Enhancing Inclusion, Equity, and Access: An Analysis of Higher Education Policies in Nepal

Devendra Rawal

Deputy Director, University Grants Commission, Nepal
Email: withdrawal2010@gmail.com

Abstract

Higher education is the backbone for the human resource development which are crucial for the economic and socio-cultural development of any country. Unlike other sector, higher education is imperative not only for the welfare of the human beings but also fundamental for nation building through innovation in areas that concern the society. The aim of this paper is to critically analyze the policy arrangements of higher education in Nepal and its impact on enhancing inclusion, equity and access. Adopting Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) research method which is combined with policy review, it is found that though commendable efforts by the government and the commission have been continuing, the issues of access, equity, and inclusion remain still lacking in some areas. Therefore, more policy and programmatic actions are necessary for improvement the situation. If the policy recommendations outlined above are seriously considered by the Government of Nepal, the commission, universities, and other relevant bodies, it is possible to further promote and improve the state of access, equity, and inclusion in Nepal's higher education.

Keywords: Higher education policy, access, equity, inclusion, scholarships

Introduction

The historical development of Nepalese education policy starts with the publication of education in 1996 at the period of Rana Prime Minister Juddha Shamsher. The history of education policy that addressed the higher education was begun when the Nepal National Education Plan Commission (1956) recommended the provision of higher education system under the national university. This is the first policy document addressing higher education in Nepal, and based on its recommendation, Tribhuvan University, Nepal's first university, was established in 1959. Apart from the suggestion to establish a university, the report did not contain much else regarding higher education. The National Education System Plan (NESP 2028) was initiated to introduce substantial reforms in the education sector. The NESP implemented both academic and organizational transformations in higher education (CEDA, 2007). This is the government's first plan that suggested implementing a scholarship system in higher education. The plan proposed providing scholarships to assist poor but talented students in gaining education and to help students from educationally disadvantaged regions and communities.

Additionally, it mentioned considering Loan Scholarships for students in necessary fields. Another significant aspect is that this plan was the first to propose educational arrangements for the disabled, stating the intention to run educational programs for mute, deaf, blind, and other disabled students. The report of the National Education Commission (1992) provided various policy recommendations to make Nepal's education sector more inclusive, participatory, and accessible, and to integrate disadvantaged individuals into the national mainstream. The Commission suggested prioritizing and encouraging women at all levels of education, making appropriate arrangements for disabled and differently-abled children up to higher education, providing education and training for the upliftment of economically and socially backward indigenous people and communities, ensuring proper education for orphaned and helpless children, and establishing appropriate education dissemination in geographically backward areas. It also recommended establishing an open university to expand access to higher education for everyone. There is also the recommendation to arrange for scholarships and loans from appropriate bodies for capable students and those from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds.

The High-Level National Education Commission's Report (1998) stated under the heading of access and equality that various measures should be adopted to reduce the inequalities based on gender, caste, and geography in higher education and to increase access to higher education. The commission provided policy recommendations such as arranging scholarships and affordable loan programs to ensure that capable students from educationally disadvantaged castes, communities, and impoverished backgrounds are not

deprived of higher education, making quality higher education available at the regional level to reduce regional imbalances, and allocating quotas for women, disadvantaged, and Dalit students.

The current constitution, under Articles 31(3) and 31(4), provides for free education up to higher education for Dalits, people with disabilities, and impoverished students. There should be a policy framework to provide low-interest loans to these and other community students, with a system of regular loan deductions based on their earnings after they complete their studies and gain employment. Additionally, opportunities should be created for these students to work on university campuses, allowing them to earn and support their education. Inclusive policies and programs should be based on national statistics (HECR, 2018).

Higher education is the backbone for the human resource development which are crucial for the economic and socio-cultural development of any country. Unlike other sector, higher education is imperative not only for the welfare of the human beings but also fundamental for nation building through innovation in areas that concern the society. Viewing higher education through the lens of development, and as a means for developing collective capabilities among the population, enables us to understand the crucial significance of promoting equity and inclusion in higher education. Guided by the principles of social justice and democracy, equality and inclusion efforts seek to guarantee that background characteristics do not hinder one's access to and success in higher education (Malish, 2022). In the context of Nepal, various policy arrangements have been made since the past to make higher education systematic, quality, accessible and equitable. To promote inclusive access and growth in education, the government has been continuing its efforts to enhance higher education with integrated development and policy arrangements. Malish (2022) states that this is the context for demanding state interventions for equalizing access and providing opportunities for deprived sections to succeed in higher education. Concepts of equality, equity and inclusion are important in understanding the current state of affairs of how higher education opportunities are distributed among diverse populations. It also helps to develop effective interventions in order to ensure that one's background characteristics and life circumstances do not hinder aspirations to access higher education and fully benefit from the opportunities provided by the higher education.

