

Inclusive Practices in Higher Education: Institutional and Classroom Experiences from a Rural College in Assam

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Abstract

Inclusion in higher education extends beyond formal institutional provisions and requires the creation of educational environments in which diverse learners feel respected, supported and able to participate meaningfully. This paper examines inclusive institutional and classroom practices at Kharupetia College, Darrang, Assam, through a reflective qualitative approach grounded in the author's professional experiences as a teacher and involvement in institutional activities. The reflection focuses on institutional support mechanisms, gender-sensitive initiatives, inclusive classroom pedagogy, linguistic diversity, digital practices, co-curricular participation, mentoring and teacher-student relationships. It highlights how everyday pedagogical practices, including flexible explanation, encouragement of classroom participation, peer interaction and additional academic guidance, can contribute to inclusion in a heterogeneous student environment. The paper also identifies continuing challenges relating to disability inclusion, differences in academic preparedness, digital inequalities, systematic mentoring and less visible forms of exclusion. It argues that inclusion cannot be understood as a one-time institutional achievement or the responsibility of individual committees alone. Rather, it is a continuous process created through the interaction of institutional structures, pedagogical practices and supportive relationships. The paper concludes that strengthening inclusion requires sustained institutional reflection, responsive teaching, student participation, sensitisation and continued attention to barriers that may prevent students from participating fully in academic and institutional life.

Keywords: Inclusive higher education; inclusive practices; inclusive pedagogy; learner diversity; student participation; institutional inclusion; rural higher education; Assam

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as an important principle in contemporary educational policy and practice. It is based on the recognition that educational institutions comprise learners with diverse social, economic, linguistic, cultural, gender and ability-related backgrounds, and that such diversity should be accommodated within educational processes rather than treated as an impediment to learning. Inclusion therefore involves creating educational environments in which learners are valued, respected and able to participate meaningfully, irrespective of their

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individual circumstances or backgrounds. UNESCO (2020) conceptualises inclusion as a process that embraces diversity, promotes a sense of belonging and recognises the value and potential of every learner.

The idea of inclusion extends beyond the existence of formal policies or the physical presence of diverse groups of students within an educational institution. Meaningful inclusion requires attention to the conditions under which students learn, interact and participate in institutional life. Students may differ considerably in their previous educational experiences, linguistic confidence, socioeconomic circumstances, digital resources, family educational backgrounds and levels of academic preparedness. Consequently, an educational environment may be formally open to diverse learners while some students continue to experience difficulties in participating confidently and effectively. Inclusive educational practice therefore requires institutions and teachers to recognise learner diversity and respond to barriers that may restrict participation, learning and a sense of belonging (UNESCO, 2020).

The role of teachers is particularly important in translating the principle of inclusion into everyday educational practice. Inclusive pedagogy challenges approaches that regard differences among learners primarily as problems requiring separate treatment. Instead, it emphasises extending learning opportunities in ways that enable all learners to participate while recognising individual differences (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This perspective places considerable importance on classroom practices such as encouraging participation, providing appropriate academic support, adopting flexible methods of explanation and creating an environment in which students are not afraid of making mistakes or expressing their views. Inclusion, from this perspective, is not simply an institutional objective but something that is continuously produced through interactions between teachers and students.

In the Indian context, inclusion has acquired increasing significance within higher education policy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places equity and inclusion among the central principles for transforming the education system and gives particular attention to Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) (Government of India, 2020). The policy recognises that educational disadvantage can arise from several intersecting circumstances, including gender identities, sociocultural identities, geographical identities, socioeconomic conditions and disabilities. Within higher education, this creates a responsibility for institutions to develop environments capable of responding to heterogeneous student populations rather than assuming uniform educational circumstances among learners.

The issue assumes particular relevance for colleges serving rural and socioeconomically diverse populations. Students entering such institutions may differ substantially in their academic preparation, family circumstances, linguistic backgrounds, confidence and familiarity with the culture of higher education. Some may be first-generation learners whose families have limited experience of higher education, while others may encounter financial difficulties, inadequate digital resources or limited academic support outside the institution. Under such circumstances, inclusion becomes closely connected with the everyday functioning of the institution and the manner in which teachers, administrators and institutional support mechanisms respond to student diversity.

Kharupetia College in Darrang district of Assam provides an appropriate institutional setting within which these issues can be considered. The college serves students belonging to diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds, including students from rural and economically constrained families and first-generation learners. Students may also experience differences in linguistic confidence, digital resources and academic support available within their households. These circumstances make inclusion a practical concern within teaching and institutional life rather than merely an abstract educational principle.

Institutional mechanisms constitute one component of this process. Student-support activities, mentoring, gender-sensitive initiatives, anti-ragging measures, orientation programmes and quality-related institutional mechanisms can contribute to creating an environment in which students feel secure and encouraged to participate. At the same time, formal institutional arrangements alone cannot ensure inclusion. Everyday classroom relationships, teachers' sensitivity towards differences in learning ability and confidence, opportunities for participation, communication with students and willingness to provide additional guidance can significantly influence how students experience their institution.

The distinction between treating students identically and responding equitably to learner diversity is particularly significant in this context. Students do not necessarily enter a classroom with identical educational preparation or learning circumstances. Providing every student with precisely the same form of instruction may therefore fail to respond adequately to differences in learning needs. Inclusive pedagogy instead seeks to expand the learning opportunities ordinarily available within the classroom so that differences among learners do not automatically result in marginalisation or exclusion (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Such an approach requires teachers to recognise diversity while avoiding practices that unnecessarily label or isolate students.

Inclusion also extends beyond conventional classroom instruction. Digital communication, co-curricular activities, orientation programmes, mentoring and informal teacher-student interactions increasingly form part of students' educational experiences. Digital technologies can facilitate communication and provide learning resources beyond classroom hours, but differences in devices, connectivity and digital literacy can themselves create new forms of disadvantage. Similarly, opportunities for participation in institutional and co-curricular activities can contribute to confidence, interaction and a sense of belonging when students from different backgrounds are encouraged to participate.

Against this background, the present paper reflects upon inclusive practices within Kharupetia College from the perspective of a teacher actively involved in classroom teaching and institutional activities, including the Women Cell. Drawing upon professional experience and observations within the institution, the paper examines how inclusion is reflected through institutional mechanisms, gender-sensitive initiatives, classroom pedagogy, digital practices, student participation, mentoring and teacher-student relationships. It also identifies continuing challenges relating to infrastructure, disability inclusion, digital inequalities, differences in academic preparedness and less visible forms of exclusion.

The purpose of the paper is not to evaluate the institution quantitatively or to claim that the experiences discussed are representative of all higher education institutions. Rather, it uses situated professional reflection to examine how the broader principle of inclusion is translated into everyday practices within a rural college setting. By connecting institutional experience with the wider literature on inclusive education and inclusive pedagogy, the paper seeks to demonstrate that developing an inclusive higher education environment is a continuous process involving institutional arrangements as well as everyday pedagogical and interpersonal practices.

2. Review of Literature and Conceptual Understanding of Inclusion in Higher Education

The concept of inclusion in education has gradually evolved from a relatively narrow concern with integrating particular groups of learners into mainstream educational settings towards a broader understanding of how educational institutions respond to human diversity. Contemporary approaches emphasise not merely the presence of diverse learners within institutions but their meaningful participation, recognition, belonging and opportunity to learn. This broader understanding is particularly relevant to higher education, where students enter institutions with considerable differences in socioeconomic circumstances, educational preparation, language, gender, disability, cultural background and familiarity with institutional environments.

2.1 Understanding Inclusion in Education

Ainscow (2020) conceptualises inclusion as an ongoing process concerned with identifying and removing barriers that restrict the presence, participation and achievement of learners. This understanding is important because it shifts attention away from viewing individual students as the source of educational difficulties and towards examining the institutional and educational conditions that may produce exclusion. Inclusion consequently becomes an institutional responsibility rather than an adjustment made only for particular categories of students.

A similar perspective is reflected in the *Index for Inclusion* developed by Booth and Ainscow (2011), which conceptualises inclusion through the interconnected development of inclusive cultures, policies and practices. Their framework indicates that institutional inclusion cannot be produced by isolated programmes alone. Values embedded within institutional culture must be supported by appropriate policies and translated into everyday practices. Although originally developed primarily in relation to schools, this distinction between inclusive culture, policy and practice provides a useful framework for understanding inclusion within higher education institutions as well.

UNESCO (2020) further broadens this understanding by emphasising that inclusion involves recognising diversity and fostering a sense of belonging in which every learner is valued. The *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020* demonstrates that exclusion may arise through intersecting characteristics and circumstances, including poverty, gender, disability, ethnicity, language, migration and geographical disadvantage. Inclusion must therefore be understood as a multidimensional process rather than as an intervention directed towards a single disadvantaged category.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to higher education because students who are physically present within an institution may nevertheless experience less visible forms of exclusion. A student may attend classes but hesitate to participate, experience difficulties in understanding classroom communication, lack confidence in approaching teachers, encounter technological constraints or feel disconnected from institutional life. Inclusion therefore requires consideration of students' actual educational experiences rather than relying exclusively upon their formal presence within an institution.

2.2 Inclusive Pedagogy and Learner Diversity

The literature on inclusive pedagogy provides an important foundation for understanding the role of classroom practices. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), through classroom observations and teacher interviews, developed an influential conceptualisation of inclusive pedagogy based on extending learning opportunities ordinarily available to everyone rather than designing ordinary instruction for most learners and separate responses for those perceived to have additional needs. Their approach challenges assumptions that learner differences necessarily require categorisation and separation.

