

Perceptions of Students on Access to Higher Education in Mizoram

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Abstract

The study attempts to understand the perceptions of students regarding access to higher education in Mizoram. The present study is qualitative in nature and employs purposive sampling technique. A sample of thirty students from three institutions participated in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews are transcribed and themes are derived from the transcripts. Varied perceptions of students regarding choice of educational institution, method of teaching, grievance services, infrastructural facilities, transportation facilities, student union and the difficulties faced in receiving scholarships are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Access, Higher Education, Mizoram, Perception.

Introduction

For a nation to experience social mobility and economic prosperity, higher education is essential. With a long history of social hierarchy and patriarchal society, India still has issues with access to education which significantly slows down the rate of progress of the country. According to Chanana (2013), access to higher education is the opportunity to enroll in and successfully complete higher education, regardless of one's socio-economic background, gender, religion, caste, or any other marker of social identity. Walker (2018) says that access to university is the ability to enroll and participate in university education without facing barriers of any kind, be it financial, academic, social, or cultural. Access in the proposed study refers to the ability of the people to have equal opportunity to take part in higher education irrespective of socio-economic status, geographical conditions, gender, ethnic & religious minority status and differently-abled conditions. There are numerous studies

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regarding access to education. Yet, in the context of Mizoram, research on access to higher education especially from the perspectives of stakeholders remains an uncharted territory.

Access and Higher Education in India

India is a diversified country with a population of over 1.2 million (Census India, 2011) and is the home of many religions, ethnicity, languages and social classes. At present, there are 42,343 colleges in India (AISHE, 2019-20). In India, many disadvantaged groups are still facing challenges in accessing higher education and according to Chanana (2013), women, minorities, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes are among the disadvantaged groups facing barriers like socioeconomic factors, poor educational preparation, gender and caste discrimination, and cultural norms to accessing higher education in India. National Education Policy (2020) also aims to increase the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education from 26.3% in 2018 to 50% by 2035. In a study by Zoie and Rashid (2018) to highlight inclusive education and challenges with equality in the Indian higher education system, it was discovered that scheduled tribes (ST) and girls had lower GER than other varied groups. Challenges of access to higher education persist despite having numerous programmes and policies to improve and strengthen the sector.

Access and Higher Education in Mizoram

Mizoram is one of the states of India located in the north-eastern region. According to the Census of India 2011 (the latest), the literacy rate of Mizoram is 91.33%, which is the third-highest among the states and union territories of India (Census India, 2011), with a diverse population. At present there is one central university offering higher education in Mizoram i.e., Mizoram University. One constituent college and 40 colleges affiliated with Mizoram University are functioning in the state as per the office records (College Development Council, 2022).

Due to numerous factors, many social groups have challenges in enrolling themselves in higher education institutions. Access to higher education institutions is influenced by privilege, it is important to pay attention to how underprivileged groups are rendered invisible in the struggle for access, leading to inequality. The issues and challenges faced by various groups based on geography, socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, and religion require thorough analysis in order to understand participation in higher education. The present study is undertaken to study the perceptions of students on access to higher education in Mizoram.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature. Purposive sampling technique is adopted for the present study. The total sample includes 30 undergraduate students from three colleges in Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram. The distribution of the sample is as follows: Institution-1 (7 female and 8 male), Institution-2 (5 female and 5 male) and Institution-3 (2 female and 3 male). In-depth interview is conducted using the semi-structured interview schedule prepared

by the researchers. Semi-structured interview schedule is used to gather detailed information about a person's assumptions, beliefs, and problems (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 97). Interviews are transcribed, themes are derived and findings are interpreted.

Findings

Themes derived from the analysis are based on perceptions of students on choice of educational institution, courses offered in the institution, method of teaching, bridge courses, career guidance and counselling services, transportation facilities, grievance services, hostel facility, classroom condition, toilet condition, quality and quantity of water, student union and scholarships.

Choice of educational institution

Numerous factors can influence one's choice of an educational institution. Varied perceptions are seen in the excerpts of transcripts given below.

