

Rural Community Engagement at Select Higher Education Institutions in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Community Engagement is a strategic process with the specific objectives of working with identified groups of people, addressing the issues affecting their well-being and bringing in sustainable social change. The importance of community engagement can be viewed in academics, research, policy design and practice. Objective: The objective of the article is to describe the community engagement carried out by select Higher Education Institutions in West Bengal, India. Methodology: This study is a mixed method research design, exploratory and descriptive by nature including both quantitative and qualitative data in terms of collection, analysis techniques and interpretation. The tools of data collection used were questionnaire and interview for quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. The analysis was done through IBM-SPSS for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The systematic random

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sampling technique was used and data was collected from 65 higher education institutions. The ethical considerations that guided this study consist of informed consent, respect and dignity, anonymity and digital data privacy. This study was conducted as part of a major research project funded by the Mahatma Gandhi National Council of Rural Education. Results: The results of the study display that there is a lack of specialisation courses on rural community development (3.1%, 2 out of 65 institutions) with the most concentration being in the form of compulsory individual courses (55.4%). The fieldwork module is a part of the curriculum at 63 institutions but is compulsory every semester at 16 of those institutions. A total of 34 responses mentioned that they have not started the process and 26 responses mentioned that they are in the process concerned with restructuring and revision of curriculum as per the National Education Policy, 2020. Conclusion: The study concludes that the relationship and role of community engagement in education are of mutual enhancement and an integrative approach is the way forward.

Keywords: Rural Community Engagement, Higher Education Institutions, West Bengal

INTRODUCTION

Education is the foundation of progress and development in terms of potential and meaningful contribution to society (UNESCO, 2017). It can be argued that there are various intricacies that are present because contents, perspectives, pedagogies and the individuality of the learner are extremely significant and interrelated. Community engagement is defined as a strategic process to directly involve local populations in all aspects of decision-making and implementation to strengthen local capacities, community structures and local ownership, as well as to improve transparency, accountability and optimal resource allocations across diverse settings (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2020). It can also be argued as an attempt towards the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people and addressing issues affecting their well-being. It entails a systematic approach, background planning, planned implementation and continuous and comprehensive assessment. 'Community Engagement' has been specifically emphasised in contemporary educational policies and practices and it is expected that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) would engage in service. Engagement of HEIs with communities is

mostly viewed through the lens of service. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) have also included community engagement as an important criterion in assessing the performance of universities (Tandon, 2015). The importance of HEIs in the reconstruction of the rural Indian community has also been emphasised by the great poet, philosopher and educationist Rabindranath Tagore.

The relationship between higher education institutions and communities is one of mutual learning; both needs to learn from each other to enhance their respective capacities (Bhagwan, 2017). Experiential learning also needs to be considered regarding participation in community engagement programmes. Student engagement needs to be centred on the learning process, the objective of the study, the context of the study and finally, but most important human condition (Bowen, 2005). Community engagement also needs to be viewed as a distinctive pedagogical tool that fosters the development of partnerships between social work departments and communities to improve the psycho-social well-being of individuals and families and to address socio-economically related problems in communities (Bhagwan, 2017).

The year 2020 was a landmark not only because of the pandemic but also concerning education in India. A major reform and a step towards development for young minds were taken by adopting the National Education Policy (NEP) by the Government of India. It is a comprehensive and transformative policy document formulated to address the challenges and concerns of the country's long-stranded education system and come up with a life-connecting, realistic and effective one. The previous policy that was replaced by this new policy was the National Policy on education formulated in 1986 and modified in 1992. The core components of the NEP focus on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), foundational literacy and numeracy and enhanced multi-disciplinary approach and skill development, among others (Kumar, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted as a means of academic and practical knowledge sharing of a major research project funded by the Mahatma Gandhi National Council of Rural Education. The study consisted of a mixed methods research design. The tools of data collection used were an interview schedule consisting of both open and close-ended questions. The tools essentially consisted of themes and items concerning the courses

offered syllabus and content, practice of fieldwork and community engagement, among others. The analysis of data was done through SPSS for quantitative data and thematic analysis was conducted for qualitative data. The sample size of the study was 67 institutions. A total of 65 out of 67 institutions provided consent for participation in the study. The sampling procedure was simple random sampling and purposive sampling for quantitative and qualitative respectively. The ethical consideration by which the study was governed consisted of informed consent from the institution, informed consent of the respondents and anonymity.