This perspective has important implications for heterogeneous classrooms. Students differ in their previous educational preparation, confidence, language proficiency, pace of learning and familiarity with academic expectations. Inclusive pedagogy does not imply lowering academic standards for particular students. Rather, it requires teachers to consider how teaching practices can provide meaningful opportunities for participation among learners with diverse circumstances (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Spratt and Florian (2015) subsequently examined how inclusive pedagogy is translated from theoretical principles into classroom practice. They found that teachers practising inclusive pedagogy attempted to respond to individual difficulties while maintaining students' membership within the broader learning community. Their work highlights the importance of the dignity of individual learners and reinforces the argument that inclusion should be incorporated into ordinary teaching rather than treated solely as a specialised intervention.

Florian and Spratt (2013) similarly developed a framework for examining inclusive practice that emphasises differences among learners as an ordinary aspect of human development. This approach requires teachers to reject deterministic assumptions about students' abilities and to recognise their own responsibility for developing teaching strategies that enable participation. Inclusive practice consequently involves both pedagogical techniques and teachers' underlying beliefs about learners and learning.

These studies are particularly significant for the present paper because classroom inclusion often occurs through relatively ordinary practices: encouraging hesitant students to speak, explaining difficult concepts in different ways, allowing sufficient response time, using familiar examples, facilitating peer interaction and providing additional academic guidance where necessary. Such practices illustrate how inclusion can become embedded within everyday teaching rather than existing only at the level of formal institutional policy.

2.3 Participation, Belonging and the Student Experience

The literature increasingly recognises that inclusion has an important psychological and relational dimension. Students need not only educational opportunities but also a sense that they are legitimate and valued members of their educational community.

Strayhorn (2018) identifies a sense of belonging as an important component of the college student experience. Belonging concerns students' perceived social support, connectedness and feeling that they matter within their educational environment. Its significance may become particularly pronounced among students who encounter unfamiliar institutional cultures or who perceive themselves as different from dominant groups within an institution.

Earlier research by Ostrove and Long (2007) demonstrated a relationship between social class background, students' sense of belonging and their adjustment to college. Their findings are important for institutions serving students from economically diverse backgrounds because students' experiences within higher education may be influenced by the extent to which they feel comfortable within the social and academic environment of the institution.

Pittman and Richmond (2007) likewise found that students' sense of belonging was associated with important aspects of academic and psychological functioning during the transition to college. Their work indicates that educational inclusion cannot be understood solely in terms of classroom instruction. Relationships with peers, teachers and the wider institution contribute to students' ability to adjust to an educational environment.

Thomas (2012) further emphasises the importance of belonging, engagement and supportive institutional relationships in higher education. Her work suggests that students' continuation and success are influenced by institutional cultures that encourage meaningful interaction and enable students to develop connections with peers and staff. This places mentoring, approachable teachers, orientation activities and opportunities for participation within the broader framework of inclusive institutional practice.

2.4 First-Generation and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Learners

The experiences of first-generation students provide another important dimension of inclusion. Students whose parents have not experienced higher education may enter college without the same familiarity with academic norms, institutional procedures and expectations that some continuing-generation students acquire through their families.

Jehangir (2010), in her work on first-generation college students, emphasises the importance of community, voice, connectedness and care in creating supportive higher education environments. Her analysis demonstrates that first-generation and low-income students bring valuable experiences into higher education but may simultaneously encounter institutional environments whose assumptions and practices are unfamiliar to them. Inclusive educational practice should therefore recognise students' existing knowledge and experiences while providing the support necessary for them to navigate higher education.

Stephens et al. (2012) explain some of these difficulties through the concept of cultural mismatch. They argue that higher education institutions may embody norms of independence

that correspond more closely with the experiences of students from relatively advantaged backgrounds, whereas many first-generation students may come from contexts that place stronger emphasis on interdependence. Such differences can influence how students experience and perform within universities. The study demonstrates why institutions should avoid interpreting difficulties solely as deficiencies within individual students and should instead consider how institutional expectations interact with students' backgrounds.

These findings have considerable relevance to rural colleges where first-generation and economically constrained students constitute an important part of the student community. Academic guidance, mentoring, clear communication and approachable teacher-student relationships can help reduce the uncertainty students may experience while navigating unfamiliar institutional processes.

2.5 Gender-Sensitive Inclusion

Gender represents another important dimension of inclusive institutional practice. Educational participation alone does not necessarily eliminate gendered experiences relating to safety, discrimination, confidence, social expectations or participation in institutional activities.

The National Education Policy 2020 recognises gender identities as one of the dimensions through which educational disadvantage may emerge and places gender inclusion within its broader framework of equitable education (Government of India, 2020). This implies that higher education institutions have responsibilities extending beyond enrolment to the creation of safe and supportive educational environments.

Morley (2010) argues that gender inequalities within higher education can persist through organisational cultures, practices and power relations even where women's numerical participation has increased. This observation is significant because it distinguishes numerical representation from substantive inclusion. Gender-sensitive institutional mechanisms, opportunities for students to discuss gender-related concerns, awareness programmes and supportive environments therefore constitute important components of inclusive institutional practice.

From this perspective, mechanisms such as Women Cells should not be viewed merely as formal administrative requirements. Their contribution to inclusion depends upon whether they create spaces for awareness, dialogue, support and participation and whether gender sensitivity becomes embedded within the wider institutional culture.

2.6 Disability and Inclusive Higher Education

Disability inclusion constitutes one of the areas in which the difference between formal participation and meaningful inclusion becomes particularly evident. Students with disabilities may encounter physical, pedagogical, technological and attitudinal barriers within higher education institutions.

Moriña (2017), reviewing research on inclusive education in higher education, observes that students with disabilities continue to experience barriers associated with teaching practices, institutional environments, attitudes and inadequate support. Her review highlights the

importance of shifting from approaches that require individual students continually to adapt to existing institutional arrangements towards institutional practices designed with diverse learners in mind.

Fuller et al. (2004), examining the experiences of disabled students in higher education, similarly found that students encountered barriers within teaching and learning environments. Their research illustrates that disability inclusion requires more than physical entry into institutional spaces. Teaching materials, assessment practices, communication and the physical environment can all influence students' educational participation.

Universal Design for Learning provides a complementary perspective by encouraging educational environments to be designed proactively for learner variability. Rather than waiting for difficulties to arise and subsequently making individual adjustments, universal design encourages multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2018). Although individual accommodations may continue to be necessary, the broader principle is relevant to institutions attempting to make teaching and learning more inclusive from the outset.

Disability inclusion therefore requires attention to barrier-free infrastructure, accessible educational resources, appropriate technologies, teacher awareness and institutional sensitivity towards different learning requirements.

2.7 Digital Inclusion and Emerging Educational Inequalities

Digital technologies have become increasingly integrated into higher education through online resources, messaging platforms, learning management systems and digitally distributed study materials. However, technological integration does not automatically result in inclusion.

Warschauer (2004) argues that the digital divide should not be understood simply as a binary distinction between those who possess technology and those who do not. Meaningful digital inclusion also depends upon skills, literacy, relevant content and the social conditions necessary to use technology effectively. This broader understanding is especially important in educational contexts where students may technically have access to a mobile device but face limitations relating to connectivity, affordability, device quality or digital competence.

The rapid expansion of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed such inequalities. The UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank (2020) survey of national education responses demonstrated the considerable challenges education systems faced in maintaining learning during institutional closures. The experience reinforced the need to consider differences in technological resources when digital approaches are incorporated into mainstream education.

Digital inclusion in higher education therefore requires a balanced approach. Digital platforms can expand communication and provide students with educational materials outside conventional classroom hours, but exclusive dependence on digital communication may disadvantage students facing connectivity, device or digital-literacy constraints. Inclusive practice consequently requires maintaining alternative channels of communication and academic support where necessary.

2.8 Institutional Culture, Mentoring and Teacher-Student Relationships

Inclusion is also shaped by relationships within educational institutions. Tinto (1993) emphasises the significance of students' academic and social integration within higher education. Although his work primarily addresses student departure and persistence, it demonstrates the broader importance of students' interaction with academic and social communities within institutions.

Later scholarship has increasingly highlighted the importance of institutional responsibility rather than expecting students alone to adapt to higher education. Thomas (2012) demonstrates that supportive relationships, engagement and a sense of belonging can contribute significantly to students' experiences and continuation. Teachers consequently perform a role that extends beyond formal delivery of subject content.

Mentoring and informal teacher-student communication can be particularly important for students who are uncertain about institutional procedures or reluctant to seek assistance. An approachable teacher may become an important source of academic guidance as well as information concerning educational opportunities, institutional processes and future careers. Inclusive institutional cultures therefore depend partly upon whether students believe that asking for assistance is legitimate and whether support is available without stigma.

Co-curricular activities can similarly contribute to inclusion by creating opportunities for students to interact outside conventional classroom structures. Participation in discussions, cultural activities, competitions, awareness programmes and social initiatives may help students develop confidence, interpersonal relationships and identification with their institution. Inclusion consequently encompasses the wider educational environment rather than being confined to classroom instruction.

2.9 Inclusion within the Indian Higher Education Context

The Indian higher education system contains considerable diversity in students' socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, regional and educational backgrounds. Consequently, the question of inclusion has particular significance for institutions serving heterogeneous populations.

The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly identifies equity and inclusion as fundamental principles of educational development. It recognises that educational disadvantage may result from gender, sociocultural circumstances, geographical location, socioeconomic conditions and disability and proposes institutional measures for supporting Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (Government of India, 2020).

The policy perspective is important for understanding inclusion in colleges located outside major metropolitan centres. Rural and semi-urban institutions frequently serve students whose experiences may differ substantially from conventional assumptions about university learners. Differences in school preparation, family educational background, language, economic circumstances and digital resources may interact within the same classroom. Inclusive higher education in such contexts therefore requires locally responsive institutional and pedagogical practices.

The international literature provides substantial conceptual understanding of inclusive pedagogy, belonging, disability, first-generation learners and digital inequality. However, these dimensions are often examined separately. Moreover, much influential research originates from higher education systems outside India. The lived institutional processes through which inclusion is practised in rural and socioeconomically heterogeneous Indian colleges remain important areas for context-specific reflection.

