



A Fair Chance for Education:
Gendered Pathways to Educational Success in Haryana

**Phase 3 Report: Institutional Initiatives to
Support Informed Choice in Accessing
Higher Education: Implementing a Taster
Day in Government Colleges in Haryana,
India**

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of Warwick.

Accompanying resources for the project

In addition to this report, other resources about the project are available on the project website: www.warwick.ac.uk/haryana. This includes various Project Outputs such as project reports and presentations, as well as other information about the project and the people involved.

The project can also be found on Twitter and Instagram as @FCFHaryana.

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List of abbreviations

IAS	Indian Administrative Services
CG	Consultative Group
FCF	Fair Chance Foundation
FCF Project	A Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Educational Success in Haryana
FD	Fieldwork Diary
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HSSC	Haryana Staff Selection Commission
MDC	Mahendragarh District College (pseudonym)
NCC	National Cadet Corps
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PI	Principal Investigator
RQ	Research Question
SDC	Sonipat District College (pseudonym)
SiDC	Sirsa District College (pseudonym)
WCPRS	Warwick Collaborative Postgraduate Research Scholarships

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Preface

This report presents the development and findings from Phase 3 of the 5-year 'Fair Chance for Education' project, funded by Fair Chance Foundation (henceforth referred to as the FCF project) which focused on gendered trajectories to Higher Education (HE) in Haryana, India.

Phase 1 revealed that most of the participants in the study identified their family as a key factor, and the home as a key space, where educational decisions were made and supported (Henderson et al., 2021). It was found that gendered access to HE was influenced by multiple factors, such as distance between home and college, family composition, and family background. However, there was very limited understanding shown in the literature of *how* educational decisions leading to HE were made within families.

Phase 2 therefore sought to explore the social and family background of this cohort of students in more depth, to establish how educational decision making was undertaken within families. It was carried out by Dr Anjali Thomas as her doctoral thesis entitled 'Role of Families in the Gendered Educational Trajectories of Undergraduate Students in Haryana, India' (Thomas, 2021). The Phase 2 findings report presents the findings from the doctoral study in an accessible way for a wider audience (Thomas and Henderson, 2022).

This report presents the findings from Phase 3 of the research. It builds on the previous research but shifts the focus to the institutional response. The research was carried out by Nikita Samanta as her doctoral project. It raises the question of whether there is an outreach culture within Government Colleges which recognises and responds to the context in which educational decision making is undertaken. The research also examines the role of Government Colleges in mitigating the lack of accurate, relevant, formal knowledge and information available to young women and men and their families, which had emerged as a major factor that affects educational choices in Haryana.

The doctoral research studies (for Phases 2 and 3) were funded by the Fair Chance Foundation (FCF) in collaboration with the Warwick Collaborative Postgraduate Research Scholarships (WCPRS) scheme as well as additional funding from the Warwick donor community and the Department of Education Studies (Phase 2) and School of Law (Phase 3) at Warwick.

Executive summary

Introduction

Phases 1 and 2 of the FCF project identified the social inequalities that influence educational choices and the decision of whether to access HE (Henderson et al., 2021; Thomas and Henderson, 2022). They highlighted the key role played by families in Haryana in influencing the HE choices of young women and men.

These earlier phases also established that Government Colleges in Haryana are providing educational opportunities for first generation students whose parents (and wider family members) have little or no experience of HE and access to very limited sources of information within their social settings. Students thus often lack reliable information and support in navigating HE choices.

The need for HE policy responses which recognise that these social, cultural, and economic disadvantages deeply affect access to HE is now widely recognised. 'Widening Participation' programmes conducted within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a key role to play as policy interventions to ensure greater diversity and inclusion among the student body. Evidence from a number of countries suggests that open-days are one of the most effective outreach strategies to enable knowledge of and access to HE (Connor et al., 1999; Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Reay, 2016).

This Phase 3 study examined the role of Government Colleges in mitigating the lack of accurate, relevant, formal knowledge, and information available to young women, young men, and their families. In particular, it involved working in partnership with local colleges to develop, implement, and evaluate a 'Taster Day', as a specific form of outreach activity.

The research asked four research questions:

1. What role do public institutions currently play, if any, in enabling gendered access to higher education in Haryana?
2. What are the institutional attitudes towards carrying out outreach in Haryana?
3. Does the development and delivery of an outreach activity contribute towards the development of an institutional culture of outreach and if so how?
4. What impact does the delivery of this outreach activity have on differently positioned young women and men and their access to higher education?

The study therefore explored the role of Government Colleges as local hubs of knowledge about HE for first generation of students and their families and consequently as facilitators of informed choice.

Research design

The research used a range of methods: participatory; document analysis to understand the current institutional context relating to access; observation and journaling to study the institution in the process of organising the taster day; questionnaires administered immediately prior to and post the taster day to student

attendees; and semi-structured interviews with selected student attendees prior to and after the event to measure the impact of the activity.

The bilingual (Hindi and English) tools for this study were developed by Nikita Samanta at the University of Warwick. She conducted the fieldwork at the three colleges between September 2019 and November 2019. Data was also collated, coded, and analysed by Nikita Samanta at the University of Warwick.

Key insights

- There have been few requirements for state funded HEIs to undertake outreach activities and therefore there was little formal outreach carried out by these institutions in Haryana.
- Outreach had been confined to printed prospectus and newspaper advertisements announcing admissions, which did not provide the students with much information on the mechanisms to access HE or the choices available.

The transition to online university application systems

- The move to online admissions, and a reliance on college websites as the main source of formal information, since 2012 had reduced opportunities for prospective students and their families to visit colleges and to make contact with staff.
- Online admission increased the challenges faced by first generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose families lacked resources to support informed decision making during the admissions process.
- Because of a lack of appropriate technology at home, students and their families relied upon the resources offered by cyber cafés. The resultant errors in the applications had to be addressed by college staff. Predominate gender conservative cultural assumptions were reinforced through this application process.

College attitude towards outreach

- Senior college staff had a positive attitude towards the idea of carrying out institutional outreach and recognition of its role in improving informed choices about access to HE. This was evidenced by staff undertaking informal outreach on social media, assisting parents and counselling prospective students.
- There were considerable constraints on the staff capacity to undertake outreach. The colleges were under resourced, lacking their full complement of permanent staff and were required to undertake a range of additional non educationally related responsibilities.
- Senior college staff at all three colleges were willing to undertake a taster day when suggested by the researcher.
- The level of engagement in the taster day reflected different institutional contexts within the three colleges. One saw the taster day as a way of increasing numbers; another saw it as a way of addressing issues relating to

inclusion and the third, an oversubscribed institution, was willing to take part but less inclined to take responsibility for implementation.

- The project was designed to evaluate the extent to which college staff had the capacity to plan and then implement such an event. A staff 'champion' who understood the objectives and was willing to work with the researcher greatly assisted the planning and implementation this process.
- Two events were conducted, hosted by the colleges, demonstrating support for and ability to undertake such an event (while the planning for the event took place in the third college, ultimately it was not possible to conduct it due to external constraints). The event was well received by staff.

Outcome of the taster day

- The study demonstrated therefore that the taster day events were successful in building the colleges' capacity to carry out such events in the future.
- Analysis of the pre- and post-event surveys and interviews evidenced that the taster days assisted young women and men from disadvantaged backgrounds in learning more about the choices available to them and to navigate the online application and admission process.
- There was a very significant increase in the number who now felt they had the information necessary to choose a HE institution.
- More young women than young men now felt confident in this decision making.
- There was also evidence of increased confidence in navigating the admission process and making informed choice about subjects to be studied.
- Overall, the analysis revealed a very high level of participants reporting that the event was useful and such an event should be adopted by colleges.
- The data from the evaluation conducted 10 months later (drawn from a limited response rate due to the Covid pandemic) established that the taster day had been very valuable in helping them to navigate the HE admission process and to make informed choices.
- One year later the two colleges who participated in the study reported an increase in application numbers. One had not carried out a precise quantitative evaluation, but the other reported a 15% increase in numbers. It is important to remember that by this time India was experiencing the full effects of the Covid pandemic.

Overall, the study demonstrated the effectiveness of carrying out institutional outreach, especially by colleges that were identified in Phase 1 as being at the frontiers of access to HE (because they are low cost and situated locally and often accessed by first generation students).

Recommendations

The recommendations for Phase 3 draw on and extend the recommendations of Phases 1 and 2. This is displayed in the table below.

