



Education

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GET UNTANGLED

Students with visual impairment have a right to learn with dignity

UGC has urged HEIs to develop and adopt suitable educational resources to better meet the needs of visual impairments for equitable access to the curriculum

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The University Grants Commission (UGC) has asked all its affiliated colleges and universities to integrate suitable educational resources and infrastructure for visually impaired students. "In pandemic times, the challenges are more acute, as the online learning systems across HEIs do not adequately support students with visual disabilities in getting information, access to virtual classroom facilities and participation in assessment. As inclusive education has been highlighted in NEP 2020, the UGC directive could not have come at a better time," says Himangshu Das, director, National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NI-EPVD) & Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya National Institute for Persons with Physical Disabilities (PDU-NIPPD).

Challenges one too many
"We have around 200 students pursuing graduation, out of which

**HEIs should make arrangements for intensive orientation of visually impaired students to the physical environment of colleges at the time of admissions**
— SR Mittal, professor (retd), DU

around 20 visually challenged students are in need of laptops for online education. Plans are on for the distribution of suitable electronic devices, training, oral examination for visually impaired (VI) students," says A Chidambaram, coordinator for Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN), an enabling unit of Pondicherry University (PU) which is headed and executed by visually and physically challenged faculty members. "In online education, lack of laptop or Android mobile with network connection are major concerns. Many of the visually impaired students lack the skill to handle electronic devices (for making Power Point presentation, extracting online materials independently, etc)," he adds further.

"Access to information has been a major problem for the visually challenged in India," says Muttayya Koganuramath, director, Basava International Information Centre, Basava Samithi, Bengaluru, whose published paper on 'Learning Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged Students', underlines the need for such centres in every HEI for equitable access in education, research, training and employment. "Mostly, the visually challenged in our country depend on two primary sources for their information: Braille Books and audio/talking book services. Today, ICTs have helped reduce the digital divide between sighted and the visually challenged by providing information on their palmtop/desktop, even during the pandemic," he says. Koganuramath however has his reservations about the buildings of educational institutions with their high steps, narrow walkways, curved staircases etc. "The educational environment should be free from all physical barriers which can be achieved by following the universal design practices to suit all of the students," he adds.

Remedial steps
SR Mittal, professor (retd), Delhi University (DU), who is himself a person with visual impairment

(PwVI), feels it is not just the physical infrastructure, but also the negative and in-different attitude of teachers and administrative staff that hamper educational development of visually challenged students. Academic institutions, he says, should follow the accessibility guidelines issued by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) and ministry of Urban Development. "They should make provisions for the production or procurement of braille books, large print books and audio books besides ensuring that the teachers are equipped in preparing need-based teaching learning material. The HEIs should also make arrangements for intensive orientation of visually impaired students to the physical environment of the colleges they choose at the time of admissions itself."

The entire teaching-learning ecosystem of HEIs needs to be modified as the solution does not lie in arranging a few books for students with visual disabilities, says Das. "Dedicated fund allocation in universities for creating the right resources and interventions is a must. Sensitisation of stakeholders is needed to ensure PwDs learn with dignity," he adds. "As disability and poverty have a positive correlation, there is a chance that students with disabilities may face financial challenges in completing their higher education. Since assistive technologies and accessible books are all too expensive, HEIs should enrich their library resources with suitable books and devices. Majority of the initiatives have been made in print and building accessibility. The gap in psychological and pedagogical challenges within university premises is yet to be met. Defining some standard framework will help universities deal with all the challenges," Das says.