RESULTS

The results of the study have been structured as per the specific variables within the study within the themes of course curriculum, fieldwork and practice in the curriculum, community engagement with rural communities and others.

Table 1: Courses

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|---|------------------|----------------|
| MSW/BSW | 14 | 21.5 |
| MA/BA Sociology | 40 | 61.5 |
| Rural Development and Lifelong Learning | 6 | 9.2 |
| Others | 5 | 7.7 |
| Total | 65 | 100.0 |

The sample of institutions consisted of an interdisciplinary profile of the departments from which data was collected. The insight from the data depicts that the Department of Sociology offering UG and/or PG courses in Sociology was 40, which consisted of 61.5 % of the sample. The Department of Social Work offering BSW and/or MSW was 14 which were 21.5% of the sample. There were 6 departments, which were of rural development and lifelong learning and offered undergraduate and/or postgraduate courses on rural development and rural management. There were 5 institutions that did not directly have a specific department but a research centre or specialised centre for advanced study and thus have been categorised as others.

Table 2: Crosstabulation Between RCD and HD in Curriculum

| | | <i>Human Development in Curriculum</i> | | <i>Total</i> |
|--|-----|--|-----------|--------------|
| | | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | |
| Rural Community Development in Curriculum | Yes | 54 | 3 | 57 |
| | No | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| Total | | 58 | 7 | 65 |

The interpretation of data displays that 54 institutions in the sample possess both rural community development and human development in the curriculum. Three institutions possess only rural community development, 4 institutions possess only human development and 4 institutions possess neither rural community development nor human development in the curriculum. The totals are 57 yes and 8 for rural community development and 58 yes and 7 no for human development in the content of the curriculum.

Table 3: Type of Community Development in Curriculum

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|-----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Specialization Paper | 2 | 3.1 |
| Compulsory Individual Paper | 36 | 55.4 |
| Unit in Individual Paper | 18 | 27.7 |
| Other | 1 | 1.5 |
| None | 8 | 12.3 |
| Total | 65 | 100.0 |

The type of content within the curriculum is important, as it provides information on the depth of coverage of the specifics. The data displays the trend that most (36 out of 65) of the institutions offer a compulsory paper within the coursework on rural community development, following which there are 18 instances wherein there is a unit in an individual paper on rural community development. The notable finding there is a direct lack of specialisation courses on rural community development which has recorded a frequency of 2 and amongst them; there are social work programmes with a specialisation on community organisation and development practice.

Table 4: Crosstabulation on Scope for Practice and Fieldwork

| | | <i>Mandatory Fieldwork in Every Semester</i> | | <i>Total</i> |
|---|-----|--|-----------|--------------|
| | | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | |
| Scope for Implementation of Theory into Practice | Yes | 16 | 47 | 63 |
| | No | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | | 16 | 49 | 65 |

The data provides insight into how most institutions possess the scope of theory into practice linkage; in which 63 of 65 responses mention yes. The question arises whether the only scope for implementation of theory into practice is enough. Fieldwork, outreach and community engagement must be systematic structured procedures and thus need to occur across all semesters in coursework and need to be mandatory. The finding is that 16 out of 63, which have scope for practice, provide mandatory fieldwork modules every semester.

Table 5: Crosstabulation Between Capacity Building Through Fieldwork of Individual and Community

| | | <i>Fieldwork Builds the Strength and Capacity of the Community</i> | | <i>Total</i> |
|---|-----|--|-----------|--------------|
| | | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | |
| Fieldwork builds Strength and Capacity of Individual | Yes | 37 | 20 | 57 |
| | No | 0 | 8 | 8 |
| Total | | 37 | 28 | 65 |

The data represents the distribution that 37 responses have yes to both the variables of fieldwork build strength and capacity of individual and fieldwork build strength and capacity of community, 20 responded yes to fieldwork build strength and capacity of individual but no to fieldwork build strength and capacity of community and 8 responded to both the said variables. There is scope for the institutions to develop a module or a participatory approach implementation leading to the mutual development of both the individual skill set of the students and the building capacity of the community (awareness, knowledge, skill development, practice and others) to contribute to collective educational and social development.