Government's Periodic Plans have been formulated since 1956 with the aim of achieving the country's economic and social objectives. These periodic plans have set policies and strategies to implement the recommendations presented by the reports of high-level educational commissions formed by the government at that time period. Policy issues such as increasing women's participation in higher education, expanding access to educationally backward areas and communities, arranging scholarships, increasing

opportunities for the participation of economically disadvantaged groups and maintaining geographical balance have been included in periodic plans. However, some plans have taken up these topics marginally, while many have included them on a priority basis. Especially after the restoration of democracy in 2047 BS, the periodical plans have given importance to the issue of expanding access and inclusive participation in higher education.

Talking about the latest plans, the Twelfth Plan (2011) had set a policy of conducting scholarship and support programs to increase access to higher education for backward castes, students with special abilities, and gifted students. The plan adopted a policy of improving and expanding the existing programs related to educational loans such as student financial assistance and providing subsidized loans to talented students from disadvantaged families in each region and district for studies based on certain criteria in medicine, engineering, agriculture, science and technology, etc. Also, the plan emphasized the establishment of an open university to expand access. The Thirteenth Plan (2014), which aimed to expand equal access to education at all levels and in all subjects, adopted a strategy to implement targeted programs to ensure educational access for the impoverished, marginalized communities, and persons with disabilities. It also put forth policies to ensure the inclusion of women, indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Dalits, and other targeted communities in education at all levels by expanding options such as reservations and scholarships.

Likewise, the Fourteenth Plan (2017) adopted a strategy to establish technology-oriented constituent campuses in remote areas and regions lagging behind based on human development indices. To enhance access to higher education, it also aimed to strengthen the institutional capacity of open universities and distance education systems. Additionally, the plan mentioned implementing programs to provide concessional loans against educational certificates as collateral.

This paper aims at critically analyzing the policy arrangements made to promote equality, inclusivity, and access in the higher education of Nepal. Moreover, the paper examines the current state of equality, inclusivity, and access in Nepal's higher education and the ongoing efforts in these areas. Finally, it provides policy recommendations based on the findings.

Research Methodology

This paper primarily adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) research method which is combined with policy review. This is a robust research method used to explore the intricate ways language and power intersect within policy documents and their implementation (Fairclough, 1995). This approach not only examines the textual features of policy documents but also contextualizes them within broader social, political, and

historical frameworks. CDA focuses on analyzing texts at multiple levels, including linguistic features, discursive practices (rhetorical strategies, argumentation), and social practices (ideologies, power relations) (Van Dijk, 1993). Similarly, this method draws from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and political science to examine how language is used to maintain or challenge societal norms and power structures (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Moreover, this method emphasizes a critical perspective, questioning dominant discourses and revealing underlying power asymmetries and social inequalities (Fairclough, 2001).

Based on CDA and policy review, first, this paper makes textual analysis of policy documents such as, Constitution of Nepal (2015), Fifteenth National Plan (2019-2024), Higher Education Policy (HEP), 2015, National Education Policy (NEP), 2019, SDG 4: Education 2030, Nepal National Framework, 2019 and Education Vision Paper, 2022 to analyze the language, metaphors, and narratives within policy documents. Secondly, the paper makes contextual analysis of the documents to Situate the policies within their broader social, political, and economic contexts to understand their implications. Finally, this paper critically examines the existing policy documents to identify and critique the underlying ideologies and power relations that shape policy discourse. Moreover, the paper discusses the policy arrangements made for inclusion and access in higher education, and the efforts being made to implement the policies, and the current situation of equitable access.

Results and Discussion

Constitution of Nepal, 2015

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) was made by the Constituent Assembly of Nepal. The country has entered a new political and social era after the promulgation of the Constitution drafted by the representatives of the Nepali people through the Constituent Assembly. There is no provision about higher education in the previous constitutions of Nepal, but this constitution has clearly spoken about higher education.

Article 31 of Part 3 of the Constitution provides for free higher education to disabled and economically disadvantaged citizens as per the law. Although the constitution provides for free education up to the secondary level, it is not mentioned that higher education is free for all, but article 51 of Part 4 of the constitution states that under the policies of the state regarding the basic needs of the citizens, higher education will be made free gradually by making it easy, quality and accessible.

Article 31 of the Constitution enshrined Nepali people's rights relating to education. The following rights are included in the constitution of Nepal.

