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## UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** Inclusive education has become an important concern in Indian higher education, particularly after the National Education Policy 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. The present paper examines the relevance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a practical framework for making higher education more accessible, flexible, and learner-centred. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based on secondary sources such as policy documents, books, reports, and scholarly literature. The paper argues that inclusion cannot be achieved only through admission or reservation; it also requires changes in curriculum, classroom practices, assessment, infrastructure, and teacher preparedness. UDL offers a useful approach because it encourages multiple ways of presenting content, engaging learners, and assessing learning. The paper concludes that UDL can strengthen inclusive education in Indian higher education if it is supported by teacher training, accessible infrastructure, institutional policy, and a positive attitude towards learner diversity.

**Key Terms** - Universal Design for Learning, Inclusive Education, Higher Education, NEP 2020, Disability, Accessibility, Teacher Education.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Education becomes meaningful only when it is available, accessible and useful for all learners. In present higher education classrooms, students come from different social, cultural, linguistic, economic and physical backgrounds. Some students may be first-generation learners, some may come from rural areas, some may face language-related difficulties, and some may have visible or invisible disabilities. Such diversity is a normal part of education, but the real question is whether our classrooms are prepared to respond to this diversity.

In India, the idea of inclusive education has received strong policy support. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes equity, access and inclusion in education. It recognizes that learners from socio-economically disadvantaged groups require meaningful academic and institutional support, not merely formal admission (Ministry of Education, 2020). Similarly, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides a legal basis for non-discrimination, accessibility, reasonable accommodation and equal opportunity in education (Government of India, 2016).

Even with these provisions, inclusion remains a challenge in actual classroom situations. Many students may be physically present in colleges and universities but still remain academically excluded because of rigid lectures, inaccessible materials, lack of assistive technology, examination-centred practices or insensitive classroom attitudes. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is useful in this context because it encourages teachers to plan teaching in such a way that different kinds of learners can access the same learning goals through different routes.

### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present paper has the following objectives:

- To explain the concept of Universal Design for Learning in relation to inclusive education.
- To examine the relevance of UDL in Indian higher education.
- To identify important barriers that affect inclusive learning in higher education institutions.
- To suggest practical measures for using UDL in teaching, learning and assessment.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is based on secondary sources of information, including the National Education Policy 2020, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, UNESCO reports, books and research literature related to Universal Design for Learning and inclusive education. The paper does not present primary field data. Instead, it reviews and interprets existing literature to develop a clear understanding of how UDL can contribute to inclusive higher education in India.

### IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Universal Design for Learning is based on a simple but important idea: all learners do not learn in the same way. Some students understand better through oral explanation, some through written notes, some through visual material, some through discussion and some through practical examples. In the same way, all learners may not be able to express their understanding through the same method. A student who is weak in written expression may explain well orally; another student may perform better through a project, presentation or reflective assignment.

CAST describes UDL as a framework that improves and optimizes teaching and learning for all people by reducing barriers in the learning environment (CAST, 2024). The strength of UDL is that it shifts attention from the limitations of the learner to the barriers created by the learning environment. For example, if a visually impaired student cannot access scanned handwritten notes, the difficulty is not only with the student; it is also with the inaccessible form of the material.

**Figure 1. Basic principles of Universal Design for Learning**

Engagement Motivation and participation	Representation Different ways of presenting content	Action & Expression Different ways of showing learning
<b>Universal Design for Learning reduces barriers in teaching and learning.</b>		
Flexible curriculum + accessible material + learner-centred assessment = inclusive higher education		

## V. RELEVANCE OF UDL IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Indian higher education institutions serve learners from highly diverse backgrounds. A common classroom may include students from urban and rural areas, different languages, different caste and class locations, different levels of digital exposure and different learning needs. In such a situation, one fixed teaching method cannot be equally effective for everyone.

UDL is especially relevant for students with disabilities. The RPwD Act, 2016 emphasizes reasonable accommodation and accessibility in education (Government of India, 2016). UDL supports this legal and ethical commitment by encouraging teachers to use accessible materials, flexible classroom strategies and varied assessment practices. It also supports learners who face language and background-related barriers. Many students enter higher education after studying in regional-medium schools. When teaching suddenly becomes highly technical or English-dominated, such students may lose confidence even when they have the ability to learn.