The role of the government and the NGO sector		
Phase 1: state-funded educational schemes and interventions should be disseminated widely in a variety of means, including directly to young people.	Phase 2: this information should be shared with all members of the family (through appropriate means), for the purposes of collective informed decision making.	
Phase 1: Aanganwadis and other localised state services such as village panchayats, government schools and colleges should collaborate in this effort.	Phase 2: the need for these services to consider parents, grandparents, other relatives and community members as recipients of information on HE, in addition to the young people as targeted recipients. It would be beneficial for public service employers to store information about HE to disburse to employees, as the workplace has been identified as one means of parents from disadvantaged groups learning about information.	Phase 3: Staffing shortages should be addressed to facilitate the role of staff in important activities such as outreach. Faculty members' additional duties that are not related to higher education (e.g. assisting with elections) should be reduced to allow further concentration on core duties.
Phase 1: families need to have access to readily available information about school choice and higher education choice (including subject choice) and employability options, and connecting these to envision educational trajectories for young people.	Phase 2: different family members may have different types of involvement and may benefit from the provision of information about HE in different locations and formats. For instance, fathers and mothers occupy different physical spaces in the community, so information targeting different parents needs to be provided in appropriate spaces. Audio or video information is particularly important for family members who have not attained high levels of formal education. This needs to be a key	Phase 3: The application process should be made multimodal (offline and online) to make it easier for rural students (or with disadvantaged backgrounds) to apply to HE.

	consideration as the government develops and supports technology and as HEIs follow the NEP recommendations to provide outreach.	
Phase 1: information should be included about costs of HE, including fees but also supplementary costs, as well as scholarships and bursaries (including of competitive HEIs which may be located further away).	Phase 2: the need for advice for low-income families for budgeting for HE and information to be presented in a clear and accessible manner including for parents who may have doubts about the worth of HE.	Phase 3: Funding should be made available for colleges to organise taster days and other outreach activities.
The role of colleges		
Phase 1: colleges need to engage with families more directly, through visits to communities and through guided visits of the colleges, and mothers and fathers as well as sisters and brothers have different roles and these need to be respected and explored.	<p>Phase 2: it is highly recommended for colleges to interact with young people's relatives, including parents and other family members, as well as the young people. It is important for all those who have a say in decision making to access more information and understanding about HE. Just targeting one family member e.g. young person or father does not reflect the way in which educational decisions are taken within families.</p> <p>Some families do contact e.g. a college principal for advice, and this can be extremely helpful. However many parents would not be aware that this is possible nor be aware of how to go about seeking advice from the college. Colleges could usefully discuss how they wish to be contacted and for which types of questions, and should then display this information on any materials circulated about the college.</p> <p>Other family members e.g. maternal uncles may also play a strong role in young</p>	Phase 3: Families should be invited and involved in the outreach efforts.

	people's education, so the concept of the family needs to encompass potential input from other relatives.	
Phase 1: colleges should formalise the role of current students acting as ambassadors for the colleges in disseminating information about higher education in their communities and giving guided visits of the college.	<p>Phase 2: 'trailblazer' students have potential to make a significant contribution to spreading accurate, reliable and experience-based information about HE in local communities who do not have a history of HE. Formalising this role in the form of student ambassadors will enhance informed choice.</p> <p>Trailblazer influence is gendered, i.e. young women are more likely to influence other young women and likewise with young men. This should be borne in mind when establishing the role of student ambassador including in terms of gender balance of ambassadors.</p>	<p>Phase 3: It would also be useful if there were members of staff hired to solely look after the admission process who could be responsible for outreach and improving access.</p> <p>Colleges should recognise and reward existing outreach practices that are occurring and faculty members' endeavours in relation to outreach</p> <p>When colleges organise events such as taster days, they need to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointing a key in-charge faculty member to oversee the event. • Including a number of other faculty members in the planning. • Plan for bus transport and refreshments. • Arrange the programme. • Ensure the venue has audio-visual equipment. • Work with local schools to attend. • Consider using a questionnaire to evaluate the success of the event. • Try to invite parents and other family members as well as school students.
Phase 1: colleges should provide step-by-step guidance on the admissions process and ensure this is available at schools, internet	Phase 2: this information could also be made available to employees in government jobs. Locations where the parental generation frequent can be	Phase 3: Colleges, especially public colleges, should carry out some form of outreach to bridge the gap in information and

<p>cafés and at the college itself, and available online.</p>	<p>identified and stocked with this information.</p>	<p>knowledge and make access to HE easier.</p> <p>Informational brochures should be distributed in hard copy to give students all the necessary information about a particular college.</p>
<p>The role of schools</p>		
<p>Phase 1: schools should work with colleges and college ambassadors to facilitate the spreading of reliable, accurate information about higher education options to young people and, where possible, their communities.</p>	<p>Phase 2: when parents are called to school for parent-teacher meetings or other occasions, information about HE should be provided and clearly signalled.</p> <p>Some families face misfortune which severely affects their quality of life and livelihoods. Particularly of note are single-parent households including those affected by bereavement. Schools are more likely to be aware of these cases than e.g. targeted colleges, so, in cases like these, schools may need to pay additional attention to HE advice (especially on the systems and processes) for young people in families facing these situations.</p>	<p>Phase 3: Schools should work with local colleges to support their students attending taster days or invite faculty members to the college to provide information on HE.</p>
<p>Phase 1: young women in particular (as well as men) need to receive more training at school level in negotiation skills, so that they can have more involvement in discussions of their futures within the family.</p>	<p>Phase 2: the training can have an emphasis on how to engage in participatory discussion within the family and also on confidence building of young women.</p>	

1. The Phase 3 study

1.1 Introduction: the role of institutional outreach in accessing higher education

Phases 1 and 2 of this project identified the social inequalities that influence educational choices and the decision of whether to access HE (Henderson et al., 2021; Thomas and Henderson, 2022). They highlighted the key role played by families in influencing the HE choices of young women and men. Families in Haryana make these choices for women in particular based upon gendered assumptions which relate to the maintenance of family honour and reputation. These underpin the social practices in northern India (Chakravarti 1993, Kandiyoti 1988, Karve 1953, Dube 1988, Chowdhry 2011a and 2011b). More specifically, the expectation of feminine chastity ensures that safeguarding the safety and reputation of young women when they access public spaces, including HEIs, is of prime importance to families. As a result, choices are informed by distance from home, the availability of safe public transport, the social reputation of the HEI, and, if applicable, the safety and quality of hostel accommodation. In contrast, for young men the decisions are more informed by subject choice, academic reputation, and employability prospects due to the role of young men in providing financial support for their families.

These earlier phases also established that Government Colleges in Haryana are providing educational opportunities for first generation students whose parents (and wider family members) have little or no experience of HE and access to very limited sources of information within their social settings. Wider literature confirms that young people from marginalised groups often face a range of challenges in accessing HE, such as lack of social and cultural capital (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2008), financial difficulty, social sanctions on movement (Chowdhry, 2009; Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2008), logistical challenges such as lack of transportation, lack of awareness about the process of applying, and lack of knowledge about the various courses and avenues available to them in HE (Chanana 2007).

The need for policy responses which recognise that social, cultural, and economic disadvantages deeply affect access to HE is now widely recognised. This is rooted in the important understanding that a society's success is reliant on access to HE for all:

A successful learning society is one in which everyone obtains high-quality general education, leading to a comprehensive post-school education and training system in which everyone has access to suitable opportunities for lifelong learning, including a university within reach of everyone (Gorard et al., 2006, p. 9).

'Widening Participation' (WP) programmes have a key role to play as policy interventions to ensure greater diversity with HEIs and can lead to positive outcomes for individuals, for the economy, and for society more generally (Gorard et al., 2006; HEFCE, 2007; Moore et al., 2013; Osbourne, 2003; Younger et al., 2018; Harrison and Waller, 2017; O'Donnell et al., 2009). The forms of these widening participation interventions vary across countries and reflect the different inequalities (race; caste;

sex/gender) or injustice being addressed (Hasan and Nussbaum, 2012). These may be government or institution led. Such interventions have been classified into three broad categories:

- in-reach programmes for ‘getting people in’, which aim to recruit students into an institution (e.g. summer schools);
- out-reach programmes ‘going out to people’, which include partnerships with external players such as schools, employers, and the wider community; and
- systematic rather than discrete provisions (e.g. accreditation of prior learning, distance learning or part time provision) (Osbourne, 2003).

At a governmental level India has a long standing, constitutionally sanctioned, affirmative action policy. It is implemented primarily through the reservation of places, in publicly funded or supported HEIs, for groups based upon caste and tribal origins. It recognises the historical and structural disadvantages faced by these groups. Over time initiatives which address other forms of disadvantage, such as those based upon sex/gender and disability, have been added. Additional measures include the provision of targeted scholarships, fee exemption, and provision of hostel accommodation (Deshpande, 2012; Hasan, 2012; Deshpande, 2017).

Reliance on this long-established ‘top down’ approach to WP has meant that there have been few institution-based initiatives within Government-supported HEIs, particularly those serving these disadvantaged communities. Evidence from South Africa and USA suggests that adding other forms of WP activities such as outreach can enhance the efficacy of these affirmative action policies (Hasan and Nussbaum, 2012). While there is a wide body of literature addressing issues relating to the implementation of the reservation system (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013; Deshpande, 2017; Kumar, 2017; Kumar, 2021), there is little or no systematic evaluation and no research which focuses specifically on institutional outreach initiatives within the Government sector.

Phase 3 of the research focused on the potential for institutional responses within Government Colleges in this context. What role do Government Colleges play, if any, in enabling young women and men, and their families, from predominately disadvantaged backgrounds, to make *informed choices* about their educational futures?

The research questions (RQs) were as follows:

1. Is there a need for outreach in public colleges in Haryana? If so, what role do public institutions currently play, if any, in enabling gender-equitable access to higher education in Haryana?
2. What are the institutional attitudes towards carrying out outreach in Haryana?
3. Does the development and delivery of an outreach activity contribute towards the development of an institutional culture of outreach and, if so, how?
4. What impact does the delivery of this outreach activity have on differently positioned young women and men and their access to higher education?

Evidence from a number of countries suggests that open days are one of the most effective outreach strategies to enable knowledge of and access to HE (Connor et

al., 1999; Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Reay, 2016). They provide prospective students with the experience of being an 'actual' student at the institution. This Phase 3 study involved developing, implementing, and evaluating the use of a 'Taster Day' as a specific form of outreach activity. Ferrier, Heagney, and Long (2008) define 'Taster days' as a programme whereby participants are able to 'sample' university life for a short period. A 'taster day' is therefore a more targeted form of open day in that it is only 'open' to invitees (Smith, 2016; Harrison and Waller, 2017).

1.2 Research design

The research adopted a **participatory action research methodology**:

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative research approach that engages the active participation of those affected by the research to identify and address real-world problems. It is a process-oriented and democratic research method that involves close collaboration between researchers and participants to generate knowledge and take action towards positive social change. This approach emphasizes the importance of empowering marginalized or underrepresented groups and ensuring that their voices and experiences are heard and integrated into the research process (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Somekh, 2005; McNiff, 2014; Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020).