1. *Every citizen shall have the right of access to basic education*
2. *Every citizen shall have the right to get compulsory and free education up to the*

basic level and free education up to the secondary level from the state

3. *The citizens with disabilities and the economically indigent citizens shall have the right to get free higher education in accordance with law.*

4. *The visually impaired citizens shall have the right to get free education through brail script and the citizens with hearing or speaking impairment, to get free education through sign language, in accordance with law.*

5. *Every Nepalese community residing in Nepal shall have the right to get education in its mother tongue and, for that purpose, to open and operate schools and educational institutions, in accordance with law.*

The education policy provision discourse in the Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 highlights a progressive and inclusive approach to educational rights, but also invites critical examination through the lenses of discourse analysis and social theory. Van Dijk (1998) emphasizes the role of discourse in shaping social power and inequality, suggesting that while the policy promotes equality by ensuring access to basic and free education, the implementation could be influenced by existing power structures. Fairclough (1992, 1995) would argue that the language used in the policy constructs an ideal of inclusivity and state responsibility, yet the realization of these rights depends on the socio-political context and institutional practices. Wodak (2001) and Van Dijk (1993) further stress that discourse not only reflects but also reinforces social hierarchies, indicating potential disparities in how different groups might experience these rights. Bourdieu (1985) introduces the concept of cultural capital, which could affect how effectively citizens can claim these rights, particularly marginalized groups. Thus, while Article 31 is rhetorically inclusive, its practical impact requires scrutiny to ensure it transcends symbolic gestures and genuinely addresses educational inequalities in Nepal.

The Fifteenth Plan

This plan, which is a periodical five-year national plan of the Government of Nepal, is being implemented from 2019/20 to 2023/24. The Plan has set different policy strategies for the development of higher education in Nepal and they are in the stage of implementation.

The plan explains "Constitution of Nepal has guaranteed the right to education as a fundamental right. The constitution has guaranteed the right to access to basic level of education, compulsory and free education up to basic level and free education up to secondary level. It has also guaranteed the right to free higher education for the disabled and economically weaker citizens, right to get an education in mother language by Every Nepalese citizen, and the right to open and operate schools and educational institutes for that purpose, pursuant to the law."

This plan focuses on ensuring expansion and quality of inclusive and equitable access in technical education and vocational skills development. It has the strategies as follows:

1. *In consideration of the need for people in remote areas who lack access to higher education and require alternative access, open and distance education systems including Open University will be extended and strengthened.*
2. *To ensure compulsory and free education for all, a provision will be made for open and alternative education to address the learning needs of the students from vulnerable, minority, endangered, and marginalized communities.*
3. *Similarly, the provision will be made for residential and special education based on the provision of learning materials and the needs of the students living with disabilities to identify and evaluate them and provide them with educational opportunities.*

The discourse of policy strategies for the development of higher education in Nepal mentioned in the Fifteenth National Plan of the Government of Nepal, particularly its emphasis on extending and strengthening open and distance education systems, reveals an underlying power dynamic and ideology that prioritizes inclusion and accessibility. According to Van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (1992, 1995), such policy statements can be seen as strategic moves to legitimize the government's role in addressing educational inequalities. The focus on vulnerable, minority, endangered, and marginalized communities, as well as students with disabilities, aligns with Wodak's (2001) framework of critical discourse analysis which highlights how language is used to construct social realities and power relations. By incorporating terms such as "compulsory and free education" and "special education," the policy aims to construct a narrative of equity and social justice (Van Dijk, 1993).

However, Bourdieu's (1985) perspective on the reproduction of social structures through education suggests that while these provisions may appear progressive, they might also perpetuate existing hierarchies by reinforcing the government's paternalistic role in 'providing' education rather than empowering communities to develop their own educational solutions. Thus, the policy discourse is a complex interplay of inclusionary rhetoric and potential perpetuation of power asymmetries within the educational landscape.

Higher Education Policy (HEP), 2015

After a prolonged effort to reform higher education in Nepal, the country finally introduced a comprehensive Higher Education Policy in 2015. Although the policy is in its nascent stage, many of the legal and institutional frameworks are yet to be established. Nevertheless, this marks the beginning of a new era in the Nepalese higher education sector (Baral 2016). Before this, there was no separate policy document for higher education only. There was a practice of including higher education within the overall education policy. The policy lays down strategies aimed at promoting student access and equitable participation in higher education. Two strategies of HEP (2015)

say that enhancing access to higher education through open and poor education systems to ensure credibility and competitiveness; and arranging support programs for students from geographically backward areas, women, tribal tribes, dalit, madhesi community, citizens with disabilities and economically disadvantaged communities and classes for the continuation of higher education studies.

The expansion of higher education in Nepal is unevenly distributed geographically and regionally. Additionally, access to higher education institutions (HEIs) varies based on gender, caste, janajati identities, and the financial capability of families to afford education. In the Higher Education Policy (HEP), the private sector has significantly invested in market-oriented technical and professional fields such as medicine, engineering, and management. Colleges offering these programs often charge exorbitant fees, making these fields financially inaccessible to students from low or lower-middle-class backgrounds. The policy acknowledges the need for equitable participation in higher education for traditionally underrepresented communities. It mentions that 'special measures' will be implemented to ensure equitable access, including scholarship programs, concessionary loans, and self-savings plans. However, the policy does not detail how these measures will be executed. Previous experiences indicate that various challenges exist in initiating and sustaining such programs (Chautari, 2015).

