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## **Access, Equity, and Inclusion In India's Higher Education Sector amidst The Covid-19 Pandemic**

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As the world experienced the outbreak of COVID-19, the education system encountered a sudden shutdown. The reconfiguration of the higher education system was evident in global institutions due to the sudden impact of the pandemic resulting in the unprecedented shutdown of face-to-face teaching. The limited opportunities for a group of learners were now further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, higher education institutions could frame their strategies to address issues of equity within the “capability approach” (Sen, 2015). This research proceeded using a qualitative approach adopting a critical ethnographical study based on the content analysis of the two data sources comprising of unstructured interviews separately with academic leaders, a group of teachers, and a group of students from each of the five higher education institutions of West Bengal. Three broad areas were identified to understand the actual situation prevailing in the institutions. These include- i) Knowledge development of socially and economically disadvantaged learners through online teaching, ii) Evolving capabilities for learners with disabilities to make reflexive choices in learning, and iii) Evaluation of meeting racial equity goals to confirm individual autonomy of marginalized learners. The study highlighted the salient premises that higher education could follow through the ideology of the Capability Approach, to deal with the issues of equity, as it considers the contingent circumstances of learners, and not merely their societal background. The research findings could serve as a structural framework as it considers the opportunities along with the invisible hindrances that learners come across during the pandemic closure.

**Keywords:** Higher education, West Bengal, Equity, Inclusion, Pandemic closure, Capability Approach

## **Introduction**

The education system of India is the second-largest education network around the globe, and the COVID-19 crisis manifests as a sudden disruption in its normal running. Maintaining the restrictions imposed by the government was the solution to minimize community transmission of the virus, however, this unprecedented approach of shutting down schools, colleges, and universities widened the existing educational inequalities. In the Indian context, the shutdown adversely affected the equity impact in the higher education sector. Students from low-income families, girls, learners belonging to minority groups, students living in remote areas, and learners with special needs have been the victims, subject to economic hardship, encountering difficulties in internet connectivity, and experiencing emotional stress due to the uncertain future. Moreover, inclusive education has been a global priority for the last two decades, which was now further extended during the pandemic lockdown. The higher education system of India has a wide range of student diversity exhibiting differences in dialects, socio-economic conditions, and the ability to afford digital devices during the pandemic. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 in the Indian Constitution, outlines the frameworks for 'inclusive' education. Section 31 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2016, strengthens the inclusion of students with benchmark disabilities not more than 40% in schools. If one must duly acknowledge the importance of higher education in the emerging knowledge economy, it must be understood that envisioning a just and democratic society may predict an inclusive and equitable higher education system. In the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 4, "Quality Education", all-inclusive and equitable quality education has been recognized as the precondition for a sustainable society (SDG 4 and its Targets, UNESCO 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic shutdown compelled educators to make a sudden shift to online education at all academic levels, and India and West Bengal were no exception. However, as the online system has come to the floor, it is important to apprehend whether it has been accessible to the marginalized student fraternity and how students with disabilities in higher education have been included in this process. The study examined this issue through the lens of Sen's (2015) Capability approach. The approach has the great potential to contribute evaluative knowledge in the domain of research for equity and inclusion in higher education. Sen proposed the Capability approach in the mid-1980s, and the approach emerged as a theory of global economic development. The premises of the theory have been extended to conceptualize the

competencies of the learners; thereby unfolding its paradigm to provide a theoretical framework concerning social justice, equity, and inclusion (Otto & Ziegler, 2006). The premises of the theory have been extended to conceptualize the competencies of the learners; thereby unfolding its paradigm to provide a theoretical framework concerning social justice, equity, and inclusion (Otto & Ziegler, 2006).

Access to online education and equity of marginalized students in online learning has been thoroughly examined before 2004; Kinash, Crichton, and Kim-Rupnow (2004) in their review studies conducted between 2000-2003 explored accessibility of specially-abled learners to join online courses an area of major focus in the researches. These researches included the studies conducted by Cook and Gladhart (2002) and the other by Kim-Rupnow, Dowrick, and Burke (2001) (Greer, Rice, and Dykman, 2014), but whether students with various disabilities have been able to maximize their inclusion in higher education is not clear to-date.