The present paper addresses this space through a reflective examination of institutional and classroom experiences at Kharupetia College in Assam. Rather than treating inclusion as a single programme or administrative mechanism, it examines inclusion as a combination of institutional practices, gender-sensitive initiatives, classroom pedagogy, digital practices, student participation, mentoring and everyday teacher-student relationships. It thereby situates local professional experience within the broader scholarly understanding that inclusion is an ongoing process created through institutional culture, educational practice and everyday interactions.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Nature and Approach of the Paper

The present paper adopts a **reflective qualitative approach** to examine inclusive practices within the context of higher education. Rather than attempting to measure inclusion quantitatively, the paper draws upon professional experiences and observations developed through teaching and participation in institutional activities at Kharupetia College, Darrang, Assam. The purpose is to understand how the broader principle of educational inclusion is translated into everyday institutional and classroom practices and to identify areas in which such practices can be further strengthened.

Reflective inquiry is particularly appropriate when professional experience itself constitutes an important source for examining educational practice. Schön (1983) emphasises the importance of reflection in professional practice, arguing that practitioners develop knowledge not only through formal theoretical understanding but also through critical engagement with situations encountered in their professional environments. In educational settings, reflective practice enables teachers to examine their own experiences, assumptions and actions and relate them to broader questions concerning teaching and learning.

Finlay (2008) similarly explains reflective practice as a process through which practitioners critically examine experiences in order to develop professional understanding. Reflection, however, should move beyond simple description of events. A meaningful reflective approach involves interpreting experiences, questioning assumptions and connecting individual observations with broader theoretical and professional concerns (Finlay, 2008). Accordingly, the present paper does not seek merely to provide a descriptive account of activities undertaken by the institution. It reflects upon what such practices reveal about the meaning and implementation of inclusion within a higher education setting.

The approach adopted in the paper may therefore be understood as contextual and experience-based reflective inquiry. The institutional setting provides the context, while the author's

experiences as a teacher and participant in institutional activities provide the principal basis for reflection. These experiences are interpreted in relation to established scholarship on inclusive education, inclusive pedagogy, belonging, learner diversity and institutional support.

3.2 Institutional Context

The reflection is situated within Kharupetia College in Darrang district of Assam. The institution serves students from heterogeneous social, economic, cultural and educational backgrounds. A considerable number of students come from rural areas and economically constrained households, while some are first-generation learners. Differences are also visible in students' previous educational preparation, linguistic confidence, availability of digital resources and academic support within their home environments.

Such heterogeneity makes the institutional setting particularly relevant for examining inclusion. Students entering the same classroom may have substantially different educational experiences and levels of confidence. Consequently, inclusive practice requires sensitivity towards diversity in students' circumstances rather than an assumption that all learners begin from identical positions.

The institutional context is examined not with the intention of formally evaluating or ranking the college but as a setting through which everyday manifestations of inclusion can be understood. The experiences discussed in the paper therefore represent context-specific reflections and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all rural colleges in Assam or higher education institutions in general.

3.3 Basis of Reflection

The paper primarily draws upon the author's professional experiences as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Hindi at Kharupetia College. Regular interaction with students in classroom and institutional settings provides opportunities to observe differences in academic preparedness, linguistic confidence, classroom participation, use of digital resources and willingness to approach teachers for assistance.

A second important dimension of the author's institutional experience arises from her involvement as Convenor of the Women Cell. Participation in activities associated with the Women Cell has provided opportunities to engage with questions concerning gender sensitivity, awareness, student participation, safety and the creation of spaces in which students can discuss social concerns.

The reflection also incorporates experiences arising from participation in broader institutional and student-oriented activities. These include awareness programmes, co-curricular activities, induction and orientation-related activities, mentoring and informal teacher-student interactions. One example considered in the paper is the observance of the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, during which students participated in awareness activities such as poster making and an anti-drug pledge. Such experiences are considered not as quantitative evidence of institutional effectiveness but as examples through which opportunities for student participation, confidence building and social engagement can be examined.

Classroom experiences constitute another major source of reflection. Teaching Hindi within a heterogeneous student population provides opportunities to observe differences in students' linguistic familiarity, confidence and pace of learning. The author's teaching practices—including encouraging questions, allowing students sufficient time to respond, beginning with simpler explanations, connecting lessons with familiar contexts, encouraging peer interaction and providing additional guidance where required—are examined in relation to the principles of inclusive pedagogy.

The paper also reflects upon experiences relating to digital communication and learning. Digital platforms and communication technologies are increasingly used to distribute notices, learning materials and academic information. At the same time, observations concerning differences in students' access to smartphones, internet connectivity and digital competence provide a basis for considering the limitations of exclusively technology-dependent educational practices.

3.4 Thematic Framework of Reflection

To provide analytical coherence, the experiences discussed in the paper are organised around interconnected themes derived from both the institutional experiences described and the literature reviewed in the preceding section.

The first theme concerns institutional mechanisms and supportive practices. It considers the contribution of mechanisms such as the Women Cell, student-support activities, mentoring, anti-ragging measures, orientation programmes and quality-related institutional initiatives towards creating a supportive educational environment.

The second theme concerns gender-sensitive inclusion. Drawing particularly upon experiences associated with the Women Cell, the paper considers awareness activities, opportunities for dialogue and institutional sensitivity towards gender-related concerns.

The third theme examines inclusive classroom pedagogy and learner diversity. It considers differences in students' academic preparedness, pace of learning, linguistic confidence and classroom participation and reflects upon teaching practices intended to encourage participation among students with different learning circumstances. This theme is interpreted in relation to the concept of inclusive pedagogy developed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), which emphasises extending learning opportunities in ways that accommodate learner diversity without unnecessarily marginalising or separating particular students.

The fourth theme addresses digital inclusion. It examines both the educational possibilities created by digital communication and the constraints arising from differences in devices, connectivity and digital literacy.

The fifth theme concerns student participation and belonging. Co-curricular activities, orientation programmes, classroom participation and other opportunities for institutional engagement are considered in relation to the development of confidence and a sense of belonging. The importance of belonging within higher education has been emphasised by Strayhorn (2018), who argues that students' perceptions of being valued and connected to their educational communities constitute an important dimension of their educational experience.

The sixth theme examines mentoring and teacher-student relationships. Particular attention is given to the role of approachable teachers, informal guidance, communication and sensitivity towards students' academic and personal circumstances.

Finally, the paper considers continuing challenges to inclusion, including disability-related accessibility, physical and digital infrastructure, differences in academic preparedness, requirements for teacher sensitisation and forms of exclusion that may remain less visible within formal institutional structures.

These themes are not treated as mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they frequently intersect. A student's classroom participation, for example, may be influenced simultaneously by linguistic confidence, previous academic preparation, relationships with teachers and a sense of belonging. The thematic organisation is therefore employed primarily as an analytical device for systematically examining different manifestations of inclusion within the institutional context.

3.5 Reflective Interpretation and Use of Literature

The experiences considered in this paper are interpreted alongside relevant literature rather than presented as self-validating evidence. This is particularly important because professional reflection can be influenced by the position and perceptions of the individual undertaking the reflection. Brookfield (2017) argues that critically reflective teaching requires practitioners to examine assumptions underlying their practices rather than accepting their own interpretations unquestioningly.

Accordingly, observations from the institutional context are related to established concepts and research concerning inclusive pedagogy, belonging, first-generation learners, gender-sensitive education, disability inclusion and digital inclusion. This provides a conceptual framework through which individual experiences can be interpreted while simultaneously allowing consideration of how broader ideas about inclusion operate within a specific institutional context.

The literature therefore performs two functions in the paper. First, it provides the conceptual basis for understanding inclusion and its various dimensions. Second, it provides an external analytical perspective against which the author's professional experiences can be considered. The relationship between experience and scholarship is consequently interpretive rather than confirmatory; institutional experiences are not presented as proof of existing theories, nor is the literature used to make claims that exceed what the author's observations can reasonably support.

3.6 Scope and Limitations of the Approach

The methodological approach adopted in this paper has certain limitations that require explicit acknowledgement. The paper is based primarily on professional reflection and institutional experience and does not employ a structured student survey, experimental design or statistical analysis. It therefore cannot establish causal relationships or quantitatively determine the effectiveness of particular institutional practices.

Similarly, the experiences discussed represent the perspective of one teacher working within a specific institutional setting. Students, administrators and other teachers may experience or interpret the same practices differently. The paper consequently does not claim that the author's perspective represents the experiences of the entire college community.

Another limitation concerns the possibility of researcher subjectivity inherent in reflective inquiry. Since the author is simultaneously a participant in and observer of many of the practices being discussed, complete detachment is neither possible nor claimed. Reflexivity is therefore important. The author's institutional position is explicitly recognised, and conclusions are restricted to interpretations that can reasonably emerge from the experiences described and the literature considered.

These limitations do not eliminate the value of reflective inquiry. Rather, clearly acknowledging them establishes the appropriate boundaries within which the findings and discussion should be interpreted. The paper provides a situated account of how inclusion may be understood and practised within a particular higher education environment while recognising that further empirical research incorporating student voices, interviews, surveys or comparative institutional evidence would be necessary for broader generalisation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The paper focuses on professional reflection concerning general institutional and classroom practices rather than the collection of identifiable personal information from individual students. No student is identified by name, and the discussion avoids presenting individual cases in a manner that could reveal personal identities or confidential circumstances.

The reflective approach also requires sensitivity when discussing students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds. Students are not characterised through deficit-based assumptions. Differences in educational preparation, economic circumstances, linguistic confidence or digital resources are instead considered in relation to the educational environment and the forms of institutional and pedagogical support that may facilitate meaningful participation.

This orientation is consistent with the broader principle underlying inclusive education: diversity among learners should be recognised as an ordinary feature of educational communities rather than treated as a problem located within individual students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Overall, the methodological approach adopted in the paper enables a systematic examination of inclusion as it is encountered through everyday teaching, institutional responsibilities and interactions with students. By combining situated professional reflection with relevant scholarship, the paper seeks to move beyond a purely personal narrative towards an analytically grounded account of inclusive practices and continuing challenges within a rural higher education institution in Assam.