The Higher Education Policy (HEP) of 2015 in Nepal represents a significant shift in the educational landscape, yet it is marred by incomplete frameworks and vague implementation strategies. Utilizing critical discourse analysis (CDA) frameworks, such as those outlined by Van Dijk (1998) and Wodak (2001), the discourse can be seen as reflecting underlying power dynamics and societal inequities. The policy's intent to enhance access for marginalized groups is commendable, but, as Fairclough (1992, 1995) would argue, the rhetoric of equity is undermined by the lack of concrete measures and the substantial barriers posed by privatization. Bourdieu's (1985) concept of capital further illuminates how economic disparities perpetuate educational inequalities, with high fees in technical and professional fields limiting opportunities for disadvantaged students. Van Dijk's (1993) emphasis on the reproduction of dominance through policy discourses is evident here, as the policy acknowledges but inadequately addresses systemic barriers, raising concerns about its actual efficacy in fostering genuine inclusivity and access.

National Education Policy (NEP), 2019

NEP (2019) has set the policies to promote access and inclusiveness of education by giving priority to Dalits, disabled people, economically disadvantaged, socially backward communities and areas, remote areas and classes that are lagging behind in human development index. The policy includes providing opportunities for inclusive

education and special education to meet the learning needs of children with disabilities. Additionally, to ensure educational opportunities for individuals marginalized due to economic, social, and cultural reasons, the policy encompasses measures such as reservations, positive discrimination, prioritization, and incentives. Furthermore, NEP (2019) emphasizes on the provision of recruiting teachers who understand the language and background of the community in schools with a predominance of Dalit, ethnic, marginalized and endangered communities within the school's service area. The policy further states that issues related to inclusion at all levels of education (from early childhood development to higher education and lifelong learning) will be identified and properly addressed.

In order to expand the access of higher education, the NEP (2019) proposes expanding and diversifying the scope of the Open University. It has also the strategies for encouraging higher education institutions to run lifelong education programs, developing skilled manpower by expanding the teaching of various subjects related to tourism, industry, sports, and herbs, and expanding public libraries and reading rooms in a planned manner to the places where libraries and reading rooms are not accessible.

The National Education Policy (NEP, 2019) discourse reflects a critical engagement with concepts of access and inclusiveness, emphasizing the importance of addressing educational disparities. According to Fairclough (1992, 1995) and Wodak (2001), policy discourse analysis reveals underlying power structures and social inequalities. The NEP's focus on Dalits, disabled individuals, and economically and socially marginalized communities highlights an attempt to rectify historical injustices, resonating with Van Dijk's (1993, 1998) notion of critical discourse analysis, which examines how discourse structures affect power dynamics and social hierarchy. Bourdieu (1985) underscores the role of education in cultural capital, which the NEP attempts to democratize through measures such as reservations and prioritization. By advocating for teacher recruitment from similar backgrounds to marginalized students, the policy aligns with Van Dijk's (1998) idea that language and background significantly impact educational success. Moreover, expanding higher education and lifelong learning opportunities, as discussed by NEP, aligns with creating inclusive educational frameworks and addressing systemic barriers at various educational levels (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2001).

SDG 4: Education 2030: Nepal National Framework, 2019

SDG 4: Education 2030, Nepal National Framework (2019) includes a strategy in higher education as expanding the access in tertiary education by reducing disparities in terms of economic status, geographical location, marginalization and vulnerabilities. It explains its intervention as:

Promoting tertiary education opportunities for young people and adults of all

ages and socio-cultural background with particular attention to gender equality (including the elimination of gender- based barriers) and to vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, the framework also includes following strategy for promoting access, equity and inclusion in higher education. Scholarship policies in education are designed to target various student groups and include needs and merit-based scholarships, such as; scholarships for girls, poor, Dalit, students with disabilities and disadvantaged social groups. Scholarship provisions for competent and economically disadvantaged students are being provided for TVET and technical higher education, including medical education. The scholarships are made inclusive for those students below the poverty line and the low HDI.

The policy discourse in the Nepal National Framework (2019) for SDG 4: Education 2030 aims to expand access to tertiary education by addressing economic, geographical, and socio-cultural disparities, with a focus on gender equality and vulnerable groups. Using Fairclough's (1992, 1995) critical discourse analysis, this strategy can be seen as a transformative measure that seeks to challenge and reshape existing power structures within the educational system. The emphasis on scholarships for marginalized groups aligns with Bourdieu's (1985) concept of cultural capital, attempting to mitigate educational inequities by providing resources to those historically disadvantaged. Van Dijk (1993, 1998) and Wodak (2001) highlight the role of discourse in perpetuating or challenging social inequalities, and this framework can be viewed as a proactive attempt to disrupt the reproduction of social hierarchies by offering equitable educational opportunities. However, the effectiveness of these policies depends on their implementation and the extent to which they genuinely address the root causes of educational disparities. The inclusive scholarship provisions, if properly enacted, could serve as a significant step towards achieving the goals of equity and inclusion in higher education, reducing the gap for those below the poverty line and with low Human Development Index (HDI).

