



# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Transforming Education for Children with Disabilities

**Research Capacity, Training, and Culture in South Asian Universities:  
Understanding the Research Landscape in South Asia and  
Building Capacity for Disability-Inclusion Research Programs**

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8<sup>th</sup> September, 2021



Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office

# Quick Overview

**Purpose of the study:** To better understand research issues as related to South Asia, particularly with the purpose of understanding how to better build capacity and support for disability-inclusion research in South Asian universities.

**Countries involved:** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

**Methodology used:** The study was conducted in three modes of data collection: an open online questionnaire with over 200 participants; focus group discussions in five countries; and analysis of program and curriculum documents from South Asian universities.

# South Asian Context

A review of literature on South Asian universities and their approaches to research shows:

- South Asian academic institutions are viewed as a means for national economic development via direct intervention, not autonomous universities that generate independent research<sup>1</sup>
- Challenge 1: Most higher education institutions in the region lack sufficient public financial support, adequate infrastructure, access to regional and international research networks, and support and time allocation for academic faculty to conduct research<sup>2</sup>
- Challenge 2: Many highly skilled researchers and scholars migrate to Global North countries and, although the economic impact of 'human capital flight' may be mixed, this does impact research culture and capacity.<sup>3</sup>
- As a result of this, South Asian universities don't attract as many internationally mobile scholars, due to lack of resources and a dearth of highly-skilled researchers

# Methodology

## Primary research questions:

1. How are research methods taught, and research skills developed, in South Asian higher education institutions?
2. What challenges and opportunities exist for South Asian researchers in higher education institutions to undertake research?

## Research questions for specific programs in the areas of disability studies, inclusive education, special educational needs, and other disability-related courses:

1. What kinds of courses and modules on disability, inclusion, and special education are currently present in South Asian higher education institutions; and what is the quality, rigor, utility, and scope of these courses and modules?
2. What is the capacity of these disability-related programs in terms of research?

### Document review

Course and module guides, syllabuses, and outlines.

Targeted and open-call sources

Both research methods documents, as well as disability-related program documents, 33 in total

### Focus group discussions

5 out of 7 countries

22 participants made up of academic faculty from a public higher education institution from each country

Recorded and thematically analyzed

### Online questionnaire

Open, online questionnaire taken by 201 participants

A section specific to disability-inclusive programs which 55 respondents filled in

# Research and disability-inclusive programs in South Asia

- Disability research in South Asia has **difficulty reaching a global audience** and becoming part of global disability discourse, especially if it comes from outside of India which dominates South Asian research<sup>4</sup>
- Most research that is published in Global North journals and publications feature either Global North researchers or South Asian – or South Asian heritage – researchers with a **significant link to the Global North** through residency, collaboration, or research training from Global North universities. <sup>5</sup>
- Most of the disability-inclusive programs in South Asia are **practical professional training programs** rather than focusing on research and learning
- There is a lot of work in disability-inclusion issues that is occurring in the **non-profit and private sectors** in South Asia, which also gets overlooked in ‘mainstream’ academic research publications and discourses

# Findings

## Research Training in South Asian Universities

- Nearly all universities in South Asia first begin their research training for students at the undergraduate level. 92% respondents attest to this fact.
- Research methods training and research ethics training requirements vary considerably and are inconsistent across the South Asian region. Only 42% said their university required post-graduate students to complete research ethics module or workshop
- Training in specific methodologies are optional and students are most often offered a generic and lecture-based introduction to conducting research. Most common types of methodologies include interviews (65%), questionnaires (83%), secondary data analysis (63.5%), action research (30%)
- The challenges that students in South Asia face in conducting research are predominantly **not enough resources (86%), not enough time in their programs, and difficulty in managing research projects.**
- There are not enough supervisors with higher-level qualifications in South Asian universities to increase post-graduate student numbers and capacity.
- A specific challenge for those working in fragile or conflict-affected regions is lack of access to field data due to safety and security concerns, leading to no practical experience

*“What we really want in our undergraduates also... is to have practitioner clinicians. It’s been really wonderful to see how some of our graduates are doing research on their practice in hospitals. Both audiology and speech therapy, what we are looking for is practitioner-research – someone to really help inform our practice; Develop our own local evidence-base, which is culturally specific and linguistically appropriate.”– Participant from Sri Lanka*