The argument that can be made from the findings is that there needs to be integration for collective holistic development and development mutually benefitting the learning outcomes of the students, capacity building of the community and community development outcomes.

Table 6: Holistic Curriculum and NEP 2020

| | | <i>Curriculum Revision as per NEP</i> | | | <i>Total</i> |
|--|-----|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|--------------|
| | | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>In-Process</i> | |
| Curriculum focused on Holistic Development | Yes | 2 | 19 | 21 | 42 |
| | No | 3 | 15 | 5 | 23 |
| Total | | 5 | 34 | 26 | 65 |

The data displayed that 42 out of 65 have responded yes and feel that their curriculum is focused on holistic development but the cross-tabulated variable distribution of curriculum revision as per NEP shows that within 42 there are 2 yes, 19 no and 21 in-process. The remaining 23 responses, which display no in the said variable, are depicted as 3 yes and 15 n and 5 in-process. From the cumulative data, it can be argued that 34 and 26 out of 65 have not started the process and the process is going on for restructuring and revision of the curriculum as per the mandates of the National Educational Policy 2020. It can be argued that the implementation of the curriculum guidelines of the policy can be a step forward for the development of a holistic educational and experiential learning outcome.

Table 7: Crosstabulation Between Status and Forms of Rural Community Engagement

| | | <i>Forms of Engagement with Rural Community</i> | | | | | <i>Total</i> |
|---|-----|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|
| | | <i>Workshop</i> | <i>Lecture</i> | <i>Seminar</i> | <i>Outreach / NSS</i> | <i>None</i> | |
| Status of Engagement with Rural Community | Yes | 10 | 4 | 1 | 39 | 3 | 57 |
| | No | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 8 |
| Total | | 10 | 4 | 1 | 39 | 11 | 65 |

The interpretation of data displays that 57 out of 65 institutions responded that they engaged with the rural community. The question arises that if community engagement with rural communities is present, then what are the types of engagement? Thus, their range of engagement initiatives for community engagement can be understood as workshops, lecture, seminar, outreach etc. The conceptual understanding that has been generated here is that community engagement can occur across different levels in an institution, like departmental, school, institution and/or university level. The distribution displays that there are varied forms of engagement with rural communities. The frequency of 39 of the 57 institutions was recorded under Outreach/NSS and can be interpreted as institutions and/or university level outreach programme and through the National Service Scheme units.

Table 8: Correlation Between Curriculum Revision and Rural Community Engagement

| | | <i>Curriculum Revision as per NEP</i> | <i>Engagement with Rural Community</i> |
|--|---------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Curriculum Revision as per NEP | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .262* |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .035 |
| | N | 65 | 65 |
| Engagement with Rural Community | Pearson Correlation | .262* | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .035 | |
| | N | 65 | 65 |
| *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) | | | |

The correlation between the variables of curriculum revision as per NEP and engagement with rural community is significant at 0.05 levels. The correlation coefficient is .262, which displays that the variables are positively correlated to each other. The p-value is .035, which displays a statistically significant bivariate association.

The distribution among the direct beneficiary groups can be displayed as 27 out of 65 (41.5%) respondents mentioned all thus referring to the composition of beneficiaries consisting of various groups. Amongst

the remaining, 19 mentioned that beneficiary groups are engaged with children, 7 mentioned farmers and 4 responded as women. The distribution of beneficiary groups while being discussed must be understood children and women specifically get attention in community engagement in form of fieldwork programmes within the curriculum and in outreach programmes, but there is also an overlap displayed.