To overcome the emerging learning crisis regarding the issues of equity and inclusion, attention and research are required to promote an inclusive classroom, teaching, and an empathetic teaching fraternity. The higher education institutions of West Bengal, where this study was conducted, revisit the pedagogical practices of institutional efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic in light of the Capability approach proposed by Sen (2015).

### **Purpose of the study**

Teaching in a time of uncertainty in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many changes in how teachers and students engage with one another. For most higher education institutions, this has meant an abrupt mid-semester shift to online learning and the possibility of that continuing. Approximately 40 percent of the low-income countries of the world like India have been unable to provide support to learners during the sudden shutdown (UNESCO GEM Report, 2020). A Case Study conducted by UNICEF (UNESCO & UNICEF Report, 2021) noted that across the continent of Asia, specifically in India, there is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor, and this region has been troubled by learning interruptions during the pandemic. Millions of learners starting from the pre-primary level to the secondary level of schooling, have been affected by the shutdown. Although online teaching and the generation of digital content assisted children to learn from home, there is little evidence to show to what extent benefit from this home-schooling, or how

many of them participate. Therefore, online learning has proved to be discriminatory to marginalized and poor learners. Moreover, the virtual mode has been challenging for specially-abled children, especially the hearing-impaired (Manzoor, 2020). In this time of crisis, academic leaders have a responsibility to respond to the coming “social recession,” focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure that physical distancing does not equate to social isolation and increased inequity. Within this context, this article investigates the issues of equity and inclusion being practiced in the higher educational institutions of West Bengal, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The article explores whether the marginalized and economically disadvantaged learners of higher education were able to participate in virtual learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns and whether the specially-abled learners were able to continue participating in their learning. Moreover, this study will refocus on the parameters of social justice theorized in Sen’s (2015) Capability Approach, affirming them with the actual practices in higher education institutions of West Bengal. The present study will propose that administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions address the equity issues in their institutions, emphasize and be empathetic while teaching specially-abled students in inclusive educational settings.

## **Literature Review**

Several studies have been conducted to explore the status and challenges of teaching in a virtual mode in the online ecosystem during the COVID-19 period in India (Raju, 2020; Strielkowski, 2020). Joshi et al. (2020) identified four categories of online teaching barriers teachers faced in different Universities in Uttarakhand: i) a lack of technical support; ii) a lack of institutional support; iii) difficulties in the home environment and vi) personal problems of the teachers. Numerous studies have been found on the related area (Chakraborty Acharya, S., 2022; Pushpanadham, K & Chakraborty Acharya, S., 2022; Chakraborty Acharya, S., 2021), but the present study is concerned with the issues of equity and inclusion in higher education and therefore, it is more justified to review the related studies in these two premises: Equity in higher education during the COVID-19 lockdown, and Inclusion in higher education during the COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, the study addresses these issues in the light of Sen’s (2015) Capability Approach; henceforth another category titled Equity and Inclusion issues and Capability Approach, drawing studies related to this field, demands inclusion in this section. The following review of related literature has been done accordingly.

### **Equity in Higher Education during the COVID-19 Lockdowns**

Equity in education includes promoting equality among students and safeguarding their interests regardless of language, religion, caste, creed, ethnicity, gender, and physical disability (Sabharwal & Malish, 2018). To create an equitable environment in higher education, the Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions, the 12th Five Year Plan (2011) policy document identifies several equity targets. These include low-income students, students with different gender identities, minority groups including students from different religions, castes, languages, localities, communities, and ethnicity, and students with disabilities. Despite this, the policy falls short, as it does not specify any concrete targets for these groups' participation in equity groups.