A male respondent pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education says,

‘I did my admission to my institution because it was the nearest college to my house.’

A female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education shares,

‘My friend and I wanted to go to the same college, we tried in another college too, but my friend did not qualify and we were able to receive admission here without any problem taking the same core.’

A female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education from Aizawl also reveals,

‘I was not planning to attend college. But my father wanted me to attend college. So, I just did my admission in my current institution and the admission process was easy.’

The choice of educational institutions is mainly based on the distance between their home and educational institutions, having friends in the institutions and fulfilling parents' wishes. Transcripts of the interview show that there are multiple reasons in choices of selecting a higher education institution.

Courses offered in the institution

Courses taken in college often determine one's career scope. It shapes the individual's aspiration towards his/her profession. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows:

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Mizo living in Aizawl says,

‘Yes, I think I am quite satisfied with the current courses offered in my institution, we have political science, sociology, education, Mizo and English.’

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree living in Aizawl also shares,

‘I wish it was more diverse, we only have education, history, English, Mizo, political science and economics. Especially for competitive exams I wish they offer sociology, geography, and public administration.’

All the students interviewed are satisfied with the current courses offered by their institution. Diverse courses offered by the institutions are believed to be helpful in appearing for competitive examinations.

Method of teaching

The methods of teaching play a vital role in students’ learning. With the advancement in science and technology, teaching can be easily facilitated using various technologies. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A male student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in history says,

‘We have projectors and laptops but teachers mainly use lecture methods but they use charts and maps a lot.’

A female student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in education living in Aizawl shares,

‘Our teachers have hardly used projectors since we started offline mode. They use lecture methods but the explanation is not bad. The problem with constantly using lecture methods is that it can be quite boring sometimes.’

It is observed that all the teachers use the lecture method as a primary transaction mode and projectors are hardly used in teaching in the colleges even when they are available and projectors are also not available in some colleges.

Bridge courses

Bridge courses connect one course of study to another and also one level to another level of study. It helps students to transition smoothly from school to college as it imparts basic knowledge about the future courses which the student will take in college. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A male student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in education says,

‘We need bridge courses. It will be good for us.’

A female student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Education shares,

‘I think that bridge courses will be beneficial for education students because we have statistics and understanding of basic mathematics will go a long way.’

‘The concept of bridge courses is new to the students and after understanding the meaning of it, students felt that it will be greatly helpful in education’.

Career guidance and counselling services

Career guidance and counselling services help students in selecting courses and jobs. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education living in Aizawl shares,

‘We never get any such type of career guidance and counselling services in our schools.’

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in commerce says,

‘Our teachers used to just tell us to go to college without any detailed information, and if they could have given us quality career guidance during our school days, it would have been really helpful for us.’

Many students informed that there is a lack of guidance and counselling services provided at the school level in opting for courses in higher education.

Transportation facilities

The transportation facilities provided by educational institutions facilitate students' access to education. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education reveals,

‘Yes, I face many problems in travelling every day to the college. I travel by college bus. It's always full, we hardly get seats, and the bus stand is very far from my home. If a class is going to start at 10 a.m., I have to be at the bus stand at 8:30 a.m. If a class is going to start at 11 a.m., I have to come by city bus And sometimes I went home using the city bus.’

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Political Science Living in Aizawl shares,

‘My institution does not have any transportation facilities; we come by foot, taxi, and bus.’

Transportation facilities are badly needed for many students. It is observed that the institutions that provide bus facilities are very much congested and have problems with people living in the lower part of the city.

Grievance services

Grievance services make higher education institutions more students centric. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Mizo Living in Aizawl says,

‘I don't think that we have anything like that. We just tell our problems to our teachers and they solve it, that's it.’

A female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in History shares,

‘We never make use of grievances complaint services online and offline. When we have issues, we just talk about it among ourselves and that’s it.’

A male student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in History says,

‘In the teachers’ office one grievance box is available and the location is very visible. We just share our problems with our head of the department and the teachers and staff in charge usually solve our problems.’

A male student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Commerce says,

‘Our grievances that we submit both through online and offline mode are reviewed weekly and our teachers try to deal with our grievances as soon as possible.’