4. Inclusive Institutional and Classroom Practices at Kharupetia College

The preceding discussion establishes inclusion as a multidimensional and continuing process

involving institutional culture, pedagogical practices, interpersonal relationships and opportunities for meaningful student participation. Within Kharupetia College, these dimensions of inclusion are reflected through a combination of formal institutional mechanisms and everyday practices involving teachers and students. The experiences discussed in this section are interpreted as situated examples of how inclusion can be translated from a broad educational principle into institutional and classroom practice.

4.1 Institutional Mechanisms for an Inclusive Environment

An inclusive institutional environment requires structures through which student welfare, dignity, safety and participation can be promoted. Booth and Ainscow (2011) argue that inclusion involves the interconnected development of inclusive cultures, policies and practices. Formal mechanisms are therefore important, although their contribution to inclusion ultimately depends upon how effectively institutional commitments are translated into students' everyday experiences.

At Kharupetia College, several institutional mechanisms contribute to the development of a supportive environment. These include the Women Cell, mechanisms relating to complaints and student welfare, anti-ragging measures, mentoring and other student-support activities. The Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) also contributes to institutional initiatives concerned with quality and student welfare. Together, such mechanisms provide an organisational framework within which issues concerning student well-being, participation and institutional responsiveness can be addressed.

The significance of such arrangements extends beyond their formal existence. Inclusion requires students to perceive the institution as an environment in which concerns can be communicated and support can be sought without fear of ridicule, discrimination or unnecessary stigma. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that inclusion requires educational systems to respond to learner diversity and remove barriers to participation. Institutional support mechanisms can contribute to this process when they are visible, approachable and responsive to students' circumstances.

For institutions serving heterogeneous student populations, these mechanisms assume additional importance. Students may enter higher education with varying degrees of familiarity with institutional procedures. First-generation learners, for example, may not possess the same family-based familiarity with higher education environments as students whose parents have previously experienced college or university education. Jehangir (2010) highlights the importance of community, voice and supportive relationships for first-generation students. Institutional support should therefore involve not merely the existence of formal structures but active communication that helps students understand where and how assistance can be obtained.

4.2 Gender-Sensitive Inclusion and the Role of the Women Cell

Gender-sensitive practices constitute an important component of institutional inclusion. The National Education Policy 2020 recognises gender as one of the dimensions through which educational disadvantage can emerge and places particular emphasis on creating inclusive

educational environments for Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (Government of India, 2020). Within an institution, gender inclusion consequently involves attention to dignity, safety, awareness, participation and opportunities for students to discuss issues that affect their lives.

The author's experience as Convenor of the Women Cell at Kharupetia College provides an important perspective on this dimension of inclusion. The Women Cell provides an institutional platform for organising programmes and activities relating to women's rights, gender equality, safety, health and wider social concerns. Such initiatives create opportunities for issues that may not ordinarily arise within subject-specific classroom instruction to become part of institutional dialogue.

The value of such activities lies not simply in organising programmes but in creating opportunities for expression. Students may sometimes hesitate to discuss sensitive social or gender-related matters in conventional classroom settings. An environment in which questions and opinions can be expressed respectfully can contribute to students' confidence and sense of recognition within the institution.

This is consistent with broader understandings of belonging in higher education. Strayhorn (2018) argues that students' sense of belonging is influenced by whether they feel valued, supported and connected within their educational environment. Gender-sensitive institutional practices can contribute to such belonging when students perceive that their experiences and concerns are recognised as legitimate components of institutional life.

At the same time, gender inclusion should not become confined exclusively to the activities of a Women Cell. Morley (2010) demonstrates that gender inequality can persist through institutional cultures and organisational practices even where formal commitments to equality exist. Gender sensitivity therefore needs to become embedded within everyday interactions, classroom environments and wider institutional practices. The Women Cell can facilitate this process through awareness and dialogue, but a genuinely inclusive institutional culture requires shared responsibility among teachers, administrators and students.

4.3 Inclusive Classroom Pedagogy

The classroom constitutes one of the most immediate spaces in which students experience inclusion or exclusion. Students within the same class may differ substantially in previous educational preparation, confidence, linguistic familiarity and pace of learning. Inclusive classroom practice therefore requires teachers to recognise learner diversity without assuming that differences necessarily represent deficiencies.

This issue has particular relevance to the teaching of Hindi at Kharupetia College. Students possess different levels of familiarity and confidence with the language. Some participate readily in classroom discussions, whereas others may remain hesitant because of shyness, weaker previous academic preparation or fear of making mistakes. Such differences can influence classroom participation even when students are formally provided with identical opportunities to respond.

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy should extend what is ordinarily available to learners rather than provide a standard educational experience for most students followed by separate responses for those considered different. This perspective is reflected in classroom practices that provide multiple opportunities for students to engage with learning.

Within the author's teaching experience, this involves encouraging students to ask questions, providing sufficient time for responses and beginning with simpler explanations before gradually introducing more complex concepts. Lessons are also connected, where appropriate, with examples drawn from daily life and contexts familiar to students. Classroom discussions, oral activities and peer interaction provide additional opportunities for students who may initially hesitate to participate.

Spratt and Florian (2015) emphasise that inclusive pedagogy involves supporting individual learners while preserving their participation within the common learning community. Additional academic guidance, where necessary, can therefore be provided without treating the student as inherently incapable or separating the learner unnecessarily from peers.

A particularly important principle emerging from classroom experience is that treating all students identically does not necessarily produce equitable educational experiences. Students enter classrooms from different starting positions. Some may require additional explanation, encouragement or time before they can participate confidently. Responding to these differences does not imply lowering educational expectations; rather, it involves creating conditions that enable a wider range of learners to engage meaningfully with those expectations.

This understanding also requires sensitivity in how teachers interpret silence or weak immediate performance. A student who rarely speaks in class may not necessarily lack understanding or interest. Hesitation can arise from linguistic insecurity, previous classroom experiences, fear of making mistakes or low confidence. Inclusive pedagogy therefore requires teachers to create a classroom atmosphere in which mistakes are treated as part of learning and students are encouraged to participate gradually.

4.4 Linguistic Diversity and Classroom Participation

Language assumes particular importance within a heterogeneous educational environment. Students' willingness to participate may be influenced not only by their understanding of academic content but also by their confidence in the language through which that understanding must be expressed.

In the context of Hindi teaching, variation in linguistic familiarity requires pedagogical flexibility. Connecting academic material with everyday examples and, where appropriate, linguistic contexts familiar to students can help bridge the distance between students' existing experiences and formal academic content. Such practices do not replace disciplinary learning; rather, they provide pathways through which students can progressively engage with it.

UNESCO (2020) identifies language as one of the factors capable of contributing to educational exclusion when educational environments fail to accommodate learner diversity. Linguistically responsive teaching is therefore relevant to inclusion because language can

influence whether students feel capable of speaking, asking questions and demonstrating their understanding.

Peer interaction can be particularly valuable in this respect. Students who hesitate to respond directly to a teacher may initially participate more comfortably through interaction with classmates. Gradual movement from peer interaction towards wider classroom participation can help develop confidence while maintaining the student's membership within the learning community.

4.5 Digital Inclusion in Teaching and Communication

Digital technologies have become an increasingly significant part of higher education. Teachers use digital communication to circulate notices, distribute study materials and maintain contact with students beyond conventional classroom hours. These practices can strengthen communication and make academic resources available to students at times convenient to them.

However, the use of technology also raises questions of inclusion. Students cannot automatically be assumed to possess identical technological resources. Differences may exist in smartphone availability, internet connectivity and digital competence. Warschauer (2004) argues that digital inequality should not be understood merely in terms of physical possession of technology. Meaningful use also depends upon skills, resources and the wider social context within which technology is employed.

Experience within the institutional setting reinforces the importance of this distinction. Digital communication can supplement classroom interaction effectively, but complete dependence upon it may disadvantage students experiencing technological constraints. An inclusive approach therefore requires flexibility in the means through which important information and academic assistance are made available.

This does not imply rejecting digital education. Rather, technology should be incorporated in ways sensitive to differences among students. Digital materials can supplement face-to-face instruction, while classroom communication and conventional forms of academic support remain important for students who experience technological difficulties. Such a blended and flexible approach is more consistent with inclusion than assuming universal and uninterrupted digital readiness.

4.6 Co-curricular Participation as a Dimension of Inclusion

Student development within higher education extends beyond formal classroom instruction. Co-curricular and awareness-oriented activities can provide opportunities for students to express creativity, interact with peers, develop confidence and participate in the wider institutional community.

One example from Kharupetia College is the observance of the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. Students were encouraged to participate in awareness-related activities, including a poster-making competition and an anti-drug pledge. Students from different courses and semesters were able to participate in these activities.

The significance of such activities for inclusion lies in the opportunities they create for participation beyond conventional academic performance. Students possess different abilities and forms of confidence. A student who rarely speaks during a formal classroom discussion may participate actively through creative or awareness-oriented activities. Providing varied forms of institutional participation can therefore create additional spaces in which students are able to contribute and receive recognition.

This broader understanding is consistent with Strayhorn's (2018) emphasis on belonging. Students' identification with an institution is influenced by their relationships and experiences within the wider educational community. Inclusive institutions should therefore provide multiple opportunities through which students can participate rather than defining student engagement solely in terms of classroom performance.

Co-curricular activities can also encourage interaction among students from different academic backgrounds. When participation is open and students are actively encouraged to become involved, such activities can help reduce boundaries between groups and strengthen the idea of the institution as a shared community.

4.7 Orientation and Supporting Students' Transition into College

The transition into higher education can be challenging, particularly for students unfamiliar with college environments. Newly admitted students must understand academic expectations, institutional procedures, available facilities and opportunities while simultaneously adapting to new teachers and peer groups.