# Findings

## Research Capacity and Culture in South Asian Universities

- Most South Asian university researchers indicated that there was **not much institutional support** to develop research grant funding proposals, unless in certain cases when the research has substantial benefits for the university themselves.
- In terms of the availability of research funding, there is some funding available at the institutional and national level, but it is often **not consistent or reliable, and the process is extremely competitive.**
- **64%** respondents have never submitted a proposal for international funding, and for those that have the success rate is very low at 25%
- There are **limited funds** available for South Asian researchers to attend international research conferences.
- Academic faculty in South Asia are mostly required to conduct research and publish, but there are **few resources to support** these requirements.
- A majority of the participants did not have any links to Global North universities, and those that did had fostered them through personal connections.

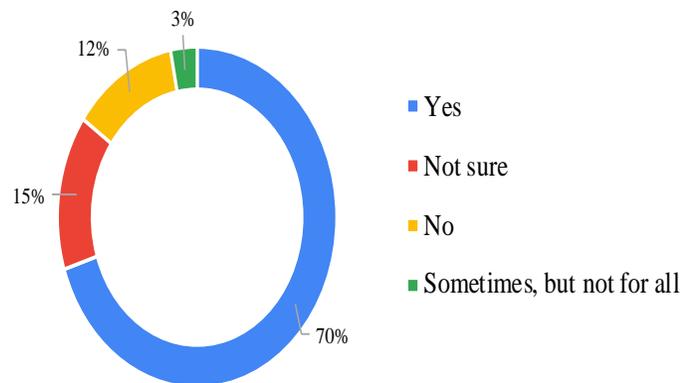
*“Things have gone online and require payment. When it says like \$50 for an article, I can’t get my head around that. I do look for research for free on some dodgy websites. We try to find ways to access research literature in any way we can. We keep in touch with colleagues overseas, directly writing to article authors to ask to share their work.”*

*–Participant from Sri Lanka*

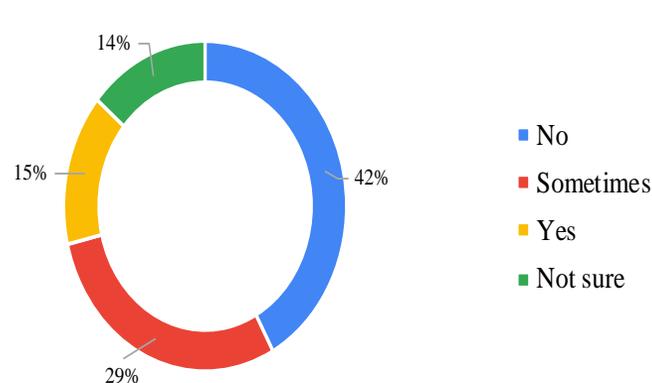
# Findings

- South Asian faculty have strongly indicated (93%) that they would conduct more research, but **do not have the time** because of other commitments to the university – particularly in terms of their teaching and administrative duties.
- Most South Asian universities have a research ethics review board, although not always comprehensive or effective. There are not many national requirements or permissions needed for conducting research.
- Participants indicated that there are procedures for doctoral students, but for master's students the research ethics review is primarily under the purview and opinion of the supervisors

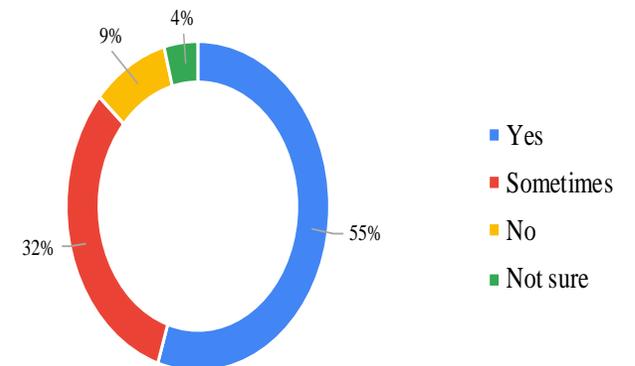
Does your institution have a research ethics review board that approves all of your research?



Do you need to gain research approval from a national research board or science agency?