Several studies dedicated to the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching-learning of higher educational institutions including West Bengal (Chakraborty Acharya, S., 2022; Pushpanadham, K & Chakraborty Acharya, S., 2022; Chakraborty Acharya, S., 2021) are described as follows. Mourlin, (2021) explored the use of computational intelligence to meet the learning outcomes of the learners through computer programming in the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in West Bengal. This student-centered approach through machine learning interventions bridged the learning gap among learners. Kapasia et al., (2020) describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic closure on the learning status of undergraduate and postgraduate learners of different universities and colleges in West Bengal. Results showed various challenges faced by learners, especially the marginalized sector, relating to poor internet connectivity, anxiety regarding the situation, and unfavorable home environments. Interventions to create a positive study environment for the learners have been suggested in the study. Paul, Roy, & Parveen, (2020), conducted at the University level in India, explained student and teachers' attitudes and perspectives on online learning. They reported that 74% of students lagged due to poor infrastructure and a lack of IT devices.

### **Inclusion in Higher Education during Lockdown**

Inclusive education values the voices of students belonging to all sections of society and outlines that physically disadvantaged learners may benefit from receiving technological assistance (Loreman and Deppler, 2001). Institutionalizing inclusion on the campus is an active and intentional process of representing every learner in teaching bringing in the educational benefits of diversity. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, reflects a paradigm shift in considering disability as an issue of human rights. It

emphasizes creating a barrier-free inclusive situation in the classroom, as well as in society, with a 3% reservation in government jobs. Few studies have been conducted in India related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inclusive issues and disabled children. A Delhi-based survey conducted on the educational status of children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, focussed on their disadvantaged online learning conditions finding that very little they learned was through their parental intervention (Alkazi and Mullick, 2020). Swabhimani, (2020) reported that 56.5% of children with special needs struggled to attend online classes, and 77% of students were not able to catch up with their lessons and lagged due to their inability to access IT devices. A report by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, (2020) covering four states, namely, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, explored the different challenges faced by learners with disabilities in learning.

### **Equity and Inclusion Issues in Higher Education and Capability Approach**

Although Sen's (2015) Capability approach has its origin in Economics, the 2002 UNESCO Report "Education for All" recognized that education and the dimensions of justice mentioned in the Capability approach are closely related, and the recommendations could be designed and evaluated in the following ways:

*These dimensions could be "[...] judged to be successful if they have enhanced people's capabilities [...]. From this capability perspective, then, education is important for several reasons. [...] The human capabilities approach to education [...] recognizes that education is intrinsically valuable as an end in itself. [...] Compared to other approaches] the capability approach goes further, clarifying the diverse reasons for education's importance. Although many of the traditional instrumental arguments for education [...] are accepted, the distinctive feature of the human capability approach is its assessment of policies not based on their impact on incomes, but on whether or not they expand the real freedoms that people value. Education is central to this process".*

Primarily rooted in a philosophical and economical aspect, Sen's (2015) Capability approach includes interdisciplinary dimensions, such as the well-being of learners, educators, and social aspects of educational policies. Furthermore, it may tend to function as a public document of social justice (Unterhalter and Brighouse, (2007). Notably, it provides a conceptual framework that ushers a re-examination of various educational issues, rather

than presenting an educational theory. Understood in this manner, it tends to become a script for promoting justice in the field of education; strengthening the learners to function as citizens enjoying equal social rights (Otto & Ziegler, H., 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework of Sen's (2015) Capability Approach**

At the 2003 Commonwealth Education Conference at Edinburgh, Sen *explained* how the development of human beings takes a lead role over the mere accumulation of human capital, in terms of acknowledging that education develops a sense of freedom. Two basic intertwined webs form the idea of Sen's (1992) Capability approach (Sen, 1992). These are Functioning and Capabilities.