Education Vision Paper, 2022

The Education Vision Paper (2022) issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology has adopted a strategy to expand access to higher education for socio-economic transformation. The paper identifies access to higher education as a key area of transformation, aiming to expand access to 30% within the next five years, 50% in ten years, and 75% in fifteen years. To ensure easy access for everyone to higher education, the paper outlines improvements such as increasing the number of constituent and community campuses based on mapping criteria and further expanding the programs of Open University.

The Education Vision Paper (2022) by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology articulates a strategy to expand access to higher education as a means of socio-economic transformation. This discourse is embedded within broader power dynamics and social practices, as highlighted by critical discourse analysts like Van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (1992, 1995). The policy's emphasis on expanding higher education access aligns with Bourdieu's (1985) notion of cultural capital, where increased educational opportunities are seen as a pathway to social mobility. However, such policies also risk perpetuating existing power structures by framing education primarily as a tool for economic development, potentially sidelining other educational purposes (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001). The vision of expanding to 75% access within fifteen years underscores a neoliberal agenda, reflecting Fairclough's (1995) critique of market-driven educational reforms. Thus, while the policy aims at inclusivity, it must be critically examined for how it navigates the intersection of power, ideology, and educational equity.

Initiatives for Access and Inclusion

As access to and quality of higher education systems worldwide continue to improve, the crucial policy objective of equity and inclusion has become increasingly central. This shift necessitates new perspectives and proactive measures to guide the future transformation of higher education (Wang, 2023). The Government of Nepal has adopted various programs and strategies to promote access, equity, and inclusion in higher education. While these efforts are more numerous and significant compared to the past, they remain insufficient for all targeted groups and communities.

The discourse of these initiatives can be critically examined through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as proposed by scholars such as Van Dijk (1998), Fairclough (1992, 1995), and Wodak (2001). Van Dijk (1993) emphasizes that discourses are inherently tied to social power and inequality, which is evident in the way the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Nepal frames its efforts.

Bourdieu's (1985) concept of cultural capital and Blackledge's (2005) work on language and power highlight how educational policies often reinforce existing social hierarchies. The UGC's implementation of the Higher Education Study Scholarship Management Guidelines (2023) is a case in point. While aimed at increasing equitable access, the categorization of scholarships based on economic and social criteria (e.g., Dalit students, disabled students, and children from extremely poor Dalit casts) implicitly acknowledges the systemic inequalities these groups face. However, the very need for such targeted programs underscores the persistence of structural barriers in higher education.

Fairclough (1992) argues that policy texts are not merely neutral or technical documents but are imbued with ideological constructs. The UGC's guidelines, by

unifying various scholarship schemes, attempt to create an orderly and predictable framework. Yet, this uniformity may mask deeper issues of access and equity. The emphasis on making scholarship arrangements "easy, simple and effective" can be seen as a neoliberal approach, focusing on efficiency and management over addressing the root causes of educational disparity (Fairclough, 1995).

While the Commission reports that 7101 students received scholarships in 2024, with 6606 from economically poor and Dalit groups (UGC, 2024), it is essential to critically assess the long-term impact of these initiatives. Wodak (2001) suggests that policies should be evaluated not just on immediate outcomes but on their broader social implications. Are these scholarships genuinely facilitating upward social mobility, or are they merely providing temporary relief without altering the underlying inequities?

While the Government of Nepal and the UGC have made commendable strides towards promoting access, equity, and inclusion in higher education, a critical discourse analysis reveals that these efforts are entangled with broader socio-political dynamics. The policies, while beneficial, may inadvertently perpetuate the very inequalities they aim to dismantle. Therefore, ongoing critical evaluation and a commitment to addressing the root causes of educational disparities are essential for truly equitable higher education.

Equity Grants

The Commission has been providing Equity Grants to HEIs in Lagging and/or disaster-affected provinces and remote regions for ensuring the access to economically disadvantaged students of the lagging behind regions, remote and disaster affected districts, at least 110 HEIs of such regions will be supported with the equity grants. Equity Grants to HEIs aims at widening the access of underprivileged students in lagging provinces and remote/ disaster affected regions. Among others, the Equity Grants funding is guided by following principles:

1. *Ensure the participation of students from disadvantaged group in national economic growth/ development;*
2. *Increase access of economically poor and disadvantaged groups to HE which shall bring change in their social and economic status (by shaping and accelerating opportunities/ capabilities of disadvantaged group students with increasing possibility to engage in high/better paid jobs after their HE);*
3. *Reduce regional disparities in HE by supporting HEIs in the regions; and*
4. *Link public funding on national priory areas with HEIs performances in promoting quality, productivity/ employability and governance in HE (Equity Grants Guideline, 2022).*

The discourse of provision of Equity Grants emphasizes their role in fostering national economic development by integrating students from disadvantaged backgrounds

into the workforce (Equity Grants Guideline, 2022). However, such initiatives may inadvertently perpetuate existing power structures by reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies rather than fundamentally challenging them (Fairclough, 1992). By framing access to higher education as a means of individual upliftment, these grants may overlook systemic barriers and fail to address underlying inequalities in educational opportunity (Wodak, 2001).