Induction and orientation activities can therefore perform an important inclusive function. They introduce students to the institution and reduce uncertainty concerning its academic and administrative environment. This can be particularly valuable for first-generation learners who may have limited family experience from which to obtain information about college life.

Research on first-generation students demonstrates that unfamiliarity with institutional norms can influence students' higher education experiences. Stephens et al. (2012) show that differences between students' backgrounds and institutional expectations can create disadvantages that are not immediately visible. Institutions can respond by making expectations explicit rather than assuming that every student already understands how higher education operates.

Teachers and senior students can contribute significantly during this transition. Providing clear information, encouraging questions and helping newly admitted students become familiar with institutional life can facilitate adjustment and reduce hesitation. Orientation should therefore be understood not simply as a ceremonial programme at the beginning of an academic year but as one component of creating an environment in which new students are made to feel that they belong.

4.8 Mentoring and Teacher-Student Relationships

One of the strongest dimensions of inclusion emerging from institutional experience concerns the relationship between teachers and students. Students frequently approach teachers not only

with questions relating directly to subject content but also with concerns regarding attendance, academic adjustment, financial difficulties and future educational or career opportunities.

Such interactions illustrate why inclusion cannot be reduced to formal policy. A student may require relatively simple information or reassurance but may hesitate to seek assistance unless teachers are perceived as approachable. The interpersonal environment of an institution therefore influences whether existing support actually becomes usable by students.

Thomas (2012) emphasises the importance of supportive relationships and belonging within higher education. Positive interactions with institutional staff can strengthen students' engagement and connection with their educational environment. Jehangir (2010) similarly highlights the importance of care, voice and community, particularly for first-generation students.

Mentoring can provide a more systematic structure for such support. However, mentoring is most effective when it extends beyond administrative allocation of students to teachers. Regular communication can enable teachers to recognise academic difficulties and provide timely guidance. Where specialised assistance is necessary, teachers can also help students identify appropriate institutional sources of support.

Informal interactions remain important alongside formal mentoring. Students may disclose concerns during ordinary conversations that would not necessarily emerge within formal meetings. An inclusive teacher-student relationship therefore requires approachability, patience, active listening and sensitivity towards the varied circumstances from which students come.

4.9 Recognising Less Visible Forms of Exclusion

One of the most important insights emerging from everyday educational experience is that exclusion is not always immediately observable. Some barriers are visible, such as physical inaccessibility or lack of technological resources. Others operate more subtly.

A student may attend every class but rarely speak because of low self-confidence. Another may struggle academically because previous educational experiences have not provided adequate preparation for college-level learning. A student facing financial or family difficulties may remain reluctant to approach teachers. Such students are physically present within the institution, yet their capacity to participate fully may remain constrained.

Ainscow (2020) emphasises identifying and removing barriers to students' participation and achievement as central to inclusion. This requires institutions to pay attention not only to students who explicitly request assistance but also to patterns that may indicate less visible difficulties.

Teachers occupy an important position in identifying such concerns because they interact with students regularly. Changes in attendance, declining participation, repeated difficulty with academic work or withdrawal from classroom interaction may indicate a need for support. However, teachers should avoid making assumptions about individual circumstances. Sensitive

communication and opportunities for students to seek assistance voluntarily are preferable to labelling students on the basis of limited observation.

This perspective shifts inclusion from a reactive model towards a more attentive institutional culture. Instead of waiting until difficulties become severe, institutions can create routine mechanisms of communication, mentoring and academic support through which emerging concerns are more likely to be identified.

4.10 Inclusion as a Shared Institutional Culture

The experiences discussed throughout this section suggest that inclusion cannot be attributed to any single committee, teacher or programme. Institutional mechanisms provide important structures, but students experience inclusion primarily through the cumulative effect of policies, classroom interactions, peer relationships, communication, participation opportunities and everyday encounters within the institution.

Booth and Ainscow's (2011) distinction between inclusive cultures, policies and practices is particularly useful in understanding this relationship. Formal policies establish institutional commitments, while practices determine how those commitments are experienced. Institutional culture connects the two by shaping expectations concerning dignity, participation, difference and responsibility.

An inclusive college therefore requires shared responsibility. The Women Cell can promote gender awareness, but gender sensitivity must also be reflected in classrooms and ordinary institutional interactions. Mentoring structures can provide mechanisms for guidance, but students must feel sufficiently comfortable to communicate with mentors. Digital platforms can improve communication, but alternative arrangements must remain available where technological inequalities exist. Orientation programmes can introduce students to the institution, but a continuing sense of belonging depends upon what students experience after those programmes conclude.

Inclusion should consequently be understood as an ongoing institutional process rather than a condition that an institution permanently achieves after introducing particular mechanisms. UNESCO (2020) similarly conceptualises inclusion as a continuing process of responding to learner diversity and addressing barriers.

The experience of Kharupetia College demonstrates how this process can operate through interconnected institutional and classroom practices. At the same time, reflective examination also reveals areas in which inclusion requires further strengthening. Recognising those limitations is itself important because an inclusive institutional culture depends upon a willingness to identify remaining barriers rather than interpreting existing initiatives as evidence that the process is complete.

5. Continuing Challenges and Scope for Strengthening Inclusion

The institutional and classroom practices discussed in the preceding section demonstrate that inclusion can be promoted through a combination of supportive institutional mechanisms, responsive teaching, mentoring, gender-sensitive initiatives, student participation and teacher-

student interaction. At the same time, inclusion cannot be understood as a completed institutional achievement. It requires continuous identification of barriers that may prevent some students from participating fully in academic and institutional life. Ainscow (2020) emphasises that inclusion involves an ongoing process of identifying and addressing barriers to students' presence, participation and achievement. Reflective examination of the experiences at Kharupetia College similarly reveals several areas in which existing inclusive practices can be further strengthened.

5.1 Strengthening Inclusion for Students with Disabilities

One important area requiring continuing attention is the inclusion of students with disabilities. Disability inclusion cannot be limited to the formal admission of students with disabilities into higher education. The physical environment, teaching-learning processes, educational materials, communication systems and institutional attitudes all influence whether students are able to participate meaningfully.

Moriña (2017) observes that students with disabilities in higher education continue to encounter barriers associated with institutional environments, teaching practices and inadequate support. Similarly, Fuller et al. (2004) demonstrate that barriers within teaching and learning environments can significantly shape the educational experiences of disabled students. These findings indicate that inclusion requires institutions to examine not only the characteristics or needs of individual students but also features of the educational environment that may restrict their participation.

Within the institutional context considered in this paper, sustained attention to barrier-free physical infrastructure is therefore important. Classrooms, common spaces and other facilities should progressively be made usable by students with different mobility requirements. Physical accessibility, however, represents only one component of disability inclusion. Learning materials and communication should also be made accessible wherever required, and teachers need adequate awareness of different learning requirements.

The principles of Universal Design for Learning are relevant in this context. CAST (2018) recommends providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression in recognition of variability among learners. While the requirements of individual students may still necessitate specific accommodations, designing educational practices with learner diversity in mind can reduce the need to make every adjustment retrospectively.

An important direction for strengthening inclusion is therefore the development of greater institutional and teacher awareness concerning disability. Sensitisation programmes, improved infrastructure, accessible educational materials and clear support mechanisms can contribute to an environment in which disability inclusion becomes part of ordinary institutional planning rather than being addressed only when a particular difficulty arises.

5.2 Addressing Differences in Academic Preparedness

Another continuing challenge arises from differences in students' previous educational experiences. Students entering the same course may possess considerably different levels of subject knowledge, linguistic confidence, study skills and familiarity with academic

expectations. Such differences can become particularly significant during the transition from school to higher education.

These variations should not automatically be interpreted as indicators of students' intellectual ability or educational potential. Inclusive pedagogy recognises learner diversity as an ordinary feature of educational environments and seeks to extend opportunities for participation rather than categorising students according to perceived deficits (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Classroom experience indicates that some students may require additional explanation, greater time to respond or more encouragement before participating confidently. Such support is already possible through everyday teaching practices, but it could be strengthened through more systematic academic assistance.

Bridge or introductory academic support, tutorial assistance, peer-learning opportunities and additional guidance for students experiencing difficulty may be useful in this respect. The objective should not be to label particular students as academically weak but to provide opportunities through which differences in previous educational preparation do not become permanent barriers to participation.

Early identification is also important. Difficulties that remain unnoticed during the initial stages of a course can accumulate over time. Regular interaction, formative classroom exercises and mentoring can help teachers recognise where additional academic assistance may be required.

5.3 Supporting First-Generation and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students

Students' educational experiences are influenced by circumstances beyond the classroom. First-generation learners and students from economically constrained households may face difficulties that are not immediately visible within academic interactions.

Jehangir (2010) demonstrates the importance of community, voice and supportive relationships for first-generation college students. Stephens et al. (2012) further show that students whose backgrounds differ from dominant institutional expectations may encounter disadvantages even when these are not explicitly recognised by institutions.

In a rural college context, these observations have important implications. Students whose families have limited experience of higher education may require greater clarity concerning institutional procedures, academic expectations, educational opportunities and future pathways. Some may also experience financial pressures that affect their ability to purchase learning resources, maintain regular digital connectivity or participate in particular activities.

Institutional communication should therefore be clear and easily understandable. Information concerning scholarships, student-support schemes, examinations, academic requirements and other institutional opportunities should be communicated through channels likely to reach students with different circumstances.

Mentoring can perform an important role here. Regular mentor-student interaction can provide opportunities for students to seek clarification and discuss difficulties before they become severe. Such interaction should remain sensitive to students' privacy and dignity and should

avoid assuming that all students belonging to a particular social or economic category experience identical problems.

5.4 Bridging Digital Inequalities

Digital technology has expanded the possibilities for communication and learning in higher education, but unequal digital circumstances remain an important challenge to inclusion. Students may differ in the quality of devices available to them, reliability of internet connectivity, affordability of data and ability to use digital platforms effectively.