Is there research funding available from your institution?

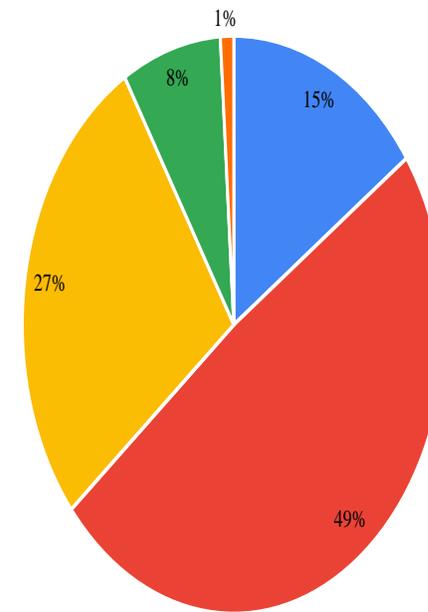
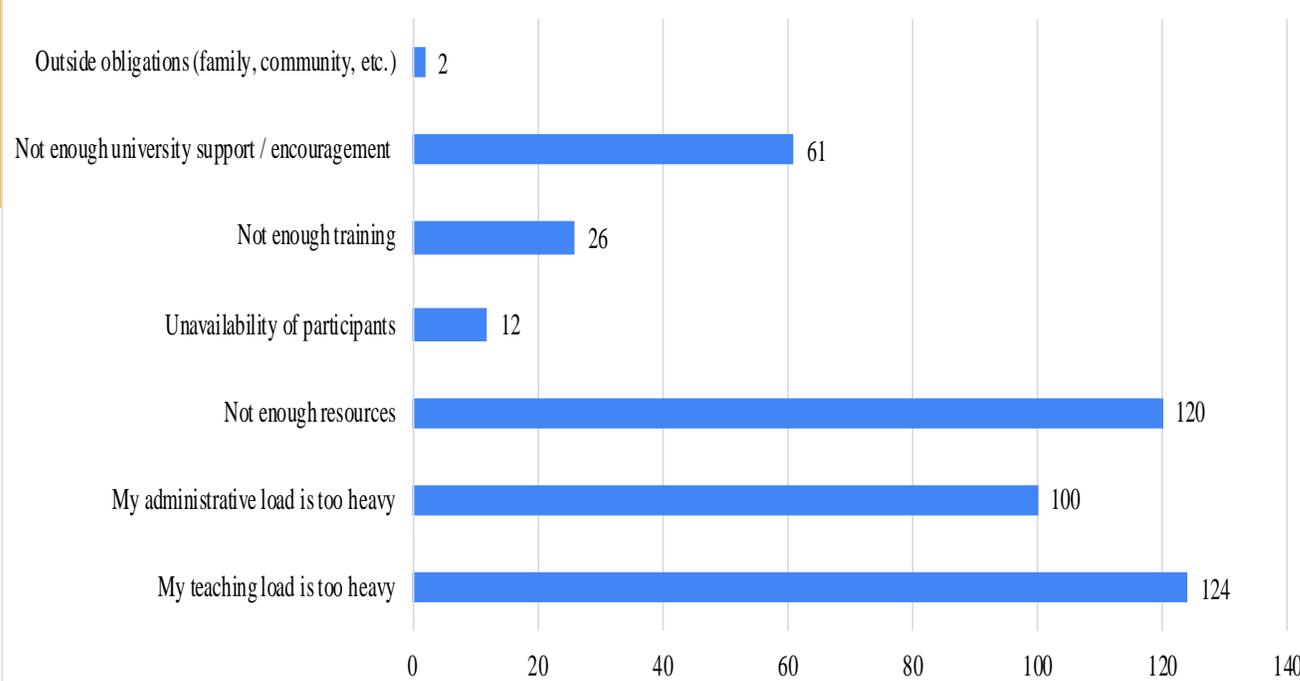


# Challenges to conducting research

The historical and contextual nature of South Asian universities clearly skews towards a significant emphasis on teaching and learning with little time devoted in a work-load model for research and writing activities

What challenges do you face when trying to conduct research?

How much of your time in your professional role is taken up by research activities?