A key aim of the research was to assess the willingness and capacity of the institutions to carry out an event as a pilot outreach activity. The researcher, building on discussions with key actors within the colleges (and past interactions with the earlier phases of the FCF project), proposed a taster day. The proposal put to the key actors included (1) an offer of modest financial support provided by the FCF Project to cover the costs of the event (such as hiring of transport and provision of refreshments for attendees) and (2) logistical support from the researcher (provided within the fieldwork timeframe). The nature and extent of the researcher role itself was part of the assessment of the institutional willingness and capacity to undertake the activity. This required establishing agreement on the role and tasks to be undertaken by the researcher. The aim was to encourage the colleges to take ownership of the event and run it as their own event, while assessing their response to this externally suggested initiative. The researcher took responsibility for the evaluative elements relating to the impact of the taster day on the student attendees, which involved the administering the pre- and post-event questionnaires, as these formed the basis for the second part of the doctoral research. The project design took account of the role of hierarchy within the institutional context of Haryana and India more generally. It therefore built in a visit to the colleges by the FCF Project Principal Investigator (PI) and established the willingness of key local contributors to the FCF Project to mediate relationships if this proved necessary.

The study focused on three colleges, and this enabled the researcher,

- to develop and evaluate interventions (Baxter and Jack, 2008);
- to identify links between events and processes over time (Fusch et al., 2017);
- to identify the similarities and differences in the experience of implementing outreach in the various colleges as well as the perceptions of the participants who attended the event.

Overall, there were therefore two elements to this study. The *first part of the study* constituted the observational element, and aimed to evaluate the processes and attitudes adopted within the HEIs when planning and implementing a taster day. It aimed to assess the willingness and ability of government college staff members to undertake such an activity when initially proposed by the researcher. It also sought to assess the extent to which such an activity built awareness of the value of outreach activities within the institution.

The *second part of the study* focused on evaluating the taster day from the students' perspective. Did the students who experienced the taster day consider themselves more ready to access HE and make informed choices, due to the added support provided?

Thus, the study followed the trajectory of implementing an outreach activity in public institutions in Haryana from its inception through to evaluating its effectiveness.

The study used the following **methods** to collect data:

- **document analysis** to understand the current context for enrolling students including any evidence of outreach activities;
- **observation** and **researcher journaling** to study the institution in the process of organising the outreach activity, complemented by **questionnaires**; and
- **semi-structured interviews** with students before the event to understand the current level of knowledge and willingness to access HE, and after the event to evaluate the impact of the activity on the students.

Thus, to answer research questions about the process and feasibility of implementing an outreach event in a public college in Haryana, the research adopted observation and journaling along with document analysis. In order to better understand the experiences of students in participating in an outreach activity and its impact on their access to HE, the research used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The research study followed codes of research integrity practice, and ethical approval was granted from University of Warwick before the study. The colleges and all study participants were carefully anonymised. More specifically, the colleges were given the same pseudonyms as used in Phases 1 and 2: Sonipat District College (SDC), Sirsa District College (SiDC), Mahendragarh District College (MDC). All participants were provided with information about the research project, and they voluntarily consented to be participants of this study with an option to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was also sought from student participants prior to undertaking the questionnaires.

1.3 District, college, school, and student selection

The study was conducted in the same three districts and colleges chosen for the first two phases. Access to the field was therefore facilitated by the previous interaction with key resource persons in these districts and in the three colleges.

The first part of the study was carried out in all three districts and three colleges. Two local public high schools (one boys' school and one girls' school) from each district were identified and invited to participate in the outreach activity. Each school

selected approximately 50 Class 12 (final year of high school) students from across disciplines to represent the school.

The first part of the study involved the conduct of the taster day. Two colleges, SDC and SiDC, held such events. One was a co-educational college, and the other was in the process of converting into a single-sex women's college. However, both colleges hosted both young men and women participants for the taster day from the local schools. It remained beneficial for the newly women-only college to also host young men students as this would still allow the school students to better understand the HE context application process and 'taste' a college. It was not possible to carry out the event at MDC due to external administrative issues.

A total of 194 (115 women and 79 men) Class 11 and 12 students from the various public schools in the districts attended the two events. These participants came from a variety of rural and urban locations and were from different Scheduled Caste, Backward Class (divided into A and B group in Haryana) and Non-marginalised Caste categories.

1.4 Fieldwork implementation

The fieldwork was implemented in the three months between September 2019 to November 2019.

Fieldwork visit 1 in September 2019 consisted of one week in each district including 2-3 visits to each college to build rapport with the college staff and Principal;

- to observe the normal day-to-day functioning of the college and provide insight into the culture of the college, in particular whether there was evidence of an outreach culture or the potential to develop this (RQs 1 and 3);
- to obtain secondary documentation relating to HE outreach, access to HE in Haryana, and in relation to government colleges (RQs 1 and 3);
- to conduct semi-structured interviews with officials and institutional heads to ascertain if there were any institutional efforts to improve enrolments that secondary literature may have failed to capture (RQs 1 and 3);
- to initiate informal discussions with previously identified faculty contact persons relating to hosting a taster day in the college and to observe the reception of such a proposal (RQ 2);
- to identify public schools from each district whose Class 12 students would be invited to attend the taster day (RQs 2 and 4).

In addition, the researcher had the opportunity to conduct a formal session with current students at SiDC to ask about their experience of accessing HE, which gave the researcher first-hand insight into some of the challenges they had faced.

Fieldwork visit 2 in October 2019 consisted of a return visit to all 3 colleges (to focus primarily on RQ 2), accompanied by the FCF Project PI,

- to solidify the plans for the taster day including practical and logistical issues;
- to meet the Principal in MDC to obtain support and buy-in for the event; and

- to visit the schools to discuss logistical issues involved in attendance at the event.

Fieldwork visit 3 in November 2019 consisted of a visit to two districts and colleges (SDC and SiDC),

- to facilitate and assist with the preparation for the taster days in the two colleges and to visit the invited schools (3 days) (RQ 2);
- to confirm the agreed tasks to be undertaken by the researcher (RQ 2)
- to facilitate and observe the conduct of the two taster days (RQs 2 and 4);
- to administer pre and post event questionnaires to the predominately Class 12 participants (RQ 4); and
- to administer in-person, in-depth post event interviews with randomly selected Class 12 participants (RQ 4).

District	Participants	Grade		Stream			Interviews conducted
		Class 11	Class 12	Science	Arts	Commerce	
Sirsa	Govt. Sr. Sc. Girls School	0	56	21	21	14	4
	Govt. Sr. Sc. Boys School	0	32	0*	26	6	3
Sonipat	Govt. Sr. Sc. Girls School	8	51	19	20	20	4
	Govt. Sr. Sc. Boys School	2	45	12	29	6	2
	Total Participants	194 (88 participants in Sirsa and 106 participants in Sonipat)					

Figure 1: Data about the taster day participants

*Note: There was no science stream in the school

The **evaluation in September 2020** (10 months after the events) involved carrying out telephone follow-up interviews with the Class 12 attendees who filled in questionnaires, to understand the effect of the event on students' perception,

knowledge, and willingness to access HE as well as to understand the challenges they face in accessing HE (RQ 4).

The take up for this phase was 17% of the original cohort because of the challenges of contacting participants in the Covid-19 pandemic. The planned in-person interviews with Class 12 attendees had to be replaced by these telephone calls. There were substantial practical challenges identifying appropriate telephone numbers (often via family members) and then obtaining access to student attendees via these numbers.

Throughout the research, adequate time was allocated to cover important steps including seeking and receiving voluntary informed consent, building rapport, and conducting interviews during the working hours of the colleges.

1.5 Data analysis

The interviews and questionnaires were administered to the student participants using a bilingual (English and Hindi) format. The qualitative data from the interviews were verbally transcribed into separate Word files and were not translated into English except when quoted in research and reports. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were entered into an Excel file and then analysed to produce demographic profiles of the student attendees (gender, caste, religion, and class) and to describe the experience of most (if not all) of the attendees. These data provided the context to findings from the smaller number of individual interviews and from analysis of the fieldwork observational notes.

The pre- and post-event questionnaires and data from the interviews with Class 12 attendees were also thematically coded using Nvivo (for which the researcher was trained). The responses from the free text box were entered verbatim and analysed for the themes that emerged.

The observation and journal records were also thematically coded in NVivo. The themes enabled the researcher to analyse and interpret the data to assess the effectiveness of taster days as a tool of institutional outreach in improving access and changing mindsets about HE. The gendered aspects relating to access were also identified.

Document analysis was also undertaken on the limited number of documents. This included a brochure and poster on outreach, as well as other materials that the colleges used to encourage access to HE. The brochure and poster were both outdated. The lack of documents was in itself a finding of the study.

2. Current role played by public HEIs in enabling access

The following two sections provide general findings based on the researcher's observations and informal interviews with college staff and principals recorded in a fieldwork diary (henceforth FD). These observations and interviews were supplemented by informal conversations with students in all three colleges, plus notes taken in a meeting with students organised by college staff at SiDC, recorded in the FD.

2.1 Conducting outreach in an era of online admissions

Prior to the National Education Policy 2020 (MHRD 2020), access to HE was framed primarily through the implementation of reservation quotas, supplemented with additional measures such as scholarships. There were few requirements for state funded HEIs generally to undertake outreach activities and therefore there was little formal outreach carried out by those institutions in Haryana. Outreach was confined to printed prospectus and newspaper advertisements announcing admissions, which did not provide the students with substantial information on the mechanisms to access HE or the choices available.

Until 2012, colleges were required to print a prospectus which detailed courses, the admission process, and scholarships and funding specific to the college. However, this policy was discontinued when the government in Haryana introduced online admissions in 2012, to coincide with a national push towards digitalisation (Tribune India 2013; Vij 2018). As a result, the application process for admission to HE moved online along with information about colleges and courses.

After 2012, college websites became the main source of information for potential applicants. However, during the time of the fieldwork, it was observed that the college websites were not updated with the most relevant information about courses. It was therefore a challenge for the researcher, and therefore any prospective students, to find in-depth information about the colleges anywhere on the internet.

