

Guidelines to Provide Equitable Opportunity for the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) in the HEIs

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The University Grants Commission
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University Grants Commission

Ministry of Education, Govt. of India



Foreword

The National Education Policy 2020 envisions a transformative approach to education, emphasising inclusive practices that cater to the diverse needs of learners. Inclusive education, as outlined in the NEP 2020, incorporates students with diverse backgrounds into mainstream education and emphasises creating an environment that enables, honours, and promotes diversity. One of the primary goals is to increase students' participation from socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and their Gross Enrolment Ratio.

I am happy to announce the University Grants Commission Guidelines launch to ensure equitable access to higher education for SEDGs. This marks a significant step towards fulfilling the National Education Policy 2020 vision- an inclusive and vibrant education landscape where no talent is left behind. The UGC guidelines reflect the collective dedication to fostering inclusivity and ensuring that every aspiring student, regardless of socioeconomic background, has an equal opportunity at quality education.

By encouraging inclusive education, the Guidelines aim to ensure that every learner receives a quality education and is equipped with the skills needed in the 21st century, irrespective of their background or ability. Through initiatives like bridge courses, earn-while-learn schemes, and targeted outreach programmes, we aim to create multiple pathways for SEDGs to access quality education. UGC will encourage higher educational institutions to establish Equal Opportunity Cells (EOCs) on campuses to foster a supportive and inclusive environment free from discrimination and prejudice.

I invite the Higher Educational Institutions to take up this opportunity and make our higher education accessible to all. Together, we can create an education system that empowers minds, transforms lives, and builds a just and equitable society.

(Prof. M. Jagadesh Kumar)

Chairman, University Grants Commission

19th January, 2024

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Section - I

Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

1.1 Introduction:

Accessibility of quality education to all has been a major challenge in countries all over the world. In India, there are several disadvantaged groups, such as women, minorities, SCs and STs, OBCs, PwDs, EWSs, who lag behind others in the field of education. Taking all together in the development of the nation is the prime goal of the Government of India. Accordingly, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the need to address the issues of students belonging to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).

The students belonging to SEDGs face several challenges and difficulties in accessing quality education because of socio-cultural, economic, and historical reasons. The NEP 2020 has indicated people with the following identities as *Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups* (SEDGs) and emphasized on their increased participation, particularly in higher education:

(i) Gender Identity:

- Female (Girls and Women make up about half of all SEDGs and, in particular, those belonging to underrepresented groups have multiple disadvantages)
- Transgender.

(ii) Social Backwardness Identity:

- Scheduled Castes (SCs)
- Scheduled Tribes (STs)

(iii) Educational and Economic Backward Identity:

- Non-Creamy Layer among Other Backward Classes (OBCs)
- Economically Weaker Sections (EWSs)
- Students from the vernacular medium schools
- First Generation Learners

(iv) Minority Identity:

- Religious Minorities
- Linguistic Minorities

(v) Persons with Disabilities and Benchmark Disabilities.

- A person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment,
- A person with not less than forty percent of a specified disability as certified by the certifying authority.

(vi) Vulnerable and Low Socio-economic conditions:

- Migrant communities, Denotified and Nomadic Tribes
- Low-income households Below Poverty Line (BPL)
- Child beggars and Children in vulnerable situations

- Victims of or Children of victims of trafficking
- Students who lost their parents
- Any other group of low socio-economic conditions

(vii) Less-developed, poor-access, and disadvantaged locations:

- Villages and towns
- Tribal Areas /Scheduled Areas as mentioned in the V and VI Schedule under the Constitution of India
- Slums
- Aspirational Areas with Special Educational Zones (SEZs)
- North East States
- Islands
- Conflict Prone Areas
- Disaster-prone areas, including flood, drought, earthquake, etc.
- Border Areas

Accomplishing the goals of NEP 2020 is considered necessary to help India addressing effectively the challenges of her commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, particularly the challenges related to achieving SDG-4 (quality education), SDG-5 (gender equality), SDG-1 (no poverty), and SDG-8 (decent work and economic growth). These guidelines are meant to ensure that students belonging to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) have a safe and secure environment and equitable access to quality education in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), as specified in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and quality assessment of HEIs as under relevant criteria of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF).