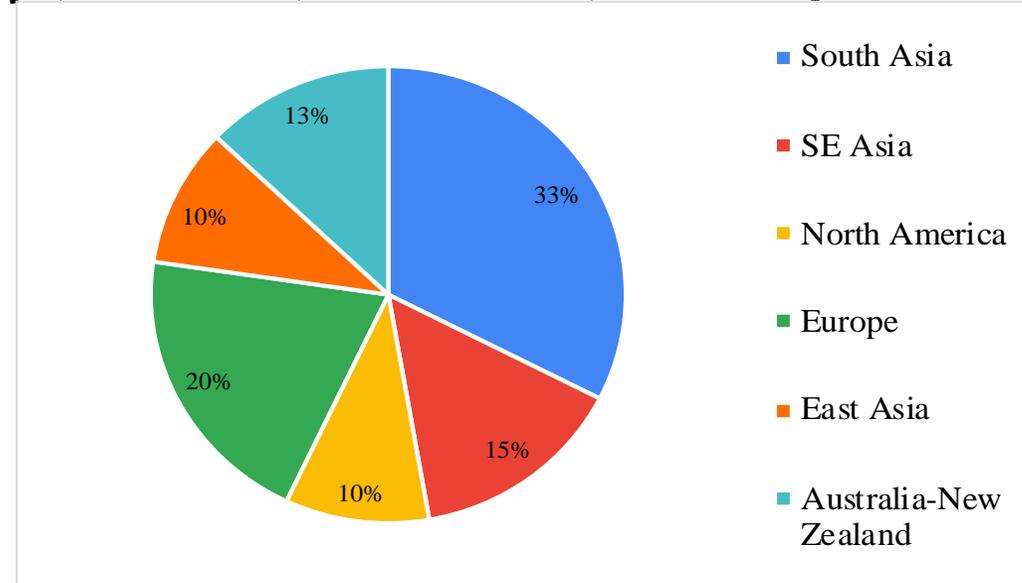
- 0-10% (I barely have any time to do research because I have other responsibilities)
- 11-25% (Research is a part of what I am expected to, but I have other obligations as well)
- 26-50% (Research is a major part of my professional role)
- 51-75% (Research is mostly what I do)
- 76-100% (Research is all that I do)

*The universities here all these years have been teaching-focused universities. They are unable to see research as part of academia. They are unable to see that when we are talking about the university we are talking about teaching and research. That concept is still not instilled in the culture.”– Participant from Maldives*

# Findings

## Research Skills and Experience

- The majority (67%) of respondents to the survey received their **research training outside of South Asia**
- Despite the challenges, most respondents viewed themselves as **research active** (75%) and had at least adequate research skills (83%)
- Most South Asian researchers responding to the survey (62%) **did not have any specific research training** or certificates in specific methods or software
- There is a diverse range of research methodologies that academic staff engage upon, with the most common being surveys, interviews, case studies, secondary data analysis, and a mixed-method approach



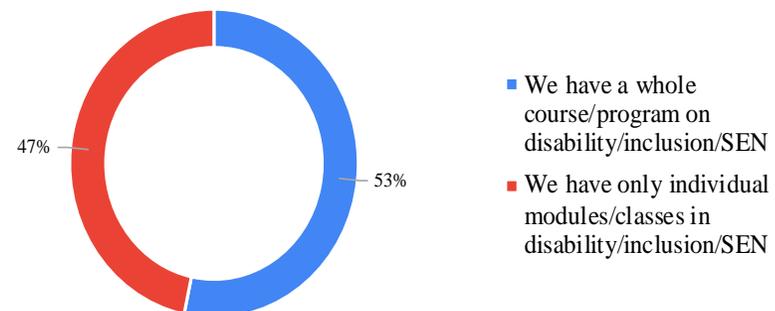
Regions where research training was received

# Findings

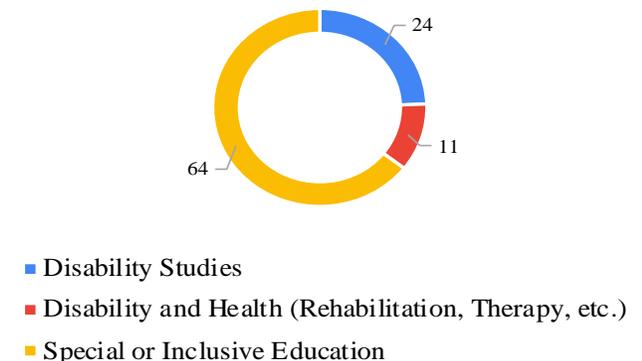
## Disability-Inclusion Research and Programs

