

# Opinion | The Urgent Need for Reasonable Accommodation in Higher Education

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Many students face impairments in executive functions. (File for representation)

## **Higher educational institutions must ensure that students with mental health conditions receive the necessary support and accommodations equivalent to those available for other students with special needs**

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In India, there is a discernible rise in mental health conditions among students, such as anxiety and depression. Several factors contribute to this mental health scenario among university students, including low stress tolerance and resilience, an overemphasis on academic success, and a lack of involvement in hobbies, sports, or recreational activities. Parental factors may include a focus on high scores and good rankings, imposing subjects or courses that do not align with the student's interests, and pressuring students to appear for entrance exams for professional courses even when they struggle to pass after prolonged preparation and multiple attempts.

Systemic factors such as rapidly evolving education systems, increased academic competition and requirements, the trend of compulsory private coaching, and the lack of adequate seats in reputable universities place additional burdens on students.

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Students with mental health conditions face several cognitive and psychosocial difficulties. Cognitive difficulties include an inability to focus and sustain attention, impaired memory, and slower processing speeds, which make it challenging to persist with academic tasks, retain and recall necessary information, and understand and respond to information within a given timeframe.

Many students face impairments in executive functions such as planning, organising, time management, and emotional regulation, which can significantly interfere with learning, test-taking, task initiation and completion, and overall academic performance. Some students may also experience difficulties with social and communication skills, which hampers their ability to build peer relationships, engage in classroom activities or group work, and fosters challenges in interpersonal relationships and social interactions.

## What is reasonable accommodation?

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The 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016' defines reasonable accommodation as “necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, without imposing a disproportionate or undue burden in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise of rights equally with others” and mandates the higher educational institutions to provide an inclusive educational environment and reasonable accommodation to all students with special needs.

To meet this requirement, the UGC has published the 'Accessibility Guidelines and Standards for Higher Education Institutions and Universities,' which outlines steps for assessing disability-specific needs and providing support and reasonable accommodations for students with special needs, including those with mental health conditions. Higher educational institutions must ensure that students with mental health conditions receive the necessary support and accommodations equivalent to those available for other students with special needs.

## Why is Reasonable accommodation necessary?

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Given the difficulties and challenges faced by students with mental health conditions in higher education, many may require additional academic support and reasonable accommodations. According to the UGC guidelines, suggested accommodations in teaching and learning include breaks during classes, focusing on parts of a topic rather than the entire concept, transition support between timetable changes, preferential seating in the classroom, assistance with study skills, choices in assignments, and one-to-one feedback.

Accommodations for assessment, examination, and evaluation include step-by-step examination guidelines, quiet and distraction-free examination areas, breaks during exams, exams divided by page or section, alternate modalities for examination and evaluation or adapted question papers, and additional exam time.

The invisible nature of mental health conditions, combined with the hesitancy to disclose such conditions due to stigma and a shortage of trained professionals, can complicate the identification of needs for students with mental health conditions. This makes it challenging to provide the necessary support and accommodations.

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Nonetheless, when these measures are implemented appropriately, they can alleviate students' academic difficulties and help them navigate higher education systems more effectively. This, in turn, ensures equity, facilitates inclusion, and supports the goals outlined in the National Educational Policy, 2020.

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