Functioning is the various activities or roles the persons may undertake at a given point in time, which could be complex in nature depending on the context. It could be personal or social, concrete, abstract, or survival related to want-related (Terzi, 2005). Sen stated that functioning has an intrinsic value and is determined by the person themselves based on socially legitimized reasons. Whereas capabilities could be seen as "real opportunities and freedoms people have to achieve this valued functioning" (Terzi, 2005, p. 449) and it is the kind of functioning that is achievable. Henceforth, the capability approach has the possibility of doing things with the fullest potential in society, being provided with the available resources. Equal distribution of resources could be termed as justice, and using this approach, the capabilities of an individual or the functioning they find essential for their ultimate well-being, determine their required justice (Terzi, 2007). The focus of Sen's (2015) Capability approach henceforth, is on the capabilities of people rather than on their needs, if one has to consider their well-being in life (Norwich, 2014) which may lead to the adoption of an equity-based approach in society and education.

### **How are inclusion and equity issues justified in Sen's (2015) theory?**

The concept of justice is founded on capabilities or the extent of freedom an individual can exercise to choose the functioning they feel valued for their well-being in society. It is important to understand that the capability of the educated becomes the right of the individuals. Education itself at the highest level is an expression of freedom. In addition to providing a source for generating income, it is associated with the freedom of expression of individuals, influencing social change, and engaging oneself in public well-being. Research shows that education has an enormous contribution to the life of individuals and improves

their quality of life. Sen, developed the Capability Approach “as a set of interrelated theses in welfare economics, particularly on the assessment of personal well-being, poverty, and inequality” (Mitra, 2006, p. 236). The approach created a platform where different issues of equity were discussed with multi-dimensional aspects and posed answers to the question ‘equality of what?’ within the ways individuals lead their lives in society (Terzi, 2005, p. 449). The concept of the Capability approach quantifies and projects the human desire for freedom, which could ultimately lead to satisfaction of self and overall well-being of individuals. Keeping in tune with this, the theory has an innate framework for analyzing the premises concerned with social arrangements and equity (Hinchcliffe & Terzi, 2009).

A person chooses their “functionalities” or structures their activities from a set of capabilities. The larger their set of capabilities, the more freedom they will enjoy in their choice which determines their satisfaction and well-being (Stella, & Corry, 2017). The concept of justice is founded on capabilities or the extent of freedom an individual can exercise to choose their functioning that they feel valued for their well-being in society. To create an equity-based society, the Capability approach emphasizes the capabilities of an individual and recognizes human diversity and heterogeneity (Sen, 1992). Sen’s approach considers that equality of capabilities could be achieved in and through education. Therefore, it presents a useful framework by which learning processes and social marginalization in education could be articulated. Further, human diversity demands attention to the functioning and capabilities of human beings, rather than the close calculation of their needs for material resources, in evaluating the quality of their livelihood (Hinchcliffe & Terzi, 2009). As such, individuals may differ from one another in accessing the resources available to them for functioning. This definition of diversity includes impairment, as it reflects the unavailability or insufficiency of necessary resources for functioning in society, thereby causing limitations to the fullest expression of their capabilities.

Exercising one’s capabilities under this approach is determined personally, hence it is discussed as a collective effort or used as an opportunity for the development of a certain group of the population (Sen, 1985). Drawing on the principles and values underlying the Capability approach, the present study will examine the following capabilities that encapsulate the relevant issues of equity and inclusion, exercised during the pandemic in higher education institutions of West Bengal:

- Knowledge development of socially and economically disadvantaged learners through online teaching

- Evolving capabilities for learners with disabilities to make reflexive choices in learning
- Evaluation on meeting racial equity goals to confirm individual autonomy of marginalized learners.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative approach and proceeded using Critical Ethnography, aiming to expose various social events to wider aspects, and disclose the prevailing system of suppression, guided by the bases of a critical theory (Hardcastle, Usher, and Holmes, 2006). Henceforth, the different issues and trivialities of the teaching-learning process in higher education exercised during the COVID-19 lockdowns are important social phenomena that can be redefined through this approach. A critical theory can be introduced as a philosophical framework with the predominant tenet of freeing people by addressing the existing patterns of power games and domination (Lodh, 1996). As Creswell (2003) explained, when a researcher is positioned critically, they purposefully adopt the idea of empowering people from social and political restraints. This has been further extended by Carspecken (1996) by considering research conducted through critical ethnography as a form of “social activism”. Sen’s (2015) Capability approach has been introduced here as the central framework for analyzing how far the issues of equity and inclusion have been exercised amidst the COVID-19 lockdown situation in the higher education institutions of West Bengal.