Warschauer (2004) argues that digital inclusion cannot be reduced to the simple availability of computers or devices. The capacity to use technology meaningfully depends upon several interconnected resources, including skills, literacy and social support. Consequently, an institution may increasingly digitise educational communication while unintentionally creating difficulties for students who are less digitally equipped.

The appropriate response is not to abandon digital technologies but to employ them flexibly. Study materials may be circulated digitally while important information continues to be communicated through alternative channels. Teachers can also assist students who encounter difficulty in using educational platforms and avoid assuming that technological competence is uniform among all learners.

Digital literacy itself can become an area of student support. Short orientation sessions concerning commonly used academic platforms, online educational resources and responsible use of digital information may help students who have had limited previous exposure to such tools.

As higher education becomes increasingly dependent upon digital communication, maintaining this sensitivity will be important for ensuring that technological innovation strengthens rather than weakens inclusion.

5.5 Strengthening Mentoring and Counselling Support

Informal teacher-student interaction constitutes an important strength within a supportive educational environment. However, reliance entirely upon informal interaction may result in some students receiving greater support simply because they are more confident in approaching teachers.

Students who most require assistance may sometimes be the least likely to request it. A shy student, a learner with low confidence or someone facing difficult personal circumstances may hesitate to initiate a conversation. More systematic mentoring can help address this limitation.

Thomas (2012) emphasises that supportive relationships and meaningful engagement contribute to students' sense of belonging within higher education. Mentoring can provide a regular opportunity for communication and help students understand that seeking guidance is a normal component of educational life.

A strengthened mentoring system could include periodic interaction with students rather than communication occurring only when academic difficulties become visible. Such interactions

may cover academic progress, adjustment to college, participation in institutional activities and awareness of available support.

At the same time, teachers cannot be expected to provide specialised assistance for every difficulty students may encounter. Where concerns require professional expertise, particularly in relation to counselling or specialised support, appropriate referral mechanisms become important. Strengthening institutional linkages with suitable professional services could therefore complement the supportive role already performed by teachers.

5.6 Continuous Gender Sensitisation

Gender-sensitive inclusion requires continuity. Occasional programmes can generate awareness, but sustainable change depends upon whether respect, dignity and sensitivity become embedded within everyday institutional culture.

The Women Cell can play an important role in this process by facilitating awareness programmes, discussions and opportunities for students to engage with issues concerning gender equality, women's rights, safety and health. However, gender inclusion should remain a responsibility shared across the institution.

Morley (2010) cautions that formal equality does not necessarily eliminate gendered inequalities embedded within institutional cultures and practices. This observation suggests that gender sensitivity should extend beyond compliance with formal requirements.

Regular awareness activities can therefore be complemented by opportunities for dialogue involving both female and male students. Discussions surrounding respectful behaviour, stereotypes, dignity and equality can help situate gender inclusion within the broader institutional culture rather than presenting it solely as a concern of women students.

It is equally important that students know the institutional mechanisms through which concerns can be communicated and that such mechanisms are perceived as trustworthy and sensitive. Institutional awareness, confidentiality and responsiveness are therefore essential components of meaningful gender inclusion.

5.7 Teacher Development for Inclusive Pedagogy

Teachers occupy a central position in creating inclusive learning environments, but inclusive teaching cannot be assumed to develop automatically through subject expertise alone. Continuing professional development can help teachers recognise diverse learning requirements and critically reflect upon their own pedagogical practices.

Florian and Spratt (2013) emphasise that inclusive practice involves both what teachers do and how they conceptualise differences among learners. Teachers' expectations can influence classroom participation, particularly when students are categorised according to assumptions about their abilities or backgrounds.

Regular faculty development and sensitisation programmes can therefore strengthen institutional inclusion. Relevant areas may include inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness,

gender sensitivity, digital teaching, identification of diverse learning needs and strategies for supporting students with different levels of academic preparation.

Reflective practice is also important. Schön (1983) argues that professionals develop knowledge through critical reflection on their practice. Teachers can therefore benefit from periodically examining which students participate actively, which remain silent, how teaching methods accommodate different learners and whether apparently neutral classroom practices unintentionally disadvantage some students.

Teacher development for inclusion should not be understood as criticism of existing teaching practices. Rather, it recognises that student populations and educational environments continually change and that professional practice must evolve accordingly.

5.8 Identifying Less Visible Forms of Exclusion

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges is identifying forms of exclusion that are not readily visible. Formal institutional indicators may show that students attend classes and participate in examinations while revealing relatively little about their confidence, sense of belonging or difficulties in engaging with learning.

A student may remain silent because of fear of making mistakes. Another may avoid seeking help because of embarrassment. A student experiencing economic difficulties may quietly restrict participation in activities requiring additional expenditure. Others may struggle with academic work because their previous educational experiences have not adequately prepared them for college-level study.

UNESCO (2020) emphasises that exclusion can arise through multiple and intersecting circumstances. Institutions therefore need mechanisms that allow students' difficulties to become visible without requiring students to publicly identify themselves as disadvantaged.

Mentoring, approachable teachers, regular academic interaction and confidential channels for communicating concerns can contribute to such identification. Student feedback can also provide useful insights into institutional practices that teachers or administrators may not recognise from their own perspectives.

Importantly, identifying hidden exclusion should not become an exercise in categorising or labelling students. The objective should be to understand barriers within the educational environment and determine how they can be reduced.

5.9 Student Voice and Participation in Strengthening Inclusion

An important extension of inclusive institutional practice involves giving students opportunities to contribute to discussions concerning their own educational experiences. Inclusion should not be developed exclusively through assumptions made by teachers and administrators about what students require.

Student voice can help institutions understand barriers that may otherwise remain unnoticed. Students may identify difficulties concerning classroom communication, digital systems,

physical facilities, institutional procedures or participation that appear relatively minor from an administrative perspective but significantly influence their educational experiences.

Cook-Sather (2006) argues that recognising student perspectives can contribute to more participatory educational relationships by challenging assumptions that educational knowledge and decision-making should flow exclusively from adults to students. Although institutional decision-making necessarily involves different levels of responsibility, meaningful opportunities for student feedback can strengthen responsiveness.

Existing activities, mentoring interactions and student-support structures can provide channels for such feedback. Institutions may also consider periodic structured opportunities for students to communicate their experiences and suggestions.

Student participation in the development of an inclusive environment also reinforces the idea that students themselves share responsibility for creating a respectful institutional culture. Inclusion concerns interactions among students as well as relationships between students and institutional authorities.

5.10 Towards a More Systematic Institutional Approach to Inclusion

The preceding challenges suggest that the next stage of strengthening inclusion involves connecting existing practices more systematically. Individual initiatives can be valuable, but their cumulative effect is likely to be greater when they operate within a coherent institutional understanding of inclusion.

Booth and Ainscow (2011) emphasise the interrelationship between inclusive cultures, policies and practices. Applied to the present institutional context, this suggests that mechanisms relating to mentoring, gender sensitivity, disability, academic support, digital communication and student participation should not be regarded as unrelated activities. Each contributes to the broader objective of creating an educational environment in which diversity is recognised and students are enabled to participate meaningfully.

A systematic approach could therefore involve periodic reflection on existing institutional practices, identification of groups or circumstances requiring additional support, improved coordination among relevant institutional mechanisms, regular sensitisation and greater incorporation of student feedback.

Particular attention may be given to strengthening barrier-free physical infrastructure, improving the accessibility of digital and educational resources, providing additional academic support for students requiring it, strengthening mentoring and counselling arrangements, conducting regular gender and disability sensitisation programmes and developing mechanisms for identifying students experiencing less visible difficulties.

Such measures need not imply that all students require identical forms of assistance. Inclusion instead requires an institution to possess sufficient flexibility to respond appropriately to diverse circumstances while maintaining students' dignity and participation within the common educational community.

The challenges identified in this section should therefore not be interpreted solely as institutional deficiencies. They illustrate the continuing character of inclusion itself. As student populations, technologies and educational practices change, new forms of exclusion may emerge and previously established practices may require reconsideration. An inclusive institution is consequently not one that claims to have eliminated every barrier, but one that remains willing to identify barriers, listen to different experiences and continuously improve its practices.

6. Discussion

The reflective examination of institutional and classroom experiences at Kharupetia College demonstrates that inclusion in higher education is best understood as a continuing and multidimensional process rather than as the outcome of any single policy, committee or programme. The experiences considered in this paper indicate that formal institutional mechanisms are important, but their contribution to inclusion depends ultimately upon how they are translated into everyday educational practices and relationships. This interpretation corresponds with Booth and Ainscow's (2011) distinction between inclusive cultures, policies and practices and with UNESCO's (2020) understanding of inclusion as an ongoing process of responding to learner diversity and addressing barriers to participation.

6.1 From Formal Provisions to Everyday Inclusion

One of the principal observations emerging from the reflection is the distinction between the formal presence of institutional mechanisms and students' actual experiences of inclusion. Mechanisms such as the Women Cell, anti-ragging provisions, mentoring, student-support activities and quality-related institutional initiatives provide an important organisational foundation. However, their existence by itself cannot ensure that every student feels comfortable, respected and able to participate.

This distinction is consistent with Ainscow's (2020) argument that inclusion requires attention to barriers affecting students' presence, participation and achievement. Institutional mechanisms become meaningful when students know about them, perceive them as approachable and are confident that their concerns will be treated sensitively. Inclusion therefore depends not simply upon what an institution formally provides but upon whether students can meaningfully engage with those provisions.

The experience of Kharupetia College suggests that relatively ordinary institutional practices can be significant in this process. Orientation, mentoring, opportunities for participation, awareness programmes and communication between teachers and students can help create an environment in which students become more familiar with institutional life. This may be particularly relevant in a college serving students from rural and economically constrained backgrounds, including first-generation learners.