Prof. P¹—a faculty at the college and our point of contact—and his colleagues at SiDC thought that the disappearance of print prospectus curbed prospective students' opportunities to visit colleges and obtain information and advice from the college staff first hand. When the application process was conducted using hard-copy forms, parents and students were required to visit the colleges to collect the forms, which often doubled as an opportunity for an informal campus visit/tour as well as informal information sessions with the staff where students could have their questions and concerns addressed (source: FD).

Prof. S commented on the advantage of having a printed prospectus: “students isko ghar le jate to mummy, daddy, dada, dadi sab dekhte aur decide karte. Abhi to kisi ke pas aise koi information nahi hai” (Students would take it home and their mother,

¹ This designation, and any other ones that follow, are pseudonyms, in line with the ethical approval process.

father, paternal grandfather, paternal grandmother would all have a look and decide. Now no one has any of this information available).

Colleges are seen as safe spaces where information can be found. College leaders in all three districts thought that these avenues had served to demystify the often complex application process (source: FD).

2.2 Challenges of online admissions system for applicants and colleges

The colleges' online application systems do not allow for errors to be rectified easily. As a result, students often made many mistakes in their application forms. The potential for error was exacerbated by the fact that students rarely filled out the application forms themselves as they did not have access to computers at home.

During an informal conversation with a group of four students of SDC, while the researcher was waiting outside the college Principal's office, the researcher asked about their experience of the application process to the college:

At first, they [the students] all said that the process was easy. Last year was the first year all admissions had been done purely online. On probing, one student said that she had no idea what she wanted to study or how to fill the forms and which course to select and that it was in fact her friend's father and brother who had filled hers, and the forms for two other friends to this college, without consulting her or them on the specifics. The father assumed all the friends would want to go to the same college and study the same course. (FD SDC, September 2019)

Families also rely on 'cyber cafés'² where the proprietor or staff of the café would take the student's information down and fill the application on their behalf. This is rarely done in real time. During her interaction with the students at SiDC, the researcher noted:

Every single girl in the room said that they or their family or acquaintance had visited a "shop" or internet café to fill out their forms. No one had access to or understood how to actually use a computer, so they just left the actual filling-in of the form to the person who ran the café.

Later conversations with Prof. P and his colleagues, confirmed the role of cyber cafés. Students visit a café and just give the person all their details and then leave. The person in the café fills out their forms in their own time. Often, they make mistakes in filling out the college preferences and end up signing the student up to a college quite far away from their homes. With hundreds of students accessing these cyber cafés, and only a few cafés existing in each area, the sheer volume of forms that these cafés assist with, often leads to errors in filling the forms or omissions. (FD SiDC, September 2019)

The use of cyber cafés thus leads to serious challenges for the applicant such as entering the wrong name, applying to the wrong college or to the wrong course. The form currently does not have the option to 'edit' so once something is entered, it is

² Cyber Cafés are businesses which provide access to computers and the internet for a fee. This is a popular business in India, especially in small-towns and rural parts of the country where the population do not have access to personal computers and the internet.

set in stone. These errors then have to be rectified by the college staff who identified this a great inconvenience (Summary from FD).

Young women are not always allowed to access cyber cafés and rely on male members of their friends and family to go to the cybercafé and fill out their application. However, previously, they would have been allowed to go, accompanied, to colleges to obtain the forms (Summary from FD).

3. Attitude of HEIs towards outreach and challenges faced

3.1 Positive staff attitudes

Across all the meetings with the college leaders and principals (as noted in FD), the researcher observed a positive attitude towards the idea of carrying out outreach. They all echoed that outreach events were useful for applicants in making informed choices about HE and that they were also useful for colleges to be able to attract students to apply to their college.

Prof P at SiDC indicated that the college had put out a newspaper advertisement announcing the current admission cycle and that this was the only form of formal outreach they carried out in SiDC. When asked if they had ever undertaken other forms of formal outreach, he recounted that in 2017, they had had a circular from the government requesting colleges to visit nearby villages to talk to local communities. The aim was to give them information and motivate them to access HE in order to improve enrolments from rural areas. However, SiDC was unable to participate due to a shortage of staff.

The researcher was able to have several conversations with staff and faculty of the three different colleges to understand the constraints under which the colleges work. One of the biggest concerns they identified was lack of full-time faculty and shortage of staff generally. It became apparent that, even though all three colleges were positive and enthusiastic about undertaking outreach activities, they were already stretched so thinly with responsibilities that conducting outreach events would be a significant additional task to incorporate into their schedules.

3.2 Constraints of staffing

The Principal at MDC reported that there were 123 sanctioned faculty positions, of which only 26 were filled by full time faculty members. There were only four laboratory assistants for the laboratories which supported all the sciences streams across the various degree levels. There were 75 'extension faculty members' hired to fill the gap in the faculty. It was common practice that the colleges were advised to hire staff on short-term contracts to fill the gaps in staffing. The Principal explained the challenges this caused for the college: contractual staff were paid more than full-time staff while not sharing the same workload which at times affected the motivation among the current full-time staff.

Further, the full-time faculty at the colleges had a myriad of responsibilities that stretched far beyond teaching and academia. They were expected to assist with election duties, volunteer for trainings that the state mandated, invigilate state level exams, help organise state sanctioned events at the college to commemorate various occasions, organise cultural events, and assist with several other events and obligations, which left them with limited hours to spend in the classroom.

These calls upon time were observed first hand by the researcher during her time in the field. Faculty indicated in discussions relating to the planning and conduct of a potential outreach activity that their time was going to be taken up with duties relating to the conduct of elections in Haryana.

Nonetheless, the positive attitude of the college Principals and key faculty members towards undertaking outreach activities was demonstrated in their willingness to spend their own time undertaking informal outreach activities with parents and informally counselling prospective students. These activities were taking place outside college hours.

A professor at SiDC said that all teaching staff used informal methods of outreach to communicate with local communities. In this case, they were trying to introduce a new BSc course in the college and had relied on the newspaper advertisement as well as the informal WhatsApp groups to spread the word about the introduction of the course. Similarly, the Vice-principal at SDC mentioned during an initial conversation that many college professors and staff at SDC use WhatsApp groups with local parents to guide their children and provide information.

When asked by the researcher what motivated them to do this, they echoed various versions of the same underlying sentiment, which was that they were in a position to provide prospective students with *reliable* information to which students would not otherwise have access (SiDC and SDC FD).

Recognition of the value of and willingness to undertake outreach activities was demonstrated by the college staff's engagement with the researcher on each of the fieldwork visits and then in planning and hosting the outreach event. The level of enthusiasm varied depending on levels of enrolment and popularity of the college. SiDC was the newest of the three colleges and was still in the process of establishing itself when the study took place. The staff and faculty in this college were very keen to host and plan the event. They explained how such an event would help them increase their application pool. SDC on the other hand was a well-established and oversubscribed college. The college leaders here were less hands on with the planning and organising and wanted more involvement of the researcher to implement the taster day. Similarly, MDC had a good reputation locally and did not struggle to recruit prospective students. The initial planning meetings (for the taster day which eventually did not take place) suggested a willingness to engage but a requirement for more researcher support.

Overall, the existing informal initiatives taken by colleges, coupled with the willingness to undertake the taster day, indicated that there was considerable potential for building a culture of outreach in public colleges. Unlike private universities in India, these public colleges did not have staff dedicated to admissions and outreach, so the responsibility would inevitably fall upon the full-time faculty. Therefore, to realise this potential it would be necessary to provide appropriate support to ease some of the other challenges that college principals face with staffing and scheduling.

4. Delivering an outreach activity

The Phase 3 study was designed to assess,

1. the willingness and capacity of government colleges to undertake a formal institutionally based outreach event; and
2. whether such an event addressed the challenges that Class 12 students from predominately disadvantaged backgrounds experienced in making informed choices relating to access to HE.

This section addresses the first element: an assessment of the development and organisation of a taster day. Each college responded differently to the invitation to host the event reflecting their different institutional contexts. The researcher was able to observe variations in attitudes among the college staff as well as in the material constraints faced by the colleges in trying to plan and organize an outreach event.

4.1 SiDC ‘outreach is good for numbers’

Identification of a key college staff member

Prof. P was a professor of physics at the college and a relatively senior member of staff (over 7 years at the college). He was introduced to the researcher by the other doctoral student associated with the FCF Project and arranged a meeting with the staff the prior to the researcher’s arrival in Haryana.

Early adoption of the concept by key actors and willingness to proceed

The researcher was able to speak with Prof. P as well as other members of staff on the first day of the first fieldwork visit. Prof. P was immediately enthusiastic about the study and the outreach event. He assured the researcher that he would speak with the college Principal about the event, before the researcher met with him, in order to ‘oil the wheels’. In his opinion, the Principal would be on board and the event would be a good idea for the college, to attract more students to apply to the college.

Prof. P’s enthusiasm to carry out the event was further evidenced by his willingness to be proactive.

- He reached out to his local friends and colleagues, who worked at various local schools, to check if they had Class 11 and 12 in their schools who could participate in the outreach event.
- He phoned the researcher to let her know about the ‘Aarohi School’ in a nearby village which could be invited to the outreach event.
- He arranged an appointment with the acting Principal (as the Principal was on long-term leave) during the next visit to the college.

The Acting Principal and other senior staff members were equally enthusiastic about carrying out outreach once the researcher had the opportunity to explain the study. The Acting Principal exclaimed “ye to hamare enrollement ke liye accha hoga!” (This will be good for our enrolment!).

The group had a fully engaged conversation with the researcher about the practicalities of conducting the event and demonstrated their knowledge of the local gendered cultural context. Specifically, Prof. P indicated that parents were reluctant to let their children, especially girls, travel more than a few miles for HE. As a result, one of the faculty present offered to arrange the buses for the students of his own accord.