1.2 Objectives:

- a) Improving equitable access to quality education for SEDGs through bridge courses, earn-while-learn, and outreach programme;
- b) Extending and ensuring basic facilities and amenities to SEDGs for inclusive, healthy, safe, and secure environments on campuses; and
- c) Setting up SEDGs Cell for the purpose of sensitization of all stakeholders, policy implementation, monitoring, equalizing access to inclusive quality higher education, ensuring respectful dignity, promoting egalitarian and constitutional values, and grievance redressal in the HEIs.

The following measures are suggested in the NEP 2020 to achieve the above objectives:

1. Make admission processes more inclusive.
2. Make the curriculum more inclusive.
3. Develop bridge courses for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds.
4. Ensure sensitization of faculty, counselors, and students on the gender-identity issue and its inclusion in all aspects of the HEI, including curricula.
5. Strictly enforce all no-discrimination and anti-harassment rules.
6. Develop a road map that contains specific plans for action on increasing participation from SEDGs, including but not limited to the above items.

Section II

Interventions to make the HEIs Inclusive, Equitable, and Sensitive to SEDGs

There is a need to provide a robust framework to HEIs for formulating measures to make HEIs inclusive, equitable, and sensitive to students belonging to SEDGs. To facilitate learning for all students, with special emphasis on SEDGs; the HEIs may undertake appropriate affirmative action such as Bridge Courses, Earn-while-Learn, Outreach programme, SEDGs Special Education Zones, and Sensitizing Stakeholders of HEIs. It is to ensure the implementation of these measures, primarily for making the HEIs more inclusive, equitable, and sensitive to SEDGs; the HEIs shall establish the SEDGs Cell. A brief account of each of these measures is given as follows:

2.1 Bridge Courses:

Bridge courses are helpful, especially for newly admitted students in the transition to studying in higher education institutions. It is aimed at helping the moderate and below moderate level students belonging to the SEDGs at the entry-level to bridge the gap between the subjects studied at the previous level and those to be examined at the entry level of the new academic programme that the students have been admitted to. It provides an adequate foundation in the core subjects so that such students do not have difficulty when the classes commence.

The bridge courses are intended to help the students of SEDGs category perform academically at par with other category students. Such courses are to be conducted every year before the commencement of the semester programme. The bridge courses (in physical or online mode) are to provide in advance, both primary and supplementary knowledge on the subjects taught to these students during the semesters. For this purpose, HEIs need to identify the SEDGs students who are required to undergo the bridge courses, and wherever possible, the bridge courses can be offered in the local languages. The bridge courses should be tailor-made to meet the requirements of SEDGs students, and a separate timetable should be prepared to deliver the content.

2.1.1 Objectives of Bridge courses:

1. To facilitate the students to overcome challenges in their learning process.
2. To assist students with different learning abilities and multiple challenges to perform at optimal level.
3. To act as a buffer for the new students.
4. To provide adequate time to the SEDGs students for smooth transition.
5. To provide knowledge on core courses and prepare the students for the identified courses which will commence in the forthcoming sessions/semesters.
6. To equip the students with the necessary knowledge and confidence to take on more challenges.

2.1.2 Measures to be taken by the HEIs:

The HEIs shall undertake some actionable steps to introduce relevant bridge courses. The infrastructural and other facilities in the HEIs shall be utilized to realize the objectives of the bridge courses. These shall include the following:

1. Bridge courses for students with learning difficulty and challenges could be conducted for all Semesters of all courses and for such duration as needed by SEDGs. These classes are conducted for students to assist them in achieving expected competencies in subjects. Bridge courses can also be taken from online platforms such as SWAYAM.
2. Orientation courses may be conducted for the freshers to enable them for smooth transition. These courses may include mathematics, computers, communication skills, accounting, etc., designed to connect a student's previous course.

