.20
9	Around this we are just beginning to think about making our academic programmes inclusive but any things are still just at the identification stage. For making our programmes inclusive, we have looked at all the programmes upto the module levels and identified in what areas we'll have to work on to realise inclusiveness. So far we have an experience only with sight impairments. For this braille is put in place an suitable HR is managed for the assessment. There are many other things that come under the students services affairs. For these again it had to be objectively looked at the different kinds of services the institute provides, and think through what alternatives can be in place for the special needs. For students truggling mentally, there is a system of semester guide, who actually looks after the general wellbeing of the students, should there be anyone with such issues are counselled at semester guide's level and if needed are sent to the counsellor in the happiness and wellbeing center. Similarly, for students whoare academically strugglingare identified either by the semester guides and or module tutors and required attention is given.	2.60

10	The college I taught in Samtse had a few visually impair students. The strategy adopted was to not differentiate them in the learning tasks, to include them in the all the activities both academic and co-curricular. To enable them to participate and 'live the experience' of being a student teacher int eh college, we had their classmates work in groups to assist thes students with the learning tasks such as reading, researching for information, working the library etc. The classmates usually volunteered, so it was not a problem. As teachers, we arranged time to meet them to discuss their progress, and challenges and tried to use interventions within out resources and control. The exams were also conducted separately for them as tehy used the braille machines or the audio apps. This was about 10 years ago. In the current college, I usually help students who are struggling mentally and academically by providing extra support such as additionally simplified reading materials, editing them writing and providing academic writing resources which they can understand and use. Most importantly I found that giving them time, allowing them to talk, share their issues, and talking to them makes a big difference.	2.80
Additional comments	• Buddy system works better than tutoring. Providing time flexibility especially in submitting their assignment. • It becomes useful depending on what physical challenges are there in out students, sometimes we have hearing/visual impairment, and other times physical movement disabilities. • The buddy system, which I called as special friend or mentor system is found to be the most useful in my context.	

Appendix A2. Response to Survey 1 Question 2 and its mean

Q2.	What consideration do you take into account when thinking about accessibility and inclusiveness?	Mean
1	Our realistic capacity is a major consideration when thinking about accessibility and inclusiveness. Resource limitations (budget, time, expertise) mean we do not have a comprehensive capacity to actively promote accessibility and inclusiveness as much as we would like. We are also constrained by a standardized approach in our academic regulations under the parent university to provide distinct/special accommodations for persons with disabilities that would in any way imply that certain individuals are held to different standards than others. However, our organisational strategy and values are a primary consideration in all our decision-making. We aspire towards better inclusiveness, so when opportunities arise to improve our resources or to promote change towards inclusiveness, we try to make the best of it in this direction.	3.38
2	Diverse learners.	2.80
3	Different levels of reading materials used in the class, Providing additional time to some students, Use social media and online discussion forum such as virtual learning environment	3.00
4	Dignity, Wellbeing, Wellfare	3.17
5	Diversity, Individual needs, Infrastructure, Facilities, Enviornment, Attitude towards persons with disabilities, Accommodations, Assistive technology, Information, Communication	3.40
6	One common problem that students with disabilities face is they are often academically disadvantaged and cannot compete with the rest of the students. For many it is struggle to meet the admission criteria which is pretty fixed by the university. We need to be more considerate when it comes to admission criteria as well as allow more time to graduate, if needed. When it comes to accessibility conducive and friendly physical infrastructure needs to be in place. This is not generally the case with Bhutan. We need to work on this pretty urgently.	3.80
7	1. inclusive policy 2. Curriculum/modules 3. Infrastructure - colleges and beyond colleges 4. Teacher's competency 5. People's attitude	3.00
8	Physical accessibility (ramps, toilets, classroom, library), assistive devices, transportation, curriculum modification	3.40
9	The student's physical challenge programme in which s/he is admitted students' economic and social background	2.80
10	1. Physical accessibility ability needs 2. Safety and sensitivity awareness and practice for both the students and teachers 3. Mental health for both students and teachers	3.20

| Additional Comments | • If we take care of the welfare of students with physical challenges, it will promote the wellbeing of individuals with such challenges, thus they can live a dignified life. Or in other words, if we treat students with physical challenges with dignity, it will lead to better wellbeing, and such a student can reach a potential to create his/her own welfares. | |

Appendix A3. Response to Survey 1 Question 3 and its mean

Q3.	What would you consider to be the most important practices for accessibility and inclusiveness?	Mean
1	Involving people as much as possible: Frequently asking / talking with people about their ideas, suggestions, and concerns when making decisions (not just those with disabilities or accessibility limitations, but others around their spheres of interaction as well). Setting expectations of promoting accessibility and inclusiveness from the management side. Designing for accessibility and inclusion from the start (building-in institutional structures to promote and consider accessibility). Celebrating inclusiveness. Garnering public/community support for accessibility and inclusiveness. Having a policy structure in place at the national level to support accessibility and inclusiveness	3.83
2	Celebrate differences and differentiate the instructions	3.33
3	Follow different communication styles, Use different levels of learning materials, Avoid complexity in anything one does	3.29
4	Willingness to hear and to be heard. Leaving no one behind	3.63
5	Creating awareness, Involvement of all stake holders, Collaboration and team work, Use of universal design	3.67
6	Convenient Infrastructure, friendly and conducive institutional environment for learning, acceptance by the community and taking pride in having such members in the institution	3.67
7	Inclusive Policy and Practice. Once you have policy in place, I feel that will take care of changing people's attitude positively as with inclusive thoughts and actions will lead to developing inclusive curriculum or building accessible infrastructure etc	3.50
8	No assumptions, signages, captioning and sign language interpreter, person first language, modification and adaptation in teaching learning	3.67
9	Identification of programmes for different challenges Identification ofstudents with different types of challenges during the admission	3.67
10	A safe, welcoming, inclusive, safe environment for learning which recognizes diversity and fosters engagement and belonging.	3.67
Additional Comments	• This is what we aspire for.	