However, staff members did not offer to make arrangements with local schools because they indicated that they would not have the time to visit the schools. Instead, they provided the researcher with a list of local schools who could be invited to the event, and it was agreed that the researcher would approach the schools on the college's behalf.

The college staff recognised that the event would require funding to support the logistics, such as buses to ferry the students to and from the schools and the refreshments. They indicated that, due to their very modest and fixed budgets to support activities, they would not be able to cover such an unplanned event. As indicated above, the researcher was able to reassure the staff that such funds were available from the FCF Project.

Making and implementing a plan: hosting a taster day

On the second fieldwork visit, the researcher and the project PI met with the college staff, Prof. P, the Acting Principal, and two other senior faculty members. The college staff had put together a programme for the day and had arranged for audio-visual equipment at the college.

In the days before the taster day the agreed role of the researcher was confirmed as,

- providing general assistance with planning and implementation of the day;
- ordering of refreshments;
- assisting college staff in preparing their presentations;
- confirmation of the schools' attendance;
- provision of the printed questionnaires and consent forms; and
- ensuring the completion of the consent forms and pre-event questionnaires.

Prof. P and the researcher discussed the schedule for the event. He indicated where the event would be held – in the multi-purpose hall of the college which had a portable projector.

Prof. P spoke to the bus company to confirm the buses for the day of the event. The bus company wanted the buses back by 12pm so the researcher and Prof. P decided to move the event earlier and start at 10am and end by 11:30am. The researcher then informed the schools of the change in timing for the event.

The researcher informed Prof. P that the schools had agreed and that she was going to meet them to ensure that the questionnaires were filled in.

The researcher found out just before the event that personnel in the participating girls' school had changed. The teacher coordinating the event indicated that the

original school Principal had retired the week before and there was an acting Principal. Nevertheless, her consent for the girls to attend was still secured by the researcher.

As agreed, the researcher collected the snacks from a local bakery where she had placed an order two days prior.

The researcher and Prof. P set up the room for the event with the help of the college students.

On the morning of the event, it became clear that the Acting Principal was not present. However, the deputising Principal and a few senior teachers were in the office. The researcher spoke to them about the schedule for the day and the deputising Principal offered to address the students during the event.

It also became clear that there was some confusion with the transport arrangements, both buses being sent to the boys' school. The researcher called the bus company just in time to redirect one bus to the girls' school, which led to a short delay in the arrival of the students.

In the meantime, some faculty members were briefed by Prof. P and the researcher about what was going to happen in the room set up for the conduct of the taster day. There seemed to be confusion around who was going to cover issues relating to online admissions – with everyone trying to offer the opportunity to someone else. Eventually Prof. P agreed that he would talk to the students about this.

College staff took full responsibility for conducting the activities which included:

- A welcome from Prof. P who briefed the school student participants on the agenda for the day.
- A brief address by the Acting Principal.
- A motivational speech by a senior faculty member (in English). At this point the students seemed distracted, perhaps because most of them were not able to follow a speech of this nature in English.
- An information session was provided by Prof. P, during which he explained the application process. The application form was projected onto a screen so that all students could see what the form looked like, and so that they could familiarise themselves with it. (It later became evident from the researcher's conversation with the participants, as well as from the post-event questionnaires, that most of the students had never filled in an application of any kind, let alone an online application). Prof. P also explained the admission process. He listed the documents needed to complete the application, which was again a matter of which a large number of participants were not aware (this was established by a show of hands).
- An open session for questions, where some students asked about the application process, one asked about scholarships, and another asked a question about college facilities in the sciences.
- A tour of campus by college faculty and college ambassadors who had been selected to help with the event.

- Refreshments distributed.
- In addition, the researcher distributed the post-event questionnaires and conducted seven in-depth interviews.

Meeting objectives: a successful outcome

The event was well-received by staff and the participants (see Section 5)

The early adoption of the concept by Prof P and the recognition by key college actors that the event might increase number of applicants to the colleges underpinned the institutional support for the event.

The Acting Principal appointed Prof. P to be in-charge of the event and enlisted the help of several faculty members to assist with the campus tour and presentation. Additional support from the administrative staff was also enlisted to assist with the audio-visual equipment and distribution of snacks. Almost all staff members were present at the event. The college organised the day to maximise staff convenience, avoiding any other commitments apart from regular classes. The event had been three months in planning, which allowed most staff members to be prepared for the event. Staff indicated that they were happy to be a part of the day and that they did not feel that it was an additional burden or responsibility.

Whilst the key college staff were supportive of the concept of the taster day from the outset, demonstrated by their willingness to plan for and undertake the activity, there was limited organisational capability to implement the activity within the college. The researcher had to step in to assist, such as with the buses, the IT equipment, and the presentation. It was also left to the very last minute to decide whom from the college staff was addressing the students, which created some confusion. More could have been done to cover the planned content. However, the last-minute change in the timeframe resulting from the problems with the buses constrained the time available.

4.2: SDC 'outreach good for inclusion'

Identification of a key college staff member

The identification of a key resource person at the college required facilitation by a member of the FCF Project Consultative Group (CG) – a well-established university academic who briefed the college Principal about the researcher's visit. This enabled the researcher to meet the Principal on the first day.

The researcher's FD recorded that the initial reaction of the Principal to the taster day was rather lukewarm. However, the Vice Principal of the college seemed interested because he understood that the taster day was part of a research study which established ways to better support students from marginalised communities.

The Vice Principal's enthusiasm led to his role as person in-charge of facilitating the activity in the college. The Principal assured the researcher that, "Prof. S dekh lenge sab kuch" (Prof. S will see to everything).

Early adoption of the concept by key actors and willingness to proceed

On the first fieldwork visit, the researcher and Prof. S were able to schedule the taster day for a tentative date two months later in November. Prof. S indicated his

understanding of and support for outreach activities in discussions recorded in the FD. The researcher noted feeling encouraged by the increasingly positive response of the Principal and Vice Principal of SDC towards outreach generally, as well as the taster day.

Consolidation of proactive engagement and building ownership of the event: a plan

On the second fieldwork visit, the PI and the researcher met with the Principal and Vice Principal, Prof. S, to finalise the arrangements and the schedule for the day. As mentioned above, the researcher's FD noted the Principal now seemed very interested and supportive. He expressed his enthusiasm for hosting the taster day at the college. He was happy to make all the arrangements for the event and phoned the schools himself to invite them to the taster day. The Vice Principal reiterated the need for and importance of reaching out to marginalized students through mechanisms such as taster days.

The researcher and PI visited the schools to invite the school students and go over the agenda for the day and the logistics.

The role of the researcher was similar to that of the SiDC event.

Staff capacity to organise the taster day: tackling unexpected obstacles

Prof. S and the Principal of the college were ready to run through the agenda they had prepared for the taster day on the researcher's arrival. They had also,

- organised the IT equipment required;
- enlisted the help of the professor of computing at the college to aid with the presentation; and
- organised the snacks for the students.

The boys' school was closed when *the researcher* arrived to confirm attendance. The state government had ordered the closure due to smog created by the burning of hay nearby. Neither the researcher nor the college staff were aware of this decision or how long the 'holiday' would last. The *college Principal* contacted the boys' school Principal to discuss and was able to convince him to play it by ear as he felt confident that schools would re-open in a day's time. The *college Principal* then called the girls' school and confirmed the details for the taster day. The *college staff and researcher* agreed that the plan was to keep the taster day scheduled for the same day and in case the schools were still closed, the event would be postponed to the following week. Fortunately, the schools reopened the following day.

Staff capacity to conduct and ownership of the taster day

On arrival at the college on the morning of the taster day, the researcher was told by the Principal that Prof. S, who was in-charge of the event, had had to take leave due to a family emergency. This disrupted the plans for the day. The Principal was not comfortable with undertaking Prof. S' presentation and there were no other faculty members who had been prepped for the delivery of the presentation. In the absence of Prof. S, *the researcher* was obliged to,

- adapt the agenda to enable her to step-in and undertake part of the presentation;

- ensure the logistics were as planned; and
- organise the cleaning and seating in the hall.

The college Principal had invited an additional 40 students from a different school who were not part of the study (and therefore were not included in the questionnaires) which made it slightly more challenging to manage the numbers on the day.

College staff took responsibility for conducting most of the activities which included,

- A welcome address by the Principal who also briefly shared a motivation speech about the value of higher education.
- A presentation by the researcher on the admission process, how to fill the online application forms, scholarships.
- A presentation by a senior member of college staff from the college about the facilities available in the college and the history of the college.
- A tour of the campus.
- Refreshments distribution.
- In addition the researcher distributed the post-event questionnaires and conducted seven in-depth interviews.

Meeting objectives: a successful outcome

The event was *well-received by staff and the participants* (see section 5)

The early adoption of the concept by Prof S once identified and the subsequent support of an outreach event to support inclusion underpinned the institutional support for the event.

The Principal appointed Prof. S. to be in-charge of the event. The support for the event was translated into a willingness to engage in planning for the event and to produce a plan. The college was able to take ownership for the plan and actively to engage in its implementation (by contacting schools). This was also evident in the willingness of the Principal to take responsibility in overcoming unexpected obstacles such as the closure of schools.

This enthusiasm resulted in the additional invitations to schools which was not planned and which constituted a challenge for the research element of the taster day.

The researcher noted in her FD the obvious challenges relating to capacity to conduct the taster day that were faced in SDC. This was evidenced in the lack of a backup plan in the absence of the person in-charge of the event and the reluctance of the college staff as result to step in. This meant that the researcher was obliged to be involved with the presentation on the day of the event

4.3 MDC 'we don't need more students'

Identification of a key resource person as champion

This required facilitation by the same member of the FCF Project CG as with the SDC. They were able to secure an appointment with the college Principal.