2.1.3 Broad areas to enhance employability:

- a) The national development concerns, development perspectives, and priorities.
- b) Connect with the community, world of work, and global society.
- c) Self-empowerment, motivation, teamwork, and leadership development.
- d) Effective learning in a constructive and creative way with competence and confidence; life skills including effective communication, decision-making, problem-solving, design thinking, creative thinking, critical and scientific thinking, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, empathy, equanimity, coping with stress, and resilience.
- e) Emerging career opportunities and challenges.
- f) E-learning resources and use of digital technology, application of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and responsible social media uses.

2.2 Earn-while-Learn Scheme

The *Earn-while-Learn* (EwL) scheme is a means to help the SEDGs students earn and support their education and acquire skills and capabilities that would enhance their employability. It attempts to mitigate the economic hardships of learning and enhance the learner's adaptability; both will improve the quality of education making it a purposeful endeavour. It provides the students opportunities to develop their personality, gain technical skills and build their entrepreneurial ability, which would help them take up professional assignments relatively faster. Under this scheme, opportunities for part-time engagement are provided to needy students. The indicative list of such engagement opportunities may

include working on research projects, assistantship, Library assignments, Computer services, Data entry, laboratory assistance, etc.

The effectiveness of any earn-while-learn program depends on its adherence to four foundational pillars: academic rigor, relevant work experience, student financial support, and stakeholders investment in programs. The pillars are held in place by a commitment to ensuring accountability, giving students the opportunity for career exploration and professional development, and conferring credentials.

2.2.1 Benefits of the Earn-while-Learn Scheme:

Some of the benefits that the students may access through the Earn-while-Learn scheme include the following:

1. It will enhance employability skills and career preparedness.
2. The Earn-while-Learn Scheme initiative will help to reduce the dropout rate.
3. The proper and effective implementation of the scheme will minimize parents' economic burden.
4. This initiative will have a positive impact on the student's career. On one hand, students will earn some extra money, while on the other, they will get work experience and hands-on training while studying, something that needs to be encouraged in our education system.
5. Acquisition of work experience and hands-on practice during learning.
6. It will provide means of education to socio-economically disadvantaged students.
7. It will make students more resourceful due to their work experience and acquire job skills.
8. It will open various career opportunities to take better jobs in the future and enhance employment prospects.
9. It will increase networking possibilities for the students.
10. It will facilitate students to acquire the requisite competence and attitude etc.
11. It will add value to the resume of students.

2.2.2 Opportunities:

HEIs may provide various part-time engagement opportunities to the students in any department of the HEIs. HEIs should create awareness among the students about such opportunities so that eligible students make use of these opportunities.

2.2.3 Remuneration:

The rate of remuneration for each of the students will be a consolidated amount on an hourly basis for the part-time service they render. Eligible students can be engaged up to a maximum of 20 hours per week, 20 days per month. The payment may be made on an actual basis. The services of the students may be planned in such a way that it does not affect their classes.

2.2.4 Steps to be taken by the HEIs:

- a. HEIs have to ensure flexibility to the students for acquiring knowledge and skills essential to earn a living while learning.
- b. Identify the types of work engagement on the campus that can be taken up by students in part-time mode, as per local needs and also in regional languages.

- c. Publicize the “Earn while Learn” opportunities widely.
- d. Draw a transparent selection process. Priority may be given to needy students.
- e. Institutions must collaborate with Government, Non-Government agencies and corporate sector for funding or seeking projects for implementing the scheme.
- f. Provide necessary weightage to the scheme by including it as a criterion for assessment and accreditation.
- g. Students engaged in “Earn while Learn” may be issued a certificate.

2.3 Outreach Programme - SEDGs Special Education Zones:

An outreach program aims to help, uplift, and support those who are in need of certain services. It involves learning, social planning, health support, and other projects for their empowerment.