Similarly, the Performance-based Grants directed at community campuses in remote and ecologically sensitive areas ostensibly aim to enhance educational quality and infrastructure (UGC Program Guidelines, 2023). Yet, the criteria for "performance" and "quality" are often defined within frameworks that may favor urban-centric metrics of success, thereby potentially marginalizing local knowledge and community needs (Fairclough, 1995).

Moreover, the allocation of dissertation preparation expenses and scholarships, while ostensibly inclusive of marginalized groups such as students with disabilities and ethnic minorities (Procedure, MEC 2022), must be critically examined for their effectiveness in challenging entrenched inequalities (Bourdieu, 1985). Despite these efforts, the distribution of scholarship seats based on demographic quotas reflects a form of tokenism that may not translate into substantive equality or address structural barriers effectively (Fairclough, 1992).

While these initiatives represent commendable efforts to broaden access to higher education, a critical perspective reveals the need for deeper structural reforms that go beyond tokenistic gestures and address the systemic inequalities entrenched within educational and social systems (Van Dijk, 1998). True equity in higher education demands a more nuanced approach that challenges existing power dynamics and fosters genuine inclusion and empowerment across all levels of society (Blackledge, 2005).

Status of Access and Inclusion

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is a widely used measure of access in education (Malish, 2021). According to UGC EMIS Report (2022) GER provides data on the access and participation of specific age groups in education. For higher education, a five-year age group span (18-22) is used to calculate the GER. In the academic year 2021/2022, Nepal's GER was 19.31, showing an increase compared to the year 2020/2021. The enrollment in higher education is 579,448 and total population of this age group (18-22) is 3,000,698. Equal opportunity to access higher education is a precondition for promoting equity (Malish 2022). The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education in Nepal is 1.156, indicating that female enrollment exceeds male enrollment. Overall, girls constitute about 55.11 percent of higher education enrollments. When broken down by campus type, the highest proportion of female enrollment is seen in community campuses

at 66.33 percent, followed by private campuses at 51.06 percent, and constituent campuses at 49.66 percent. Within specific faculties, female enrollment is 70.87 percent in education, 59.7 percent in medicine, 53.27 percent in humanities and social sciences, and 56.66 percent in management (UGC, 2022).

The percentage of girls in total enrollment at bachelor level is 55.34 percent and at master level is 46.98 percent (UGC, EMIS, 2022). It shows that from the perspective of gender equality, the participation of women in higher education is encouraging. According to Malish (2022), availability of higher education institutions in a prerequisite for promoting equity. Regarding the ecological belts, 58.76 percent (855) of campuses are situated in the Hill region, 35.95 percent (523) in the Terai, and 5.29 percent (77) in the Mountain region. Analyzing by provinces, Bagmati Province hosts 633 campuses (43.51 percent), Lumbini Province has 185 campuses (12.71 percent), Koshi Province has 203 campuses (13.95 percent), Madhesh Province has 122 campuses (8.38 percent), Gandaki Province has 153 campuses (10.52 percent), Sudurpaschim Province has 95 campuses (6.53 percent), and Karnali Province has 64 campuses (4.4 percent). Student distribution shows that 56.86 percent are enrolled in the Hill region, 40.68 percent in the Terai, and 2.47 percent in the Mountain region. Within the provinces, Bagmati Province has 268,838 students (46.4 percent), Lumbini Province has 76,863 students (13.26 percent), Koshi Province has 75,297 students (12.99 percent), Gandaki Province has 48,238 students (8.32 percent), Madhesh Province has 48,300 students (8.34 percent), Sudurpaschim Province has 39,751 students (6.86 percent), and Karnali Province has 22,161 students (3.82 percent) (UGC, EMIS, 2022).

Most of the students are studying in Hill ecological belt. Hill belt has the highest number of campuses and highest number of students enrollment and Mountain belt has the lowest number of campuses and lowest number of students. In addition, the number of students and campuses in Sudurpashchim Province and Karnali Province is seen much less than other provinces. Economically and socially marginalized and geographically remote mountain districts and these two provinces have not yet seen improved access to higher education. However, the government has been working through various programs to ensure equal participation of students from these regions and provinces.

In countries with diverse ethnic populations, it is crucial to ensure that ethnic minority students have access to higher education (Wang 2023). Nepal is also multi-ethnic country. In Nepal, the representation of hill Brahmins and Chhetris is high. When the population of this community is 30.89 percent, the enrollment of higher education is 69 percent in the same community. When the Newar community accounts for 5.48% of the population, the percentage eligible for higher education is 12.3%. When 32 percent of the population is indigenous, only 14 percent have access to higher education. The Dalit community comprises 13% of the population but only accounts for 1.4%

of higher education enrollment. Madhesi make up about 14 percent of the population but only constitute 4 percent in higher education enrollment. When the same Muslim community accounts for 4.27 percent of the population, they hold only 0.2 percent of the space in higher education. If this shows a good access to the Brahmin, Chhetri, and Newar communities in higher education compared to the Indigenous, Dalit, and Muslim communities are left far behind (HECR, 2018).