The broader implication is that inclusion should not be treated as the responsibility of a specialised institutional unit alone. A Women Cell, mentoring mechanism or student-support structure can provide important institutional spaces, but inclusion must simultaneously become part of classroom practices, administrative communication and interpersonal relationships.

6.2 Inclusion as Recognition of Learner Diversity

A second major theme emerging from the reflection concerns the heterogeneity of the student population. Students within the same classroom may differ in their previous educational preparation, linguistic confidence, socioeconomic circumstances, digital resources, family educational backgrounds and willingness to participate.

These differences challenge an assumption that identical treatment necessarily constitutes inclusive education. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy involves extending learning opportunities in ways that respond to learner diversity rather than providing a common approach followed by separate interventions for students perceived as different. The classroom experiences considered in this paper support the relevance of this principle.

Providing additional explanation to a student who requires it, allowing more time for responses, using examples connected with familiar contexts or encouraging hesitant students to participate does not necessarily amount to preferential treatment. Rather, these practices recognise that students may require different forms of support in order to participate meaningfully within a common educational environment.

This distinction between identical treatment and responsiveness to difference is central to the understanding of inclusion developed through the present reflection. Diversity should not automatically be interpreted as deficiency. A student who is hesitant to speak may possess academic understanding but lack linguistic confidence. Another student may require additional explanation because of differences in previous educational preparation. An inclusive classroom attempts to recognise these circumstances without reducing students to labels based on their perceived weaknesses.

6.3 Inclusion as Participation and Belonging

The experiences considered in the paper also indicate that inclusion possesses an important relational dimension. Students may be physically present within an institution while remaining socially or academically disconnected from it. Consequently, opportunities to participate and develop a sense of belonging constitute important aspects of an inclusive educational environment.

Strayhorn (2018) emphasises that belonging involves students' perception that they are valued and accepted within their educational communities. Thomas (2012) similarly identifies supportive relationships and engagement as important elements of students' higher education experiences.

Within the institutional context examined here, classroom discussions, co-curricular activities, awareness programmes, orientation and informal interactions with teachers provide different forms of participation. Their importance lies partly in the fact that students may demonstrate confidence in different settings. A student who rarely speaks during a conventional classroom discussion may participate actively in a poster-making activity, awareness programme or peer interaction.

This suggests that an inclusive institution should provide varied opportunities for participation rather than defining engagement narrowly through formal academic performance. Co-curricular participation should not be considered entirely separate from inclusion because it can create spaces for expression, interaction, confidence building and institutional belonging.

At the same time, participation must remain genuinely inclusive. Merely organising activities does not ensure that different groups of students participate. Institutions and teachers need to encourage students who may be hesitant, while avoiding forms of pressure that could make participation uncomfortable. The objective is to create opportunities through which students increasingly perceive themselves as legitimate participants in institutional life.

6.4 Teacher-Student Relationships as an Everyday Foundation of Inclusion

A particularly significant insight emerging from the reflection concerns the role of teacher-student relationships. Formal institutional structures are necessary, but students often experience the institution through their everyday encounters with teachers.

Students may approach teachers with academic questions as well as concerns relating to attendance, adjustment, financial difficulties and future opportunities. Whether students feel able to initiate such conversations can influence whether problems are addressed at an early stage or remain hidden.

Thomas (2012) emphasises the importance of supportive institutional relationships in strengthening student engagement and belonging. Jehangir (2010), particularly in relation to first-generation students, similarly highlights the importance of voice, community and supportive educational relationships.

For students unfamiliar with higher education environments, an approachable teacher can also function as an important source of institutional knowledge. Procedures and expectations that appear obvious to experienced academics may not necessarily be obvious to students or their families. This is especially relevant for first-generation learners.

However, relying exclusively upon students to approach teachers has limitations. Students with greater confidence may seek help more readily, while those experiencing greater difficulties may remain silent. This reinforces the importance of systematic mentoring and regular communication alongside informal teacher-student relationships.

The implication is that interpersonal dimensions of inclusion deserve recognition alongside formal institutional measures. Patience, respectful communication, active listening and sensitivity to differences among students may appear to be ordinary professional behaviours, yet collectively they can significantly shape the inclusiveness of an educational environment.

6.5 Gender Inclusion as Institutional Culture

The experience associated with the Women Cell illustrates another important aspect of inclusion. Gender-sensitive initiatives can provide spaces for awareness, discussion and student participation around issues that may not ordinarily emerge within conventional classroom teaching.

However, the discussion also indicates that gender inclusion should extend beyond programmes specifically organised for women students. Morley (2010) demonstrates that gender inequalities can persist through institutional cultures and practices even where formal commitments to equality exist. The effectiveness of gender-sensitive mechanisms therefore depends partly upon whether principles of dignity and respect become incorporated into everyday institutional relationships.

The broader implication is that gender inclusion should be understood as a whole-institution concern. The Women Cell can play an important facilitating role, but teachers, administrators and students collectively contribute to the social environment within which gender is experienced.

This also means that awareness activities should encourage broader institutional dialogue where appropriate. Inclusion is strengthened when gender sensitivity becomes part of the ordinary culture of respectful interaction rather than remaining confined to particular occasions or administrative structures.

6.6 Digitalisation and the Need for Inclusive Flexibility

Digital communication represents an area in which educational innovation and potential exclusion can coexist. The use of digital platforms to circulate notices, materials and academic information can improve communication and allow students to engage with educational resources beyond classroom hours.

At the same time, observations within the institutional context suggest that students cannot be assumed to possess equivalent devices, connectivity or digital competence. Warschauer (2004) demonstrates that the digital divide involves more than physical possession of technology; meaningful digital participation also depends upon skills and surrounding social and educational resources.

The implication is not that institutions should avoid digitalisation. Rather, digital practices should be sufficiently flexible to prevent technology from becoming an unintended barrier. Where important information is distributed digitally, alternative forms of communication may remain necessary. Similarly, students who experience difficulty using educational platforms may require guidance rather than being interpreted as unwilling to engage.

This illustrates a broader principle running throughout the paper: inclusive practice frequently requires flexibility rather than uniformity. A single method of teaching, communication or participation may work effectively for many students while inadvertently creating difficulties for others.

6.7 Visible and Invisible Dimensions of Exclusion

Perhaps the most important insight emerging from the reflection concerns the distinction between visible and less visible forms of exclusion. Physical barriers and technological constraints may sometimes be readily identifiable. Other barriers can remain hidden within ordinary institutional life.

A student may attend regularly while remaining silent because of low confidence. Another may struggle academically without seeking assistance. Financial circumstances may limit participation without being disclosed. Linguistic insecurity may prevent a student from demonstrating knowledge publicly. First-generation students may be uncertain about institutional processes without knowing whom to ask.

These examples demonstrate why formal participation should not automatically be interpreted as meaningful inclusion. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that exclusion can arise through intersecting circumstances and may operate through educational processes that appear formally available to everyone.

Recognising less visible barriers requires sensitivity but also caution. Teachers should not make assumptions about students merely because they belong to particular socioeconomic, linguistic or social categories. An inclusive approach should instead create routine opportunities for communication and support that students can use without being stigmatised.

This strengthens the case for mentoring, student feedback and approachable teacher-student relationships. Such mechanisms can help difficulties become visible while respecting students' dignity and agency.

6.8 Inclusion as a Continuous Process of Institutional Reflection

Taken together, the experiences discussed in the paper suggest that inclusion should be viewed less as an institutional status and more as a process of continuous reflection and improvement. No institution becomes permanently inclusive simply by establishing committees, conducting programmes or adopting particular policies.

Booth and Ainscow (2011) emphasise the interconnectedness of inclusive cultures, policies and practices. This framework is particularly useful for interpreting the experience examined in the present paper. Policies and formal mechanisms provide structure; classroom and institutional practices determine how those commitments are enacted; and institutional culture shapes whether diversity, participation and dignity become shared values.

This perspective also changes the interpretation of institutional limitations. Identifying areas requiring improvement—such as disability-related infrastructure, digital inequalities, academic support, teacher sensitisation or systematic mentoring—does not necessarily imply that existing inclusive initiatives have failed. Rather, the willingness to recognise continuing barriers is itself an important characteristic of reflective institutional practice.

Schön (1983) emphasises the role of reflection in professional learning. Applied at the institutional level, a similar principle suggests that colleges can strengthen inclusion by periodically examining their own practices, listening to student experiences and reconsidering assumptions about what different learners require.

6.9 Implications for Rural Higher Education Institutions

Although this paper focuses on experiences within one college and does not claim generalisability, the reflection raises several issues that may be relevant for other rural and semi-urban higher education institutions characterised by heterogeneous student populations.

First, inclusive practices need not always depend upon large-scale or resource-intensive interventions. Infrastructure and specialised support certainly require resources, particularly in relation to disability inclusion and digital facilities. However, some dimensions of inclusion are also shaped by everyday pedagogical and interpersonal practices: allowing students time to respond, explaining concepts differently when necessary, encouraging questions, communicating institutional information clearly and remaining approachable to students.

Second, student diversity should inform institutional planning. Rural higher education institutions may serve students with widely differing school backgrounds, linguistic experiences, family educational histories and technological resources. Uniform assumptions about the typical college student may therefore overlook important differences within the student population.

Third, institutional mechanisms are most useful when connected. Gender-sensitive initiatives, mentoring, orientation, academic support, digital communication, co-curricular participation and student feedback should not function as completely separate activities. Each contributes to the broader institutional environment experienced by students.

Finally, inclusion requires the active involvement of students themselves. Students are not merely recipients of inclusive policies. Their interactions with peers contribute to institutional culture, while their experiences can provide valuable information about barriers that teachers and administrators may not otherwise recognise. Greater opportunities for student voice and feedback can therefore strengthen institutional reflection (Cook-Sather, 2006).