- The majority of disability-related programs identified in this study are in **applied professional training areas** such as in education and health. Most disability-related programs occurred at the undergraduate level.
- Most disability-related programs received **significant capacity-building, resources, and materials from Global North sources**.
- This leads to a biased approach to how disability is conceptualized, and may result in not being contextually appropriate for the region. Additionally this continues to promote a unidirectional transfers of knowledge i.e. that from North to South.
- Most programs in South Asia are specialized towards disability as a **separate and individualized attribute**, rather than a socially constructive approach

Does your institution provide a whole program related to disability-inclusion, or only individual modules?



Types of Disability-Inclusion Programs Offered



# Recommendations

- **Encourage research to be a part of professional training programs in disability-related topics.** Most disability-related programs were offered at the undergraduate level and were more professionally orientated programs. Having research-active faculty in these programs will further increase the quality of these programs, as supported by the research-teaching nexus literature.
- **Increase post-graduate opportunities in disability-related programs that encourage research.** Build upon the undergraduate programs already on offer, and support research culture and activity in departments, by further increasing post-graduate students. Partnerships with a Global North institution to provide supervisors could help address the issue of suitably-credentialed supervisors for all students.
- **Offer more flexible programs (part-time, online, hybrid, seasonal) that allow more participation from professionals already working in disability-related fields.** Post-graduate programs offered full-time and in-person limits the number of potential students as they would have to take leave from their jobs and possibly move themselves and their families. Part-time, seasonal, or online options would further increase the availability of students and potentially lead to innovative programs and research as a result.
- **Increase disability presence in general programs, but also maintain some specialization.** The balance can be tricky, but ultimately disability is a cross-cutting issue and should be a characteristic of any program. This is not to take away from some programmatic focuses on disability, particularly in relation to alternative communication and specific sensory characteristics. General programs such as teacher education, for example, could be better served with an emphasis on general practices that are inclusive for a diverse group of students rather than as a specialization.
- **Focus on increasing South Asian sources for materials, knowledge, etc.** There are South Asian journals on disability, published in South Asian languages, but these are not widely known. More can be done to disseminate these regionally, but also become know globally.

# Recommendations

- **Increase institutional support for research grant proposal development and maintenance.** A majority of participants felt that there was inadequate institutional support for developing competitive research grant proposals as academic faculty are already burdened with a heavy teaching and program administrative load
- **Require research and publication outputs, but also make sure that resources follow these requirements.** Policies of research incentivization were found to be not in line with the necessary resources needed to facilitate research output.
- **Encourage and recognize publications in local languages, while also providing resources to publish in dual-language (preferred) journals.** English-language journals dominate journal impact ratings and populate indexes, which are often biased towards English-language publications. Researchers from any country should be able to write in their own language and publish in several languages. Technology may be getting better at facilitating this, and eventually artificial intelligence might be good enough to accomplish this automatically.
- **Make global research publications, journals, and books financially accessible.** The financial inaccessibility of academic publications is a major issue everywhere in the world, but particularly in South Asia where there are limited resources. We would recommend further investment in open-access publications and suggest that policies in the Global North such as pushes for publication affordability, open-access requirements, and publicly available university research can make a big difference to the accessibility of academic resources in the Global South.
- **Make research software accessible.** Like research publications, research software also come at an extremely high cost that is unaffordable in the South Asia region. This often leads to the availability of pirated software. It is in the software companies' best interest to have regionally-appropriate pricing models.
- **Provide incentives and resources for global research engagement and collaboration, particularly south-south collaboration.** Most participants indicated that they and their institutions mostly had interactions and collaborations with Global North institutions. The participants of this study also noted that there was very little funding available for them to attend international research conferences. More investment is necessary in this regard, but also could be an opportunity to build regional capacity and collaboration to reduce travel cost and time and also foster more south-south collaboration



Thank you!  
Join us to continue the conversation.

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