Adoption of the concept by key actors and willingness to proceed

However, on arrival for the first fieldwork visit it became clear that the Principal had retired and the person in charge was the Vice Principal. FD notes record a short meeting with the Vice Principal with others present. It was difficult in the time and in the context to convey the way in which the taster day might be conducted. The assumption was that this outreach was to increase numbers and MDC did not need more students as a well-established, popular, and oversubscribed urban college.

The Vice Principal suggested a tentative date in November and reassured the researcher that she could carry out 'her' event.

The researcher's FD when documenting engagement with MDC records a lack of enthusiasm for an outreach event among college staff in MDC and the schools in the district. On the researcher's visit to the girls' high school, the school Principal indicated that women in Mahendragarh district are encouraged by their parents to pursue HE and those who score high marks in their 12th exams go outside the state to study in more renowned HEIs in Delhi and Rajasthan. This suggested that there was perhaps a limited understanding of the role of an outreach event.

Consolidation of proactive engagement and building ownership of the event: a plan

In this context, the researcher considered that it would be appropriate to seek the assistance of the local resource person, who would attend, with the project's PI, a second meeting with the Vice Principal to explain the role of college.

This second visit was much more fruitful. The Vice Principal was more inclined to sit down and listen to the researcher's explanation of the aims of the project and the proposed conduct of the taster day, in the presence of the resource person. The Vice Principal expressed his support for the event, agreed to host it in November, and discussed the schedule for the event. The researcher noted in her FD that the presence of the PI and resource person did influence the decision. There was still a lack of engagement with the importance of outreach. The Vice Principal was preoccupied with other issues in the college such as staffing, and election duty.

Translating a plan into its implementation: a taster day

The taster day did not take place. This was not due to unwillingness within the college to undertake the activity. The Vice Principal himself called the researcher a few weeks prior to the scheduled taster day to confirm the event, which showed that the college was engaged with the activity and willing to undertake it. The reason why the event did not take place was due to circumstances relating to unexpected and delayed research approvals which concerned the wider research project.

Meeting objectives: a successful outcome

The taster day did not take place. However, the two field work visits conducted prior to the event indicated that, unlike the other two events, there was no obvious

'champion' among the staff who fully understood the concept of outreach and who was then identified institutionally as the person in charge of planning and implementing the event. The initial motivation varied across the institutions (more numbers, more inclusion, no need of numbers). With no obvious champion and no institutional interest in increased numbers generally at MDC, there was very limited institutional buy-in at the end of these fieldwork stages.

5. Impact of outreach on gendered access to HE

5.1 Assessing the impact of the taster day reach activity on students' perception and knowledge about HE and how this is gendered

Data sources

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (194 in total) after attending the outreach event in the colleges. As mentioned previously, participants identified by their schools in each location (7 in SiDC and 6 in SDC) were also interviewed to obtain a more in-depth insight into the effect of the event.

Effect on participants' desire to access HE

The post-event data showed an increased desire to access HE among male participants. In the pre-event questionnaires, 42.4% of male participants from SDC said they wanted to access HE while the remaining 57.6% said they would maybe want to access HE. After the event, 70.2% male participants from SDC said they wanted to enrol in HE. This shows that there was an almost 28% increase in male participants' desire to access HE after attending the event.

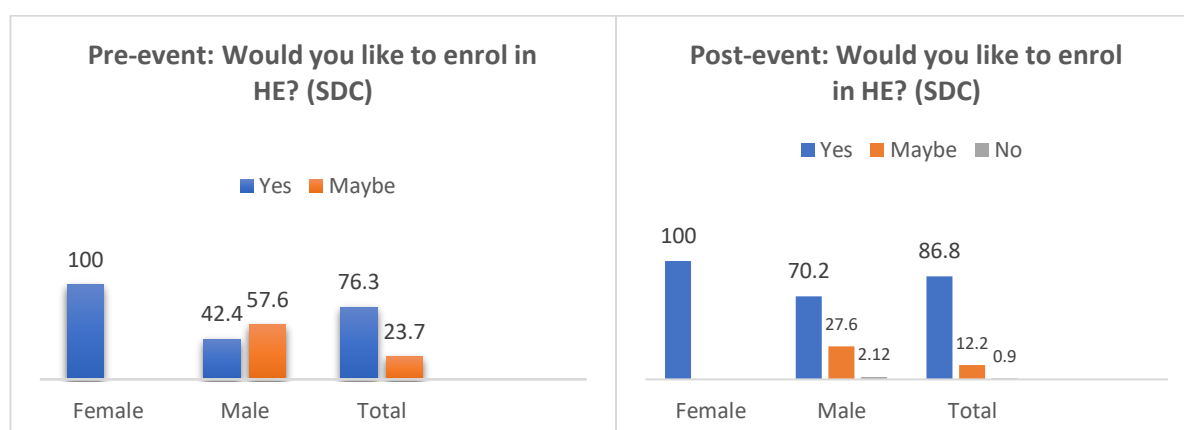


Figure 2: Pre-event and post-event desire to enrol in HE in SDC

Similarly, in SiDC, 87.5% male participants had said they wanted to access HE before the event and 12.5% said they were not sure. After the event, 90.6% male participants said they wanted to access HE. This shows that 3% more participants wanted to enrol in HE after attending the event. 100% female participants maintained that they wanted to access HE before and after the event in both districts.

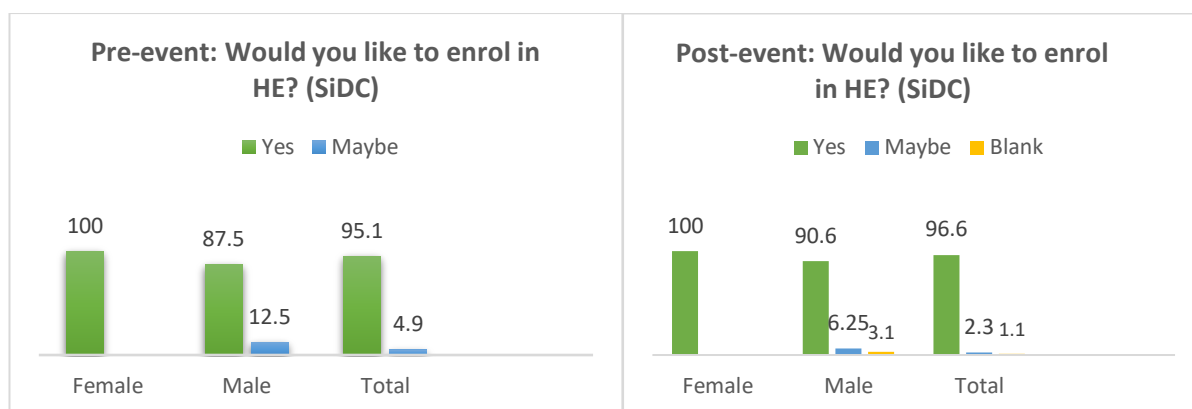


Figure 3: Pre-event and post-event desire to enrol in HE in SiDC

Although it cannot be claimed that the event alone caused this change, the fact that the pre- and post-event questionnaires were filled out just one day apart suggests that the event may have influenced this shift. However, a long-term quantitative evaluation would be necessary to determine if this change is enduring which was outside the scope of this study.

Effect on informed choice of college/university

The pre-event questionnaires of SDC revealed that only 8.6% of female participants and 6.1% of male participants felt they had the necessary information to choose a college/university. However, the post-event data showed that 83% of female and 59.6% of male participants felt they had the required information. This represents a significant increase of 74% for female participants and 53.5% for male participants. Prior to the event, over 76% of SDC participants were uncertain if they had enough information to choose a college, but after the event, 72.6% reported feeling confident in their ability to make a choice.

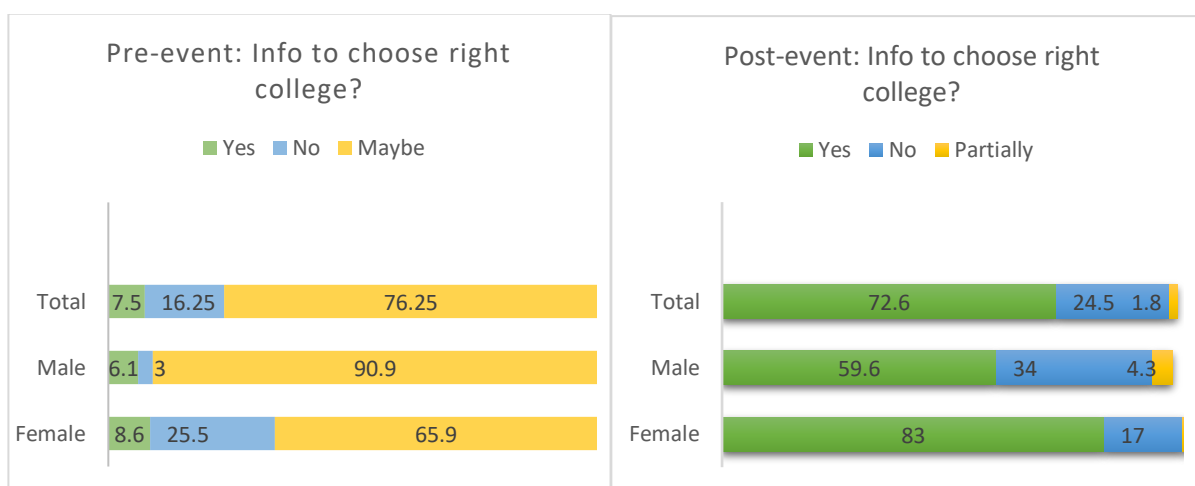


Figure 4: Pre-event and post-event perception of having the necessary information to choose the right college in SDC

In SiDC, prior to the taster day, only 2% of female and 6.25% of male participants felt they had sufficient information to choose a college, with the majority of students (53.1%) reporting partial information. However, after the taster day, 85.7% of female and 78.1% of male participants reported feeling more confident in their ability to make a decision. Before the event, the greatest percentage of students (53.1%)

were unsure if they had access to the information needed to make an informed decision about college. But after the event, the greatest percentage of students (82.9%) reported feeling more confident in their ability to choose the right college.