6.10 Central Interpretation

The central argument emerging from the paper is that inclusion in higher education is produced through the interaction between institutional structures and everyday educational relationships. Formal mechanisms provide an essential foundation, but their effectiveness depends upon the practices through which students experience the institution.

The experiences at Kharupetia College illustrate this interaction across several areas: gender-sensitive initiatives create formal spaces for awareness and dialogue; classroom practices respond to differences in confidence and learning; digital communication expands educational possibilities while requiring sensitivity to technological inequalities; co-curricular activities provide alternative opportunities for participation; and mentoring and teacher-student relationships create channels through which students can seek support.

At the same time, continuing challenges relating to disability inclusion, differences in academic preparedness, digital resources, systematic mentoring and hidden forms of exclusion demonstrate why inclusion cannot be regarded as complete.

The experience therefore supports a conception of inclusion that is institutional, pedagogical and relational simultaneously. An inclusive higher education institution is not defined merely by the diversity of students present within it or by the number of inclusion-related mechanisms it possesses. It is defined increasingly by its capacity to recognise diversity, enable meaningful participation, respond sensitively to different circumstances and continually examine the barriers that remain.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Inclusion in higher education is not achieved merely through the establishment of formal policies, committees or support mechanisms. It is a continuing institutional process through which diversity is recognised, barriers to participation are identified and students are enabled to experience dignity, belonging and meaningful participation in academic and institutional life. The reflective examination undertaken in this paper demonstrates that inclusion is simultaneously institutional, pedagogical and relational.

The experience of Kharupetia College illustrates how different components of institutional life can contribute to an inclusive educational environment. Institutional mechanisms such as the Women Cell, anti-ragging measures, mentoring, student-support activities and quality-related initiatives provide formal structures through which student welfare and participation can be promoted. Their significance, however, depends upon the extent to which students are aware of these mechanisms, feel comfortable using them and experience their institution as responsive to their concerns. This supports the wider understanding that inclusive cultures, policies and practices need to operate in an interconnected manner rather than as isolated interventions (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The reflection particularly highlights the importance of classroom practices. Students enter higher education with differences in educational preparation, linguistic confidence, socioeconomic circumstances, family educational backgrounds and pace of learning. Treating all learners identically may therefore fail to respond adequately to such diversity. Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to broaden opportunities for learning and participation while avoiding unnecessary categorisation or marginalisation of particular students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Practices such as encouraging questions, allowing students sufficient time to respond, explaining concepts through familiar examples, promoting peer interaction and providing additional guidance where required may appear relatively ordinary. Yet such everyday pedagogical decisions can determine whether hesitant or less academically confident students gradually become active participants in the classroom. The experience considered in this paper therefore reinforces the argument that inclusion is created partly through the ordinary practices of teaching.

The discussion also demonstrates the importance of relationships and belonging. Students may approach teachers with concerns extending beyond immediate subject-related questions, including difficulties associated with academic adjustment, attendance, financial circumstances and future opportunities. Approachable and sensitive teacher-student relationships can create informal channels through which students seek guidance. This is consistent with literature emphasising the significance of belonging and supportive relationships within higher education (Strayhorn, 2018; Thomas, 2012).

Gender-sensitive institutional practices constitute another significant dimension. The experience associated with the Women Cell illustrates the importance of creating opportunities

for awareness, dialogue and student participation concerning women's rights, gender equality, safety, health and wider social issues. At the same time, gender inclusion should not remain confined to a specialised institutional mechanism. It needs to become part of the everyday culture of dignity and respectful interaction across the institution.

Co-curricular and awareness-oriented activities similarly expand the meaning of student participation. Students possess different abilities, interests and forms of confidence, and opportunities outside conventional classroom instruction can allow them to participate in alternative ways. Such participation may contribute to confidence, interaction and a stronger sense of connection with the institution.

Digitalisation introduces both opportunities and challenges. Digital communication can extend educational interaction beyond classroom hours and facilitate the circulation of learning materials and information. However, differences in devices, internet connectivity and digital competence mean that technology cannot automatically be assumed to operate inclusively. As Warschauer (2004) argues, meaningful digital inclusion involves more than the physical availability of technology. Digital practices therefore need to remain flexible and sensitive to differences in students' circumstances.

The reflection also draws attention to less visible forms of exclusion. A student may be physically present in class yet remain hesitant to participate because of low confidence, linguistic insecurity or fear of making mistakes. Another may struggle academically because of differences in previous educational preparation, while some students may hesitate to seek assistance because of personal or socioeconomic circumstances. Such experiences reinforce the need to understand inclusion beyond formal participation. As UNESCO (2020) emphasises, barriers to inclusion can arise through multiple and intersecting circumstances.

At the same time, the paper identifies areas requiring further institutional attention. Disability inclusion, barrier-free infrastructure, accessible learning materials, digital inequalities, systematic academic support, mentoring, counselling and continued teacher sensitisation remain important areas for development. Recognising such challenges should not be interpreted as contradicting existing inclusive practices. Rather, it reflects the central argument of the paper that inclusion is a process of continuous institutional learning and improvement.

The experiences considered in this paper are specific to one institutional setting and are presented from the perspective of a teacher involved in classroom and institutional activities. They cannot therefore be generalised to all students or higher education institutions. Nevertheless, situated professional reflection provides an opportunity to examine how broad principles of inclusion are encountered and interpreted within everyday educational practice.

The experience of Kharupetia College ultimately suggests that an inclusive institution is not defined solely by the diversity of students present within it or by the formal mechanisms it has established. Inclusion becomes meaningful when institutional commitments are translated into classroom practices, supportive relationships, opportunities for participation and continuing efforts to recognise barriers that may otherwise remain unnoticed.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the reflective analysis and the literature considered in this paper, several measures may further strengthen inclusive practices within the institutional context.

Strengthening systematic mentoring: Existing mentoring and informal teacher-student interaction can be strengthened through periodic communication with students. Such interaction can provide opportunities to identify academic difficulties, adjustment-related concerns and requirements for additional guidance at an earlier stage. Particular care should be taken to ensure that mentoring reaches students who may be reluctant to approach teachers independently.

Providing additional academic support where required: Differences in previous educational preparation should be recognised without labelling students as inherently weak. Tutorial support, peer learning, additional explanations and introductory or bridge-oriented academic assistance may help students requiring additional support participate more confidently. Such measures are consistent with inclusive pedagogy's emphasis on extending opportunities for learning within the common educational community (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Spratt & Florian, 2015).

Strengthening disability inclusion: Continued improvement of barrier-free physical infrastructure should be accompanied by attention to accessible learning materials, appropriate communication and sensitivity towards diverse learning requirements. Faculty sensitisation concerning disability can further strengthen institutional preparedness. Where feasible, principles associated with Universal Design for Learning may be progressively incorporated into teaching and learning practices (CAST, 2018).

Maintaining flexibility in digital practices: Digital communication and learning resources should continue to supplement educational interaction, but students should not be disadvantaged solely because of limitations in devices, connectivity or digital competence. Important academic information should remain available through appropriate alternative channels where required, and basic guidance concerning educational technologies may be provided to students experiencing difficulty.

Continuing gender sensitisation: The Women Cell can continue to provide an important platform for programmes concerning gender equality, women's rights, health, safety and related social concerns. Gender sensitivity, however, should be encouraged across the wider institutional environment so that dignity and respectful interaction become shared responsibilities rather than matters confined to specific programmes.

Strengthening student voice: Students should have appropriate opportunities to communicate their experiences and suggestions concerning teaching, institutional support and participation. Periodic feedback can help identify barriers that may not be immediately visible to teachers or administrators. Student voice can thereby contribute to institutional reflection and improvement (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Expanding opportunities for participation: Academic, cultural, awareness-oriented and other co-curricular activities should continue to provide varied opportunities for students to

participate. Encouraging students with different interests and levels of confidence can help ensure that institutional participation is not dominated only by those who are already highly confident or academically visible.

Strengthening induction and orientation: Orientation should provide newly admitted students with clear information concerning academic expectations, institutional facilities, support mechanisms and opportunities for participation. Such support may be particularly valuable for students who are unfamiliar with the culture and procedures of higher education.

Promoting continuing professional development: Faculty development relating to inclusive pedagogy, gender sensitivity, disability awareness, digital education and diverse learning needs can help teachers continually adapt their practices to changing student populations. Critical reflection upon teaching should be encouraged as a normal component of professional development (Schön, 1983).

Developing appropriate counselling and referral mechanisms: Teachers can provide important guidance and support, but some student concerns may require specialised professional assistance. Where feasible, institutional arrangements for counselling or appropriate referral can complement mentoring and informal teacher support.

Periodic institutional reflection on inclusion: Inclusion-related activities should be reviewed periodically rather than treated as completed responsibilities. Institutional reflection can consider whether existing mechanisms are reaching students effectively, whether new barriers have emerged and whether students themselves perceive the institutional environment as supportive. This is consistent with the understanding of inclusion as a continuing process of identifying and addressing barriers (Ainscow, 2020).

7.3 Concluding Reflection

The central lesson emerging from this reflective examination is that inclusion is created through both institutional commitment and everyday human interaction. Infrastructure, policies and committees are essential, but students also experience inclusion through whether a teacher listens patiently, whether a hesitant learner is encouraged to speak, whether differences are respected, whether assistance can be sought without embarrassment and whether students feel that their presence and participation matter.

Inclusive higher education therefore requires both structures and sensitivity. It requires institutions to establish appropriate mechanisms while continually examining how those mechanisms operate in practice. It requires teachers to maintain academic expectations while recognising that students may need different forms of support to participate meaningfully. It also requires students to become participants in creating an institutional culture characterised by dignity, respect and mutual responsibility.

Inclusion, from this perspective, should not be regarded as a destination that an institution reaches once and for all. It is a continuing commitment to recognising diversity, listening to different experiences, identifying barriers and improving educational practices. It is through this continuing process that higher education institutions can progressively develop

environments in which every student is recognised as a valued member of the educational community.

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