The qualitative aspect focuses on the opinions of the Head of the departments, Principals, teachers, and students of the concerned departments and colleges. This has been made possible by the content analysis of their versions in response to the questions asked to them through unstructured interviews. Interviews were conducted separately with the academic leaders, a group of teachers, and a group of students of each institution through online meetings via Google Meet, along with a virtual focus group discussion with the academic leaders of the five institutions. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. They expanded the narratives along with the counter-narratives of the interviewees, to “unpack” the various strategies which have worked, and which failed to work during the closure of face-to-face classes in higher education institutions.

As a whole, the educational leaders, including Principals and departmental heads, teachers, and students were directly involved in the teaching-learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic closure, therefore, the information collected from them will be more effective in obtaining the findings of the study. Five higher education institutions, including one department from two universities and three colleges of West Bengal, were selected through purposive sampling as the sample of data collection. They are listed as follows:

**Table 1: List of the Higher Education Institutions**

SL	Name of the HEIs	Location
1.	Department of Education, Sidhu Kanho Birsa University	Purulia, West Bengal.
2.	Department of Education, West Bengal State University	Barasat, Kolkata, West Bengal.
3.	Gobardanga Hindu College	24 Parganas, West Bengal.
4.	East Calcutta Girls' College	Kolkata, West Bengal.
5.	Barabazar Bikram Tudu Memorial College	Barabazar, Purulia, West Bengal.

### Sample

The framework of the sample has been listed stated below:

**Table 2: Framework of the Sample**

University department	College
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Head of the departments	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 Principals
<input type="checkbox"/> 15 teachers (including guest faculties)	<input type="checkbox"/> 30 teachers (including guest faculties)
<input type="checkbox"/> 75 Students	<input type="checkbox"/> 150 Students

### Tools of the study method

As the research has been done in the qualitative approach, Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions as well as focus-group discussions. The interviews were conducted separately for the institutional leaders, teachers, and students of each institution.

**Table 3: Interview Schedule**

Questions comprising the interview schedule are listed below.

Interview Schedule	
1.	How did the institution support economically disadvantaged learners during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2.	How did the institution address the issues of socially disadvantaged learners to ensure equity during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3.	Were the administrators, teachers, and students evaluated on meeting racial equity goals?
4.	Did your institution provide support services for learners with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The focus group discussions proceeded virtually by the heads of the departments and Principals, with the physical attendance of five leaders of HEIs of West Bengal.

**Table 4: Focus Group Discussion Schedule**

Major key points of Focus Group Discussion	Focus Group Discussion structure
1. System of tracking applications for admissions of underrepresented groups – low-income students, minorities, or disabled students	Total participants: 2 HODs + 3 Principals = 5 Academic leaders of higher education
2. Institutional access to provide schemes for people with disabilities	Moderator: 1
3. Teaching-learning during pandemic	Recorder: 1
Mode: Virtual meeting	

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected from higher education institutions in West Bengal- a state located in the eastern part of India, through purposive sampling. Several higher education institutions were contacted for data collection during the months of November and December 2021. Those institutions which gave consent for the data collection were provided with the initial perception of the online interview. Further, the academic leaders/ Principals informed the teachers and the students by circulating a notice and requesting them to be present in the online meeting, as per the requirement of the researcher. The institutional authority provided the tentative list of teachers and students. The stakeholders (Principals and heads of the departments, teachers, and students) were separately invited and connected through Google Meet on the online platform. After a brief discussion about the theme of the study, the interviewer initiated the discussion based on access, equity, and inclusion issues of the learners that have been practiced during the pandemic lockdown. The questions of the interview schedule formed the foundation of the discussion. The participants were made comfortable at the beginning and only their spontaneous responses were recorded. The virtual interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

## **Data analysis**

For data analysis, a six-phase thematic analysis was used. It proceeded with the transcription of data followed by coding and the formation of themes. The themes were then refined, the thesis refined and a report prepared.