Complaints and grievances services are not offered in some institutions and students from some institutions reported that they can directly talk to the teachers, heads and student unions. One institution offers an online mode of grievance service for the students and said that once every week the complaints/grievances are dealt with.

Hostel facility

Hostel facilities are one of the factors that determine students’ access to education. Students from various parts of the state enrol in higher education every year. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A male student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Commerce who is also an office bearer of the Student Union says,

‘Yes, we have hostel facilities but we haven’t run it yet. It will function from next semester. But the problem is that finances for running the hostel are still not stable and apart from that the interior equipment and facilities are still not ready so that’s why we haven’t opened our hostels.’

‘No hostel facility in our institution, before it used to be there but now it’s not,’ says a male student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in history living in Aizawl.

It is observed that the institutions covered in the study do not currently provide hostel facilities due to various reasons. Students from one institution reported that the hostel facilities are to begin from next semester.

Classroom condition

Classroom conditions are important for the teaching-learning process. The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

‘Class Representative makes sweeping duty charts, so; our classroom is clean but it’s dry. And dusty since the parking place is the field, dust accumulates in the student’s shoe so it’s usually dusty,’ says a female student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in education.’

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in history reveals,

'The classrooms are good but a bit congested too many students in one room. We have sweeping duties. Class representative makes the duty chart and fines those students who skip their duty.'

The transcripts show that the classrooms are not clean and that they are congested too.

Toilet condition

The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

'Yes, separate toilet facilities for males and females are available,' report student respondents pursuing a bachelor's degree in education.

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in commerce says,

'Our college has a lot of separate toilet facilities for males and females.'

It is observed from the transcripts that separate quality toilet facilities are available for males and females in all the institutions.

Quality and quantity of water

The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in commerce shares,

'For general use like just to wash our hands, water is not adequate.'

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in education shares,

'We have one cooler that is always functioning, and never runs out of water, but we have only one, water is always there, but the main problem is it is too far from our department.'

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in History reveals,

'Our college has four floors. In every floor, there is a separate toilet for males and females. And water is also adequate.'

Drinking water facilities in the institutions are satisfactory as reported by the participants but water scarcity is reported for toilets and other general use purposes. All the institutions provide purified water for drinking.

Students Union

The interviews with the students in respect to this are transcribed as follows: -

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in commerce living in Aizawl shares,

'Yes, the Student Union is active. According to the student union constitution, a student must be at least a 3rd semester in order to be a candidate for election and in order to be

a member of the student union, and regarding head posts like Vice president and General secretary in order to be a candidate for election a student must be at least from the 5th semester. But no reservation for females is given. We have female members in our student union also. And we are going to amend our constitution in order to make reservations for females after our current internal examination and this has been advised to us by our principal.'

'Yes, members are from all parts of Mizoram and from different cores, every student who does not have any back paper can be a candidate, no reservation for females but now we have 2 female Student Union members out of 13 members,' says a male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in History living in Aizawl.

The elected student union is functioning in all the institutions. Only students in 3rd semester and above are eligible to contest in the election for member posts without back papers. Candidates from the 5th semester onwards can contest in general secretary and vice-president posts without back papers. Only one or two members are females in the council and this is felt to be very less considering the total number of members. There is no reservation for female candidates so far in these institutions and in one institution, reservation for female candidates is expected to be provided in the next election based on the advice of a female principal as part of implementing gender equity in higher education. Except for gender equity, equity in terms of representation of various socio-economic groups is seen in the student unions.

Scholarships

The interview with the students in respect to this is transcribed as follows: -

'People in the library used to take care of scholarships, we submit necessary documents to them and they take care of everything. And we have not faced any problem regarding spelling mistakes and all till now,' a female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education living in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram.

Another male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in History living in Aizawl shares,

'Our college has one teacher who is in charge of scholarships, we submit our document to our teacher and he deals with the rest, we are not confident to do it by ourselves.'