Students from SEDGs require encouragement and support to make a successful transition to higher education. HEIs should strive to provide services such as language translation, recording services, and assistive technologies. HEIs need to mobilize resources to carry out this effectively. Professional, academic, and career counselling are to be made available to all the students; also counsellors to ensure the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of the students.

2.3.1 Steps to be taken by the HEIs:

- Institutions have to ensure students’ flexibility for outreach programme.
- Guidelines and principles relating to implementing the outreach programmes must be prepared.
- HEIs have to design the curriculum to embed outreach programmes.
- HEIs must collaborate with Government, Non-Government agencies and corporate sectors to conduct such outreach programmes.
- Yearly budgetary allocation could be made by HEIs for out-reach programmes.

2.4 Sensitizing the HEIs on Challenges related to SEDGs:

Appropriate sensitization programmes are to be introduced and regularly organized for all teachers, administrators, functionaries, and students of HEIs so that the latter become more open to valuing the relevance of inclusive policies such as reservation policy, etc. There is a need to adhere to the principles of inclusion and equity at all levels of the HEIs’ engagement with the SEDGs students, and it requires more sensitivity to the challenges faced by the SEDGs students, particularly concerning their self-respect, self-esteem, and dignity.

Section III

SEDGs Cell

All HEIs shall set up SEDGs Cell to ensure opportunities for inclusive, equal and quality higher education to the SEDGs students. SEDGs Cell shall function as an independent body, without any hindrance or interference to the functioning and mandated activities of other Cells in the HEIs.

SEDGs Cell within every HEIs shall ensure the protection of the constitutionally guaranteed rights, dignity, safety, and security of all individuals belonging to the SEDGs and also ensure them equalizing access and opportunities to pursue higher education with the help of the existing statutory bodies such as SC/ST Cell, Equal Opportunity Cell etc.

3.1 Objectives of SEDGs Cell:

1. To protect all the constitutional rights of the SEDGs students.
2. To ensure that the HEIs are inclusive, safe, and secure for the SEDGs students.
3. To provide socio-emotional and academic support and mentoring for the students belonging to the SEDGs through proper counselling and monitoring programme.
4. To ensure proper implementation and monitoring of orientation and bridge courses designed by the HEIs to benefit SEDGs students.
5. To ensure implementation of all such programme designed and developed by HEIs to increase the participation of SEDGs students in academic activities.
6. To ensure implementation of Government's policies, including reservation policies and various schemes, programme, facilities and guidelines for SEDGs students.
7. To ensure that the HEIs develop appropriate outreach programme to help the SEDGs students to avail the various opportunities of educational/academic programmes of HEIs.
8. To ensure proper implementation of preventive measures and Laws against discrimination and atrocities, and for safeguards of students belonging to respective categories under SEDGs.
9. To circulate, publicize, facilitate, and monitor the implementation of all UGC and Government guidelines and instructions issued from time to time in reference to SEDGs.
10. To redress the grievances and complaints of the SEDGs students within 15 days through a Grievances Redressal Committee (GRC) without compromising the safety, privacy and dignity of the complainant.

3.2 Functions of SEDGs Cell:

1. To co-ordinate with other existing cells and statutory bodies of the HEIs and enable implementation of the existing schemes and provisions, including scholarships and fellowships of the Govt. of India and respective States.
2. To ensure the implementation of orientation and bridge courses, earn-while-learn schemes, and outreach programme designed and developed by HEIs for SEDGs.