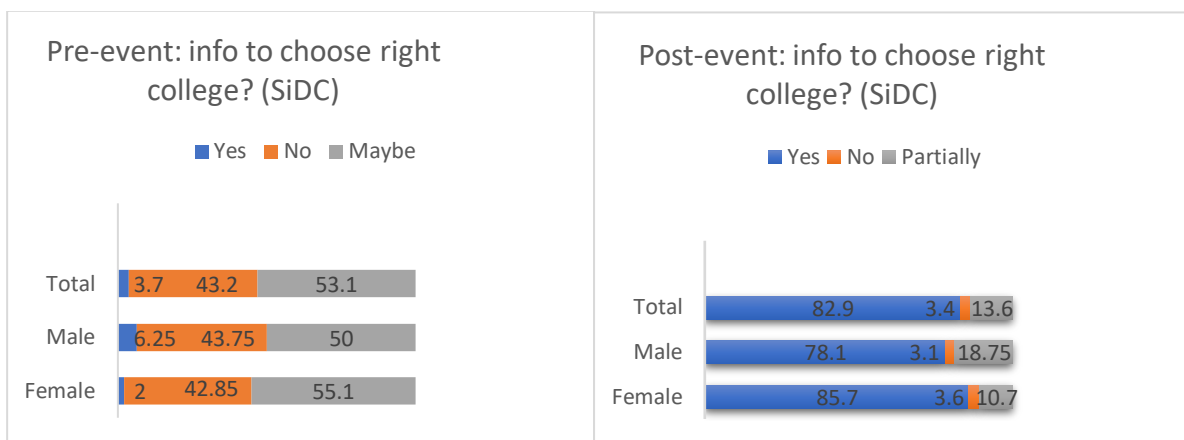
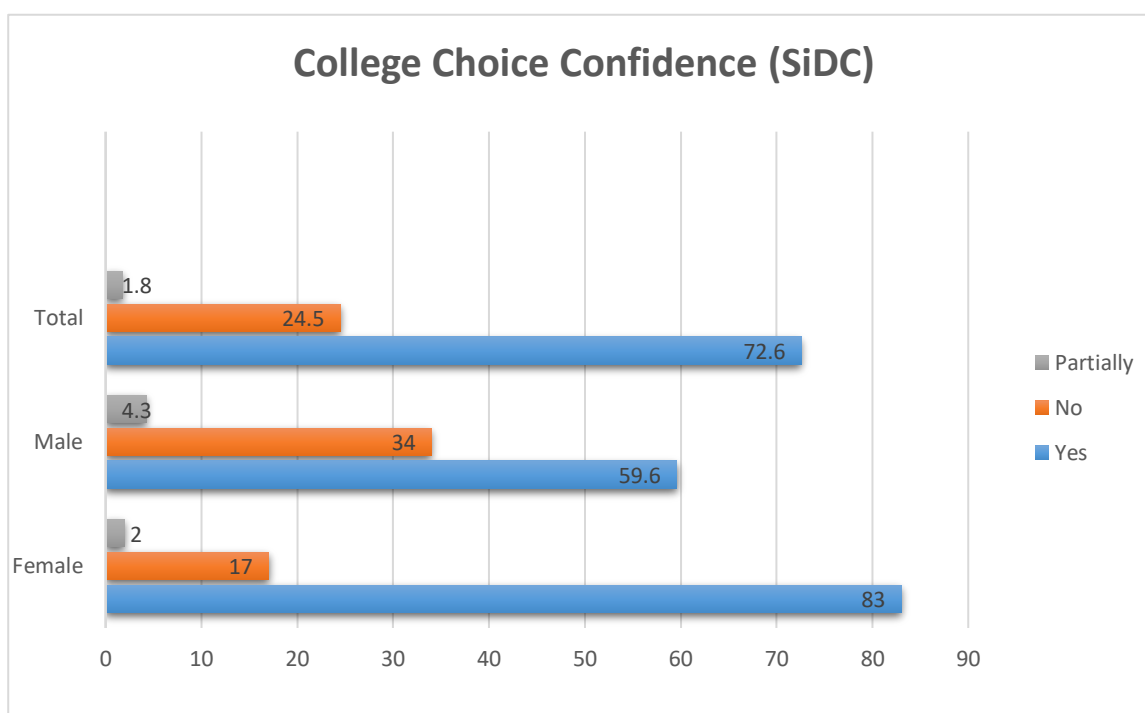


Figure 5: Pre-event and post-event perception of having the necessary information to choose the right college in SiDC

Overall, 77.75% of participants from both districts reported feeling more confident about choosing the right college or university after attending the event. 84.35% of the female participants and 68.85% male participants responded positively.



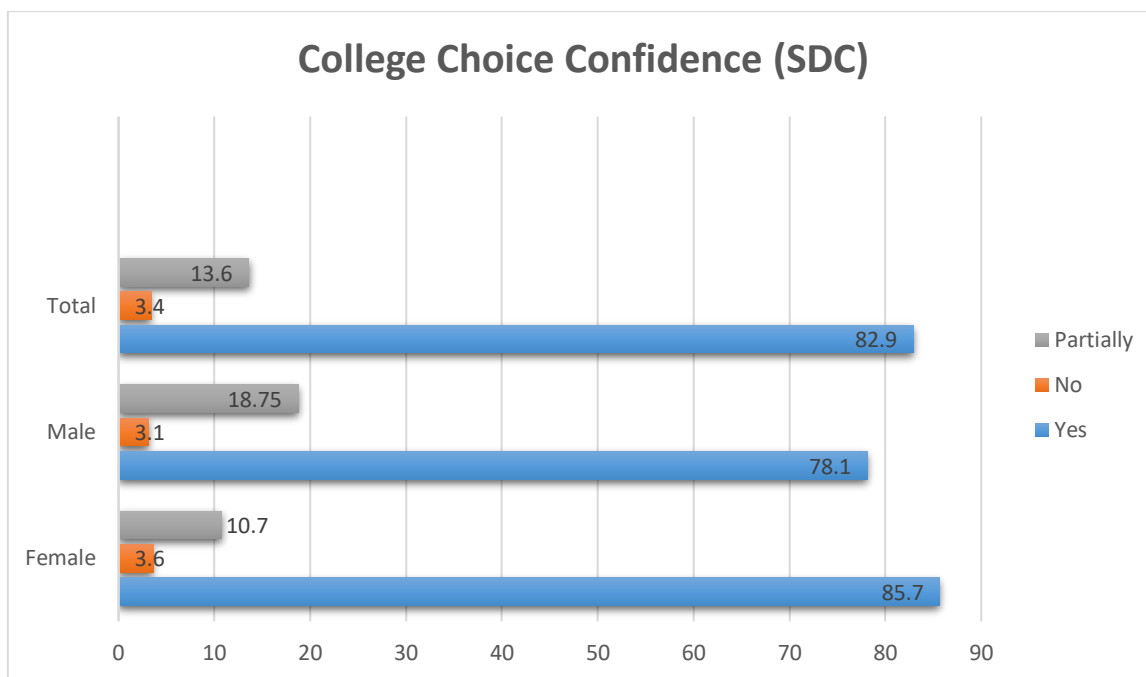


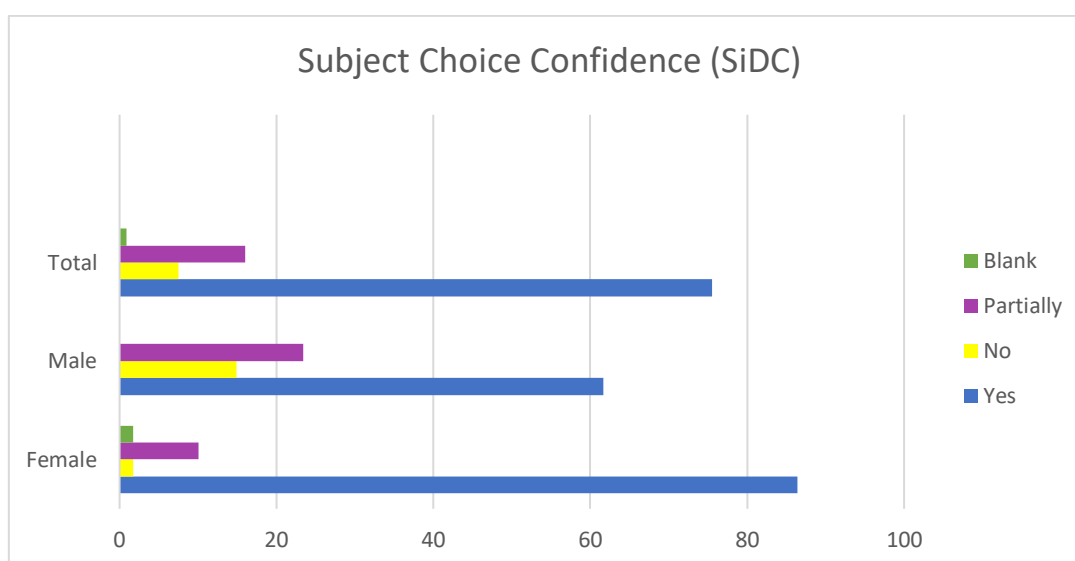
Figure 6: Results from SDC and SiDC for ‘Do you feel more confident about choosing the right college/university after the event?’

Effect on confidence about navigating the admissions process

81.75% of the participants also reported feeling more confident about navigating the admission process (identified above as one of the most challenging aspects of accessing HE) after attending the event. 86.25% of female participants and 75.15% male participants responded positively.

Effect on informed subject choices

80.35% reported feeling more confident after the event. 88.7% of female participants and 68.35% of male participants reported feeling positively.