A Female student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education living in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram shares,

'I applied for a scholarship, which I came to know about from my friends, and there are special people to deal with it. I didn't do it by myself. I cannot do it by myself and spent around 3 weeks in the application process. This was during my first semester. Till now I haven't received anything and I spent a lot of money making an affidavit and all since just the affidavit itself costs Rs.1000/-.'

A male student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Commerce living in Aizawl, reveals,

‘Yes, regarding that one, many students who are coming from outside Aizawl, usually face many problems regarding document submission. They have to go to DC to acquire income, tribal and residential certificates. And in order to get those certificates they need to submit forms which include documents from the local level authorities from their home town and villages. So, the process is sometimes very hectic and stressful for some students and their families. And sometimes they have to search for people they know for attesting their documents and all. It’s very problematic. And the time for receiving the certificates after submission of forms is irregular as well.’

Most of the students were paying Rs 100/- to Rs 200/- in their institution for scholarship applications and said that they did not know how to do it by themselves. One female student says that she spent more than Rs 1000/- and three weeks applying for a scholarship in her 1st semester which she hasn’t received till today. Many students except from Aizawl say that getting the documents for submitting the scholarship application is very stressful for them. Many students reported that they are not confident in submitting their online application on their own despite having good internet facilities.

Discussion

In light of the findings obtained students mostly choose their educational institutions based on the distance between their homes and those institutions, whether or not they have friends there, and whether or not it satisfies their parents’ wishes. It is possible that underlying socio-cultural elements could play a role in it. Some of the students expressed satisfaction with the courses offered by their institutions. However, many felt that if the institutions could provide a wider range of courses, it would be beneficial for students who wanted to take competitive exams. The institutions in the current study typically offer two streams with a restricted number of courses. Therefore, the failure of Mizo students to pass the UPSC examinations may be attributed to this system. Projectors are hardly ever used in teaching in the colleges where they are available, and it is noticed that all teachers employ the lecture technique as their main style of instruction. This has been attributed to the teachers’ disinterest in instructing and learning. The students are unfamiliar with the idea of bridge courses, but after learning about it, they came to the conclusion that it would be very beneficial to their academic progress. This could decrease dropout rates, boost learning, and enhance student performance. There is a lack of guidance and counselling services offered at the school level when choosing courses in higher education. Since the majority of students enrol in higher education courses heedlessly, this may be related to the rise of educated youth unemployment. For many students, access to transport amenities is crucial. It has been noted that the institutions that provide bus services are extremely crowded and encounter issues with residents of the lower portion of the city. All of these issues may make learners feel stressed and demotivated, which may impair their academic performance. Some colleges lack complaints and grievance methods, however, students from other institutions claim they can speak with professors, administrators, and student unions directly. One institution provides students with an online grievance service, and it claims that complaints and grievances are handled once a week.

Students must be made aware of the value of grievance services, and efforts should be made to make them accessible in all institutions of higher learning. Since the colleges covered in this research study, currently do not offer hostel accommodations for a variety of reasons. Students from remote areas may find this challenging. Students from one college claimed that hostel amenities will be provided in the next semester. Participants noted that classrooms are messy and crowded but high-quality lavatory facilities are provided in each institution for males and females separately. Though the drinking water facilities of the institutions are adequate, there is a water shortage for toilets and other general-use items. Every institution offers drinking water that has been filtered. In every institution, a democratically elected student union is functioning. Only students who are in their third semester or higher are eligible to contest for member roles. Candidates are not permitted to have back papers while contesting for vice-president or general secretary positions after the fifth semester. In the student council, there are just one or two female members, considered a relatively small proportion given the overall number of members. These institutions have not yet made reservations about the representation of female candidates, one institution however, is planning to do so in the upcoming election on the recommendation of a female principal as part of efforts to advance gender equity in higher education. Apart from this, the student unions exhibit equity in the representation of different socio-economic categories. For many students, excluding those from Aizawl, obtaining the necessary paperwork to submit a scholarship application is an extremely stressful experience. Despite having internet access, several students claimed that they lack confidence in their ability to submit their online applications on their own.

In conclusion, there is a need for broad reforms to improve the learning environment and guarantee a fair opportunity for all students pursuing higher education.

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