Table 9: Model-Based Curriculum

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|-------|------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 8 | 12.3 |
| No | 57 | 87.7 |
| Total | 65 | 100.0 |

The result distribution of the variable curriculum follows a specific model displays that most of the institutions, 57 out of 65 (87.7%), do not have a model in the background upon which the curriculum is based and/or conceptualised. The remaining 8 did have a model on which the curriculum is structured according to values and conceptualisation of the model. The common models that have been documented are the Jesuit, Tagorean and Ramakrishna Mission.

Table 10: Participation of Students and Community Leaders

| | | <i>Participation of Community Leaders in the Outreach Programme</i> | | <i>Total</i> |
|---|-----|---|-----------|--------------|
| | | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | |
| Students Participate in Outreach Programmes | Yes | 14 | 48 | 62 |
| | No | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Total | | 14 | 51 | 65 |

The data provided insight into mostly the students who participate and the community leaders, who lack participation, are depicted. The increasing participation from the community leaders would be essential for community engagement, community organisation, the learning outcomes of the students and the experiential learning of the students. In most of the communities, the community leaders play an important role

in the community development programmes, hence acknowledging their decision as the ultimate growth and development of the community.

The correlation between the variables of curriculum Revision as per NEP and engagement with rural community is significant at the 0.01 levels. The correlation coefficient is .594, which displays that the variables are moderately positively correlated to each other. The p-value is .000, which displays a statistically significant bivariate association.

Table 11: Correlation Between Community Type of Paper and Holistic Curriculum

| | | <i>Community Development Type of Paper</i> | <i>Curriculum Focused on Holistic Development</i> |
|--|---------------------|--|---|
| Community Development Type of Paper | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .504** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 65 | 65 |
| Curriculum focused on Holistic Development | Pearson Correlation | .504** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 65 | 65 |
| **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). | | | |

The correlation between the variables of community development type of paper and holistic curriculum is significant at 0.01 the levels. The correlation coefficient is .504, which displays that the variables are positively correlated to each other. The p-value is .000, which displays a statistically significant bivariate association.

Table 12: Correlation Between Curriculum Revision and Mandatory Syllabus

| | | <i>Curriculum Revision as per NEP</i> | <i>Mandatory Fieldwork in Every Semester</i> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Curriculum Revision as per NEP | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .361** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .003 |
| | N | 65 | 65 |

| | | <i>Curriculum Revision as per NEP</i> | <i>Mandatory Fieldwork in Every Semester</i> |
|---|---------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Mandatory Fieldwork in Every Semester | Pearson Correlation | .361** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .003 | |
| | N | 65 | 65 |
| ** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). | | | |

The correlation between the variables of curriculum revision as per NEP and engagement with rural community is significant at the 0.01 levels. The correlation coefficient is .361, which displays that the variables are positively correlated to each other. The p-value is .003, which displays a statistically significant bivariate association.

The responses to the rating scale on the variable of contribution of HEI to socioeconomic development can be interpreted as 4 responses (6.2%) mentioning excellent, 35 responses (53.8%) mentioning good and 26 responses (40%) mentioning average among the total of 65. It can be argued that 53.8 % of institutions believe that their contribution to the socioeconomic development of the community is good, followed by 40% of the institutions that believe that their contribution to the socioeconomic development of the community is average.

The responses to the rating scale on the variable of importance of rural community engagement can be interpreted as 56 responses (86.2%) mentioning very important and 9 responses (13.8%) mentioned fairly important among the total of 65. It can be argued that most of the institutions (86.2%) view the importance of rural community engagement as very important and even the remaining 13.8% view the same as fairly important.

The study found specific examples of outreach programs in various forms being implemented through different modes at the higher educational institutions, which have been documented to generate integrated learning. These outreach programmes aim to create a mutual and participatory learning approach amongst the students and communities through which implementation is taking place.

Despite the limitation of practicing community development through the course curriculum, the North Bengal St. Xavier's College, a Catholic missionary, carries out community development services programmes

in the college. The college before the pandemic used to run an evening school for the community children. The students gave tutorial classes to the young community children. Tutorial classes were conducted thrice a week after college. The community children were taught all the primary subjects like English, Bengali, Maths, Social Studies, etc. with full guidance and care. The college also used to run certified courses. Community service outreach programmes were organised during the pandemic programme.