3. To provide socio-economic, academic, and psychological support and mentoring for such students through proper counselling and mentoring programme.
4. To ensure sensitization of faculty, staff, counsellors, and students on the SEDGs issues and their inclusion in all aspects of the HEIs.
5. To explore and generate funds from various sources like Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) and Alumni to provide more financial assistance and scholarships to SEDGs to mitigate opportunity costs and fees for pursuing higher education.
6. To coordinate with the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) to raise awareness about the implementation of various policies for inclusive and equitable quality higher education.
7. To work as a 'Single Window' for students belonging to SEDGs for their grievances, basic needs, amenities, facilities, welfare measures, and scholarships and fellowships.
8. To upload and disseminate guidelines, facilities, welfare, and safety measures on HEI's portal and maintain such records to review and monitor amenities and basic facilities for a safe and secure environment for SEDGs.
9. To circulate, publicize, and facilitate existing welfare schemes like – Remedial, NET, entry into services, and residential Coaching for SC/ST/OBC (non-creamy layer), Minority Community, and PwD Students.
10. To establish a team of counsellors, social workers, and faculty members to provide emotional and social support to SEDGs to adapt to the environment of the HEI.
11. To focus on overall personality and skill development, including professional and soft skills, so as to ensure enhancing the student employability.
12. To organize periodic meetings and to monitor the progress of various schemes and all the HEIs may prepare a database of such schemes for SEDGs.
13. To assess the needs of SEDGs and make necessary recommendations to the authorities of the HEIs.
14. To make faculty, staff, students, and service professionals aware of facilities available for SEDGs.
15. To sensitize all the students to bring an attitudinal change towards SEDGs to ensure participation of SEDGs in curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities in the HEIs.
16. To hold regular meetings with representatives of SEDG students to check their grievances and also meet with management/authorities of HEIs to facilitate discussion of the grievances of SEDG students and maintain the confidentiality of deliberations and data.
17. To review, monitor, and ensure disposal of all grievances within 15 days.
18. To inform all students during induction/counselling session about Zero-tolerance policy for any form of discrimination.

3.3 Governance of SEDGs Cell:

1	Chairperson. SEDGs Cell	
2	Senior Professor	Member
3	In-charge of Internal Complaint Committee	Member
4	Coordinator/Director of IQAC	Member
5	SC/ST Representative	Member
6	OBC Representative	Member
7	Two Students' Representative belonging to SEDGs	Members (one male and one female member)
8	Assistant Registrar/ Administrative Officer	Member Secretary

* Chairperson and members to be nominated by Head of the HEI

INDICATIVE GLOSSARY

Definitions/ Key-terms

The definitions mentioned in these guidelines are under those appearing in the relevant Gazette notifications, Government of India NEP 2020, and guidelines notified by the University Grants Commission, unless the context otherwise requires, as under:

1. The **Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)** are those who, for historical reasons and the causes of their prevailing disadvantaged social, economic, educational, vocational, and locational conditions, cannot have equal access to the various facilities and opportunities available for higher education.
2. The category “**Economically Weaker Section (EWS)**” refers to those sections of society that are not covered under the scheme of reservation for SC/ST/OBC and whose gross annual income from all sources (as per the existing criteria) is below Rs.8 lakhs for the financial year preceding the year of application for admission/recruitment.
3. The category “**Other Backward Classes**” refers to the class or classes of citizens who are socially and educationally backward and are so determined and listed by the Central Government or by State Governments in the respective list of OBCs.
4. As per the existing notification, the Creamy Layer status of an OBC student is determined based on the income status of their parents. Hence, under the SEDGs, eligible OBC students are those in the “non-Creamy layer,” which means the parents’ income of an OBC student has been below Rs.8 lakhs per annum during the last three consecutive years. (Ref. DoPT O.M. No 36033/1.2013-Estt. (Res.) dated 13th September 2017 (which may be amended from time to time).
5. “**Persons with Disabilities**” means a person with a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders a person’s complete and adequate participation in society equally with others, as defined under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.
6. “**Persons with benchmark Disabilities**” means a person with not less than forty percent of a specified disability where a specified disability has not been defined in measurable terms and includes persons with disabilities where a specified disability has been defined in measurable terms, as certified by the certifying authority.
7. “**Scheduled Castes**” means the Scheduled Castes, notified under Article 341 of the Constitution of India.
8. “**Scheduled Tribes**” means the Scheduled Tribes, notified under Article 342 of the Constitution of India.
9. “**SEDGs Budget**” means the separate budget generated by HEIs from their own sources/ CSR/Voluntary/Donations for the welfare and benefit of students belonging to SEDGs.