## **Results**

The major findings of the study were formulated based on three capabilities that encapsulate the relevant issues of equity and inclusion, exercised during the COVID-19 pandemic in the five HEIs of West Bengal.

### **1. Knowledge development of socially and economically disadvantaged learners through online teaching**

Learners were economically supported by the institutions largely by reducing their examination fees, issuing institutional scholarships, and exemptions from annual tuition fees with the special interference of the leaders. Attrition cases were addressed with innovative strategies including the formation of student groups under the supervision of teachers, to identify those who had attrited and bring them back into the classroom. Cash assistance was provided by the principal from their institutional fund to support student

studies, and discussions with family members of students that attrit occurred to resolve their crisis. Learners were provided with an exact explanation of the situation that had been meaningful to them, ensuring that they should not feel guilty or unnecessarily scared about the situation. Research work was conducted online in virtual laboratories. Separate WhatsApp groups were created to reach the students virtually. Students with poor or no internet connectivity in remote areas remain unaddressed by the authorities. Innovative methodologies were applied in online teaching e.g. a YouTube Channel was created institutionally to share learning resources, either individually or by the institution. In-person meetings with parents ensured a greater involvement in a student's learning, which minimized the attrition rate.

## **2. Evolving capabilities for the learners with disabilities to make reflexive choices in learning**

The study proceeded on the assumption that learners with disabilities were grievously impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic closure, which is equally applicable to the higher education student fraternity. The study pointed out a lack of empathetic understanding of the difficulties confronted by the specially-abled in online learning, both on behalf of the teachers as well as their peer group. Of the five participating institutions, only two institutions had a few learners with disabilities. Thereby, no special support services were arranged by the institutions for their ease and access to online learning.

When students were asked whether they extended any assistance to their specially-abled friends, one of them said:

*In virtual classes, teachers do not have enough time for one or two specially-abled students. Therefore, they [specially-abled students] also attended very less classes and were never open to us.*

## **3. Evaluation on meeting racial equity goals to confirm individual autonomy of marginalized learners**

It was found that institutional mechanisms to check the discrepancies against the disadvantaged groups during the COVID-19 closure were less systematic and unsatisfactory. The omissions were evident in the institutional approach concerning the evaluation of meeting racial and equity goals in HEIs. Effective institutional administration in ensuring the need for reliable internet connectivity and digital devices for the learners was less feasible, according to the teachers and students who attended online classes. Furthermore, addressing the issues of

socially disadvantaged learners to ensure inclusion other than attrition, and issues regarding campus recruitment and admissions practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, had been the least priority of the administrators during the emergency. The overall impression of the study focuses on the efforts of the academic leaders towards attaining the different possible ways to address the issues of equity and inclusion within their limited scope during the closure. One of the teachers pointed out:

*There could be no readymade formula to combat educational emergencies and related equity issues of learners and institutions need to strategize creatively.*

### **Suggestions through the lens of Sen's (2015) Capability Approach**

Policies should aim to expand individual capabilities in terms of access to higher education and effective participation, attending classes, being knowledgeable, taking part in discussions, thinking critically about society, having good relationships with peers, and being treated with respect. Sen holds that education fosters social responsibility and develops the ability of public debate; thereby influencing learners to speak for the injustice to the marginalized sections of society regarding their inclusion in the educational process. This apprehension could be extended in terms of higher education with its varied scope and reach (Walker, 2008). Moral responsibility and public dialogue bloom from the primary education of a child being rooted in a conducive environment; which takes its final shape in higher education. Therefore, it plays a transformative role if one gets the scope of higher education and could be sustained for lifelong.