The students of Salesian College of Siliguri during their concurrent field work identified the problem of safe drinking water in the tea garden area/village. In finding a possible measure to mitigate the problem of the villagers, the students discussed the problem with the fieldwork supervisor and the principal of Salesian College. The students were guided to place the problem before the local authorities. They also submitted the application to the Block Development Officer for the poor condition of the villagers. The Salesian College also took the initiative from their end and submitted a proposal to UNICEF. UNICEF, after identifying the severity of the problem, has decided to address the issue in collaboration with the local governing bodies of the area by establishing a water purifier in the village. The project is all set to begin. Salesian College shared this initiative as the best practice of the partnership with UNICEF and the local government, where the students took the initiative of intervening in the problem identified during their concurrent fieldwork practice. Henceforth a collaborative agreement has been made between UNICEF, the local government and the rural community for solving the drinking water crises of the community.

The Rural Development Centre at IIT Kharagpur conducted a survey and found issues that are imperative to ensure that students have access to safe and hygienic toilets. The highlight was the lack of toilets that could be used by girls. The context here is that it is an essential component in the research, which has a direct implication on education. The “Ladies Toilet Project” is an approach towards development in terms of health and hygiene. This was funded by US-based IIT Kharagpur alumnus Mukul Khandelia and conducted by Dr. Somnath Ghosal, centre for rural development & innovative sustainable technology to set up a modern toilet facility that can be used by girls. The research revolves around the scope that there are problems like lack of privacy; the toilet lacked the

roof, thus accessibility issues and was not all weather. Furthermore, poor construction, inadequate ventilation and insufficient lighting pose safety risks. This ongoing project is a highlight while talking about a specific programme that is based upon research and is a step forward for evidence-based practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study have displayed various themes like holistic curriculum content, the need to convert theory into practice to create skill development for the students for this profession and making the community a part of this process of capacity building of the community. The Tagorean Model of Education is inspired by the ideas and philosophy of the great Indian poet, philosopher and Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a visionary thinker and a multi-faceted figure whose contribution can be viewed in Indian literature, art, music, dance and education, among many others. Their underlying concern was about the prevailing education system of the time, which was perceived as rigid and oppressive, emphasising rote learning and neglecting the holistic development of individuals. Tagore's vision for education was inspired by his experiences with nature, his interactions with students and his spiritual beliefs. The development of education occurred at the interface of nature, experiential learning, generation of a consciousness and social responsibility and learning of skills. (Bhattacharjee, 2014) He believed that education should be a liberating and transformative experience, fostering creativity, developing skills and respecting individuality. The associated approach is a distinctive one that emphasises creativity, nature-centric learning and holistic development.

The findings depicted that there is a difference between the practice component of the curriculum and the mandatory practice component every semester. There are specifications regarding the type of practice; internships are most common in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes but are often not mandatory because of the various academic disciplines that the students come from, the positioning and the lack of graded nature, among others.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provided certain guidelines for restructuring the curriculum with an attempt towards a holistic curriculum development, but the implementation is not smooth; institutions are either in process and/or have not started the process. Further, the philosophical mooring behind the structure of the curriculum is important because it provides a value-laden base to build upon. The findings have displayed a stark difference in this aspect; only a few instances of implementation were flagged.

Community engagement is being considered as a synonymous term that can be interchangeably used for internship and/or fieldwork. The argument that is conceptualised here is that internships and/or fieldwork are an integral part of the community, but community engagement needs to be adapted and implemented as a pedagogical tool to make development participatory.

CONCLUSION

The concept of Community Engagement possesses a direct relationship with higher education, that of mutual learning. There are specific requirements to create a systematic structured curriculum that will be relatively inclusive and community engagement also needs to be part of the curriculum as a pedagogical tool of implementation it is only viewed through the service lens towards the community from the institution. Community Engagement at the university level is essential and the effort is appreciated, but there remains a need to plan community engagement programmes with the community and specific groups like women, children and others on themes that need to be obtained from the community as per the respective concerns.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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