Participation in higher education is predominantly seen among youth from the upper and middle classes. Analyzing the participation in higher education over the past 10 years, the numbers are significantly increasing. This increase is directly related to the improvement in the economic status of families. However, the participation of socially and economically backward minorities, women, Dalits, and indigenous groups in higher education remains low (HECR, 2018).

To critically analyze the discourse on the status of access and inclusion in Nepalese higher education, we can draw on several critical theorists' perspectives. Van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (1992, 1995) would argue that discourse analysis reveals how educational statistics such as Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) can mask underlying inequalities. Despite an increasing GER, which appears positive on the surface, deeper scrutiny through a critical lens (Fairclough, 1992) reveals persistent disparities. Similarly, Wodak (2001) would emphasize the role of language and power in constructing educational policies and reports like the UGC EMIS Report (2022), suggesting that such documents reflect and perpetuate societal power imbalances. Van Dijk (1993) and Bourdieu (1985), in their respective works on social inequality and cultural capital, would critique how the GER and Gender Parity Index (GPI) in Nepal hide disparities among different social groups. They would argue that while GPI might suggest gender equity on paper, it fails to capture nuances such as differential access for marginalized ethnic groups (Blackledge, 2005).

The statistics revealing high enrollment among certain ethnic groups like Hill Brahmins and Chhetris, compared to disproportionately low enrollment among Dalits, Indigenous, and Muslim communities (HECR, 2018), underscore structural inequalities that persist despite nominal increases in overall enrollment. This situation aligns with Bourdieu's notion of cultural reproduction, where existing power structures perpetuate themselves through educational systems. Moreover, the geographical distribution of campuses and student enrollment across ecological belts and provinces (UGC, EMIS, 2022) reflects uneven development and resource allocation, echoing concerns raised by critical geographers about spatial justice.

While the data paints a picture of progress in access to higher education in Nepal, critical theorists would argue that true equity remains elusive. Structural barriers rooted in socio-economic status, ethnicity, and geography continue to restrict meaningful access

for marginalized groups. Policies and interventions, therefore, must go beyond increasing GER and GPI numbers to address these underlying inequities comprehensively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The discussions on access, equity, and inclusion in the higher education of Nepal have been ongoing for a long time, as evidenced by historical government documents. The current Constitution of Nepal, Periodic Plan, National Education Policy, Higher Education Policy, SDG 4: Education

National Framework, Education Vision Paper, and other policy documents emphasize the promotion of access, equity, and inclusion in higher education. To implement these policies, various bodies including the Government of Nepal, University Grants Commission, and universities have been working through various programs. Particularly, the University Grants Commission has been addressing access, equity, and inclusion in higher education through scholarships for students and grants for higher education institutions.

Despite commendable efforts by the government and the commission, issues of access, equity, and inclusion remain significant topics of discussion in Nepal's higher education, with the current state still lacking in these areas. Therefore, more policy and programmatic actions are necessary. If the policy recommendations outlined above are seriously considered by the Government of Nepal, the commission, universities, and other relevant bodies, it is possible to further promote and improve the state of access, equity, and inclusion in Nepal's higher education.

Recommendations

Nepal's constitution along with other policy documents envisions to make higher education accessible and affordable, as well as to provide opportunities for the students from marginalized and deprived communities, groups and areas. The government and other related bodies have been making numerous efforts to implement these policies, resulting in the expansion of access to higher education and the preparation of foundations for inclusive participation. However, it seems that more work needs to be done to make these efforts more effective and result-oriented.

In higher education, there are many policies and programs aimed at ensuring equitable participation of students. However, their practical implementation is still not fully realized. It appears necessary to take initiatives for the effective implementation of these policies and programs and to make timely modifications and improvements as needed. Similarly, Scholarship programs with limited availability do not cater to all targeted groups. The programs targeted at students from poor, female, indigenous, Dalit, and marginalized communities are dominated by the privileged class, as a result, needy

students are being deprived of these opportunities. Therefore, it is essential to expand scholarship and other support programs, and ensure that only needy students benefit from them. Furthermore, numerous scholarship and other programs are being run by different agencies of the Nepal government and other organizations. The lack of coordination among these scholarships has led to increasing duplication. There is a need to implement these programs through a single-window system to make the scholarship selection process more organized. This will prevent the government's investment from going to waste.