Recognition and equal distribution of resources should be the central idea of justice in Higher education. As blended learning is becoming a popular mode day by day, access to online mode of teaching is thereby inevitable and every pupil should be equipped with the necessary devices. Simultaneously, the Capability approach has further emphasized the importance of converting educational resources into capabilities; 'conversion factors' as put forward by Rajapakshe, 2016, which lays stress on individual heterogeneity. It is to be understood that equal educational resources may not lead to identical learning outcomes. Nevertheless, these converting capabilities are highly diverse and students should learn to convert the resources; which is possible in and through education. The data reveals that issues of access to online learning during the

COVID-19 pandemic are more required than the functions of supply in the HEIs in West Bengal. Therefore, keeping in tune with Sen's notion of justice in higher education, learners should be equipped with resources according to their capabilities, with proper knowledge of their willingness to participate in academics and the extent of input for learning. The essence of the theory is substantially linked with the needs, values, and aspirations of the learners and their parents for making choices in taking admission, attendance, and participating in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown.

### **Future implications of the study**

While higher education should be accessible to all learners for the advancement of a country, the reality has been quite contrasted. Opportunities may be limited for a group of learners for various reasons, which have been further enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been well-acclaimed that not all learners have access to equal scope to achieve their goals. Therefore, HEIs could frame their strategies to address the issues of equity and inclusion within the "capability approach," as put forward by Sen (2015). The approach emphasizes learners' real-life opportunities to reach their goals, rather than focusing more on their legal rights. As Sen explains,

*seeing opportunity in terms of capability allows us to distinguish appropriately between (i) whether a person can do things she would value doing, and (ii) whether she possesses the means or instruments or permissions to pursue what she would like to do (her actual ability to do that pursuing may depend on many contingent circumstances).*

The study suggests that higher education could follow the ideology of capability approach to deal with the issues of inclusion, as it considers the contingent circumstances of learners, not merely their societal background. It could serve as a structural framework as it considers the opportunities along with the invisible hindrances that learners come across during their study period.

No single policy, governmental or institutional can act as a masterstroke to foster inclusion and equity, especially in the "new normal." Inclusive practices in the classroom foster diversity, which in turn, has benefits for learners (Milem & Jeffrey, 2002). Educational leaders and teachers need to emphasize the following perspectives to provide inclusive and equitable learning in the present situation, where blended mode learning in higher education is expected to continue:

- Innovative institution-specific curriculum that will consider all diversified categories of learners
- Accessible and adequate learning materials, both hardcopies and e-copies
- Attention to the marginalized learners with more care, looking into their needs and making provisions for individualized guidance, counseling, and financial help
- Enhancing options in choosing elective subjects and opportunities to switch over to favorable options, as far as practicable by the institution
- Creating a conducive atmosphere for the well-being of diverse learners with constant motivation from the teachers and academic leaders
- Ensuring parental involvement by connecting and motivating them through parent-teacher meetings for a conducive study environment at home
- Offering learning resources in vernaculars. Academic leaders could take the support of language specialists and translators in developing culture-specific or region-specific study materials.
- Ensuring counseling options at the institution for the socio-emotional well-being of the learners, making provisions for both online and offline services.

Well-planned administrative strategies and effective teachers are vital to raising awareness about equity and inclusion. Reflective training programs would serve as a strong impetus for teachers to upskill and expand their capabilities, challenge biases and stigma, and henceforth stimulate unbiased discourses in the classroom. Effective leaders could work towards implementing various policies around equity and inclusion. Higher education institutions need to explore these opportunities and cater to the individualized needs of the learners in the increasingly divergent student population.

### **Conclusion**

The human capabilities approach developed by Sen (2015) links development, quality of life, and freedom. This article has explored the key ideas of the capability of learners, their functioning and agencies, human diversity, and their participation in teaching-learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic closure of HEIs linked with the initiations of the administrators generated during the emergency. The study created opportunities for further research on these ideas related specifically to education, and for the

implementation and evaluation of the capabilities of learners to achieve quality education.

### **Data Availability Statement**

Data collected for this study are not available as it includes identifying data that cannot be disclosed.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The study has been conducted and presented in the form of an article without any commercial or financial interest that could be decoded as a conflict of interest.

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