The approach also supports the vision of NEP 2020. The policy emphasizes flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, equity, learner-centred education and the removal of barriers to participation (Ministry of Education, 2020). UDL provides a classroom-level method for realizing these larger policy goals. For teacher education, the relevance of UDL is greater because future teachers must be prepared to deal with diverse classrooms.

## VI. BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE LEARNING

### 6.1 Rigid Teaching Practices

Many classrooms continue to depend mainly on the lecture method. A lecture may be useful, but when it becomes the only method, many learners are left behind. Students who need visuals, examples, discussion, repetition or practical demonstration may not be able to participate fully.

### 6.2 Inaccessible Learning Materials

Learning materials are often provided in formats that are not accessible to all learners. Scanned PDFs, unclear photocopies, videos without captions and overly complex notes may create difficulties for students with disabilities as well as students with language-related challenges.

### 6.3 Examination-Centred Learning

Higher education often gives excessive importance to written examinations. This creates pressure on students and sometimes ignores other forms of understanding. UDL does not reject examinations, but it supports more flexible and meaningful assessment practices.

### 6.4 Lack of Teacher Preparation

Teachers play the most important role in inclusive education. However, many teachers have not received adequate training in UDL, disability awareness, assistive technology or inclusive assessment. Without teacher preparation, inclusion remains a policy idea rather than a classroom reality.

## VII. PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF UDL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UDL can be implemented through simple but thoughtful classroom changes. It does not always require expensive technology. Many UDL practices are connected with planning, clarity, flexibility and sensitivity. The following table presents some practical differences between traditional classroom practices and UDL-based practices.

**Table 1. Traditional and UDL-based classroom practices**

Area	Traditional Practice	UDL-Based Practice
Teaching	Mostly lecture-based teaching	Lecture with discussion, visuals, examples and activities
Learning material	Printed or scanned notes only	Accessible PDFs, audio support, videos, summaries and presentations
Participation	Same task for all students	Choice of individual, pair, group or oral participation
Assessment	Mainly written examination	Written work, viva, presentation, project and reflective assignment
Feedback	General and delayed feedback	Timely, specific and improvement-oriented feedback
Accessibility	Support after difficulty appears	Accessibility planned from the beginning

## VIII. DISCUSSION

The discussion on UDL is important because inclusion should not remain limited to official documents. A student's name on the admission register does not automatically mean that the student is included. Real inclusion happens when the learner can understand, participate, ask questions, access materials, complete assignments and feel respected in the classroom.

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report on inclusion states that exclusion can occur because of disability, poverty, language, gender, location, identity or other social factors (UNESCO, 2020). This broader understanding is very relevant in India, where educational inequality is shaped by several social and economic conditions. UDL offers a practical way forward because it does not demand a separate system for every learner. Instead, it encourages teachers to make the common classroom more flexible.

However, UDL should not be reduced to a checklist. It is not enough to add one video, one activity or one alternative assignment and call the classroom inclusive. UDL requires a deeper change in educational thinking. It asks teachers to accept that learners differ and that teaching must respond to those differences. Equal treatment does not always mean identical treatment. Sometimes fairness requires additional support so that all learners can reach the same educational goals.

## IX. SUGGESTIONS

- Higher education institutions should organize regular faculty development programmes on inclusive pedagogy and UDL.
- Teachers should prepare learning materials in accessible formats, including readable PDFs, audio support, captions and clear summaries where required.
- Classrooms should use a combination of lecture, discussion, visual presentation, examples, demonstration and activity-based learning.
- Assessment should include flexibility through written assignments, presentations, viva, projects, reflective writing and application-based tasks.
- Institutions should strengthen equal opportunity cells and accessibility support systems.
- Teacher education programmes should include practical training in UDL-based lesson planning.

## X. CONCLUSION

Universal Design for Learning is highly relevant for Indian higher education because it provides a practical approach to inclusion. It helps teachers move beyond the idea that the same method will work for every student. By offering multiple ways of engagement, representation and expression, UDL makes teaching more flexible and learning more meaningful.

Policies such as NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act, 2016 have created an important foundation for inclusive education in India. Yet, the success of inclusion depends on how these ideas are translated into classroom practice. If teaching remains rigid, materials remain inaccessible and assessment remains narrowly examination-centred, many learners will continue to remain excluded despite formal access to higher education. UDL reminds us that the problem is not always within the learner; very often, the barrier lies in the design of the system.

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