In various policy documents of the government, it can be seen that in order to increase the participation of socially and economically backward minorities, women, Dalits, and indigenous groups in higher education, it has been proposed to provide low-interest loans to students from these communities. However, this does not seem to have been implemented effectively. Since it would help increase the participation of these groups in higher education, there is a need for clear policy provisions and their implementation.

Poor and backward class students have only access to simple and traditional subjects, while there is very little participation in technical and new programs. Due to the high cost of tuition fees for studying technical subjects, the poor and students from those communities are deprived of their studies even though they are capable. It seems that the government and universities should take special initiatives to increase the participation of students from those communities in technical areas. Although the constitution guarantees free higher education to students with disabilities, there is a lack of legislation to implement it and only a small number of students with disabilities have access to higher education. In addition, the amount of scholarship received by disabled students is also low and it is difficult to cover the education expenses. Besides there is a lack of disability-friendly infrastructure and the availability of necessary audiovisual materials and technologies for teaching and learning. Thus, to ensure higher education opportunities for students with disabilities, attention must be given to provide sufficient scholarship amount, target all these students and develop disability-friendly infrastructure.

There is a significant regional and geographical imbalance in higher education in Nepal. Compared to other regions, the number of higher educational institutions and students in the Mountain region is low. Although this could be due to population density and the urban-centric nature of higher education, the lack of higher educational institutions and the remoteness of these areas indeed limit students' access. Similarly, compared to other provinces, the economically and socially backward Karnali Province and Sudurpashchim Province have lower student participation and fewer higher educational institutions. In order to maintain regional and ecological balance, and ensure the participation of numerous backward communities and groups, the state

needs to increase investment in higher education in those backward areas. Expansion of constituent campuses and management of hostels can fill that shortage.

Wang (2023) suggests that comprehensive national mappings of these diverse student groups, backed by robust databases, are essential for identifying disadvantaged populations, monitoring their inclusion status, conducting gap analyses, and implementing effective solutions. In the context of Nepal, the issues mentioned by Wang have not been addressed, and even the existing efforts are not well-organized. Therefore, it is essential for the government and all concerned stakeholders to pay attention to these matters.

References

Baral, R.K. (2016). *The Higher Education Policy of Nepal: An Analysis*. Discovery Dynamics: A Peer Reviewed Journal of Research and Development. Dynamic Institute of Research and Development. Kathmandu

Blackledge, A. (2005). *Discourse, globalization, and education: Constructing global citizens*. Multilingual Matters.

Bourdieu, P. (1985). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (pp. 241-258)*. Greenwood Press.

CEDA. (2007). *Financing the Higher Education in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Fairclough, N. (1995). Critical Discourse Analysis: *The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power*. Longman.

HECR. (2019). *High-level Education Commission's Report*. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Kathmandu.

HLNEC. (1992). *The Higher Level National Education Commission's report*. Kathmandu.

Malish, C. M. (2022). Equity, access and inclusion in higher education. In *Professional Development Programme on Implementation of NEP-2020 for University and College Teachers (NEP-PDP)* (pp. 1-15). IGNOU, India.

Martin Chautari. (2015). Proposed Higher Education Policy. *Policy Review Brief, No.13*. Kathmandu.

Medical Education Commission. (2022). *Medical Education Scholarship and Grant Procedure, 2022*. Bhaktapur, Nepal.

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2018). *High-Level Education Commission report (HECR)*. Author.

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2019). *SDG 4: Education 2030, Nepal National Framework*. Kathmandu

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2022). *Education Vision Paper*. Kathmandu

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2019). *National Education Policy*. Kathmandu.

National Planning Commission. (2011). *The Twelfth Plan*. Author.

National Planning Commission. (2014). *The Thirteenth Plan*. Author.

National Planning Commission. (2017). *The Fourteenth Plan*. Author.

National Planning Commission. (2020). *The Fifteenth Plan*. Author.

NEC. (1992). *The Report of the National Education Commission*. Kathmandu.

Nepal. (2015). *The Constitution of Nepal*. The Government of Nepal. Kathmandu.

NESP. (2028). Report of the National Education System Plan. Kathmandu

NNEPC. (1956). *Report of the Nepal National Education Planning Commission*. Kathmandu.

University Grants Commission. (2015). *Higher Education Policy*. Bhaktapur, Nepal.

University Grants Commission. (2022). *Education Management Information System (EMIS) Report, 2021/22*. Bhaktapur, Nepal.

University Grants Commission. (2022). *Equity Grants Guidelines*. Bhaktapur, Nepal.

University Grants Commission. (2023). *Higher Education Study Scholarship Management Guidelines*. Bhaktapur, Nepal.

University Grants Commission. (2023). *Program Guidelines*. Bhaktapur, Nepal.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Discourse & Society, 4*(2), 249-283.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Wang, L. (2023). Equity and inclusion: Setting the agenda for the transformation of higher education in Asia and the Pacific. A keynote speech delivered at the *Sophia University-UNU-IAS-ProSPER.Net Forum*. UNESCO Regional Office, Bangkok.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. Sage Publications.