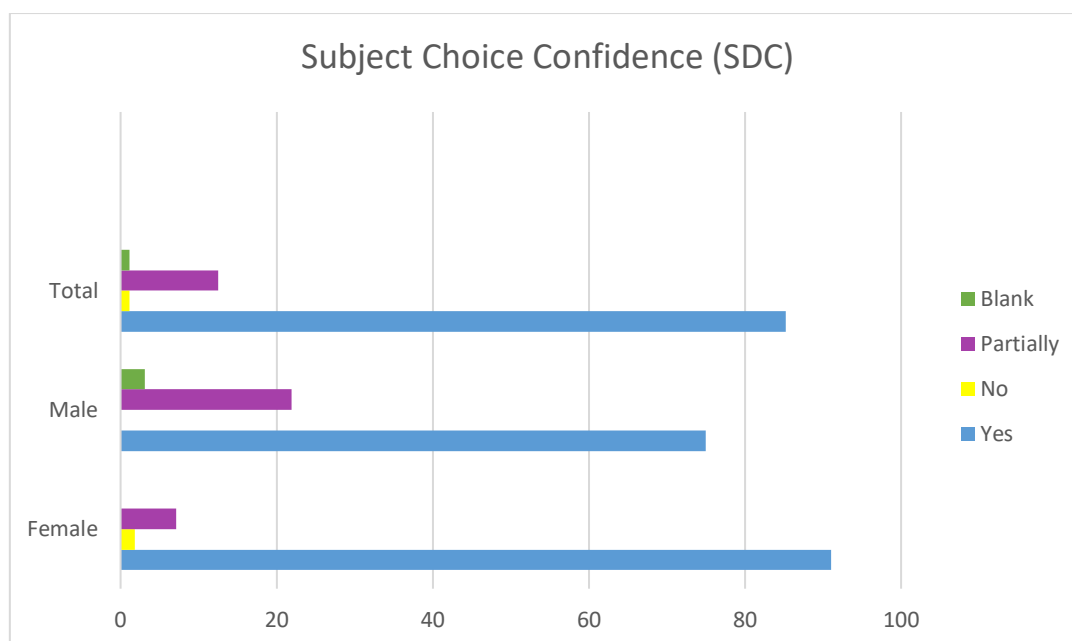


Figure 7: Results from SDC and SiDC for ‘Do you feel more confident about which subject/stream to choose after attending the event?’

Overall, the number of participants who felt they had sufficient information to make informed subject choices increased from 12.3% before the event to 75.5% after the event. However, almost 15% of male participants still reported feeling uncertain even after attending the taster day. In-depth interviews revealed that male participants were more interested in specific subjects and career paths, such as the armed forces or NCC, which were not covered in detail during the event, potentially explaining the lower rate of confidence among men compared to women.

Assessment of overall usefulness

When participants were asked if they found the event to be useful, 92.35% of participants from both districts said ‘Yes’, 5.75% said ‘Partially useful’, and 0.9% said ‘No’. 95.7% of female participants and 88.3% of male participants reported finding the event useful. About 10% of the male participants reported not finding the event useful and some of the reasons cited were lack of information on sports facilities, NCC facilities, information on careers in the armed forces, and public administration.

Addressing lack of formal sources of information

As indicated above, the lack of information about HE was cited as one of the biggest barriers by participants in the pre-event questionnaire. When asked if the event gave participants access to information that they previously did not have, 91.9% of participants said ‘Yes’ with 93% of female participants and 90.47% male participants saying ‘Yes’. Several comments left by the students in the open comments box on the questionnaire stated how useful they had found the event in demystifying the HE admission process and that it had motivated them to access HE.

A need for college outreach

When asked if such outreach events should be carried out by colleges across the state each year, 95.65% of the total participants—with 97.4% female and 93.6% male participants—said ‘Yes’.

Comments SDC	
Female students	We got the right guidance about HE// We got to visit the college, talk to the faculty and learn about common errors students make while applying to college// We got a lot of information that we were unaware of before, our assumptions about this college were also corrected// The event has motivated us to access HE, and given us information about admission procedures// We did not have any information about online applications before the event but now I feel confident about it
Male students	the event helped us understand our options for HE better and make more informed decision// cautioning us against errors in filling admission forms and choosing the right subject and motivation// Information about college and courses// Information about online admission// Information about various departments in college and how we should select a stream
Comments SiDC	
Female students	We learnt from this program how to fill online form and admission (<i>most cited</i>), what documents we need to fill it// everything was great because we did not have information about this stuff before this// I got a lot of information about college which I had very little information about previously// info on HE// This program will help me access HE more easily.
Male students	Information about admissions, filling the form and info about documents needed. // This event helped us making the right decision and also gave us information from college faculty// More clarity on choosing college after school// selecting streams and college.

Figure 8: Summary of SDC and SiDC questionnaires open box for ‘What did you find most useful about the event?’

Analysis of the responses from the in-depth interviews reinforced these results

Participants said that they had never had access to an opportunity like this event. They confirmed that it was extremely difficult to obtain what they now identified as ‘objective’ advice or reliable information about HE or career related topics. Male participants reported using the internet on their phones to research these areas but not being able to find the right sources of information.

5.2 Longer term impact of the taster day

Data source

The evaluation phase of the study that was carried out 10 months after the event, once the admission cycle for undergraduate courses was over. The purpose of this was to measure the longer-term impact of the event by tracking how many participants ended up accessing HE and to what extent participating in the event had an effect on their access. This research was designed prior to the onset of the Covid pandemic, so the original plan was to conduct the evaluation in person. However, this stage had to be implemented during the pandemic via phone calls instead. All

participants who filled in the general questionnaires were telephoned with the aim of securing a phone interview.

The pandemic had changed the circumstances of many of participants. In addition, it was more difficult to reach the participants via phone calls than it would have been in person. Despite repeated attempts to contact participants, it was only possible to undertake 12 interviews in SDC and 21 in SiDC. Thus, the researcher was able to reach 25% of the original 194 participants and to undertake telephone interviews with both men and women from both districts.

Who accessed HE?

One year later, the two colleges who participated in the study reported an increase in application numbers. SDC had not carried out a precise quantitative evaluation, but SiDC reported a 15% increase in numbers. It is important to remember that, by this time India was experiencing the full effects of the pandemic.

It was also observed that women accessed HE in higher numbers than men. Men chose to either find employment or enrol in coaching centres, with the hope to clear the administrative exams and find employment in the near future. A few men had been actively preparing to join the armed forces as well. Most women interviewed were either enrolled or in the process of enrolling to HE. Analysis of interviews indicated that women were more informed than before the event about the timeline for admission and the process. They were more confident than before the event in seeking out the right information as a result of the event and having had the exposure to college faculty and staff.

Overall, both men and women who accessed HE shared that the taster day was very valuable in helping them in navigating the HE admission process and choices.

6. Conclusion

This third phase of the study explored the role of the institution in enabling young people's access to HE. This was accomplished by looking at what existing structures and policy were in place to encourage or aid students' access and by implementing an outreach activity in government colleges to gauge the effectiveness of outreach in bridging the gap in information about HE.

Institutionally, the three colleges in the study implemented seat reservation and relaxation of admission criteria based on the reservation policy. But beyond reservations, the colleges did not carry out any other form of activities officially that would aid students' access to HE. There were provisions to make students' experience during HE easier. This included allowing them to earn money by taking up small jobs at the college, making women's transport free, and providing students with access to sports and other recreational activities. However, there was no provision to facilitate the *getting-in* process. Since the vast majority of students who access these government colleges are first generation learners, with extremely limited access to reliable and objective information, and with little support in accessing and navigating HE admission and choices, the role of the institution, as an objective and reliable source of information becomes even more salient.

The study found that government colleges in Haryana are at the frontiers of access, which makes their role critical in enabling access and bridging the gap between them and the students. However, India's push towards massification of education, coupled with the move to make India go digital in all spheres including education has meant that those who live in rural/semi-urban areas and lack necessary infrastructure and resources, like the participants in this study, suffer. Lack of computers at home and more importantly, lack of digital literacy has caused several additional challenges for both students and colleges. Students and their families struggle to find avenues to gain reliable information about HE in the first instance and then struggle to find ways to complete the application process, which has been made completely digital, despite most of the population not having access to computers or the internet. It transpired through the research that, previously, both access to information about colleges and the application process was carried out offline using prospectus and brochures which allowed for space to have face-to-face interactions and information sharing between the students, families, and the colleges. Prior to the transition to online information and applications in 2012, colleges were able to reach out to motivate students to apply and ensure a good fit between the students' aspirations and the colleges facilities by having conversations and informational sessions. Distribution of prospectus along with the application forms were also seen as an effective way to contact the applicant pool and provided the students and families an opportunity to visit the college and speak to the staff. However, students the researcher spoke to revealed that the online system had forced them to enlist the assistance of 'cyber cafés' in order to fill in the application forms. However, due to the large number of applications being completed by the limited number of cafés in each area, colleges reported dealing with a high rate of errors in the application, which delay or in some cases suspend the application process, and hence affects the ability of the student to gain admission. As a result, college staff often have to assist the students and their families in rectifying these errors. This adds to their workload, despite the study finding that many colleges face significant staff

shortages, with sometimes only a fraction of sanctioned faculty positions being filled. The faculty shared that, although no formal outreach was in place, they still try to carry out outreach informally, using WhatsApp and other social media within their communities

The research established that the colleges who participated in the study were positive about carrying out outreach in the form of a taster day.

Despite some organisational challenges, particularly in relation to staff shortages, the event itself proved to be a success in the two district colleges, out of the three originally planned which were able to undertake the taster days. In total, the study recorded and surveyed 194 participants attending the taster days across both districts, although one of the colleges unexpectedly invited an additional group of students which was not part of the study. The researcher did however note in her FD that there was not always a full ownership of the event from the colleges, as the researcher had to step in, for both events, to provide various type of support from assisting with organisation to delivering a presentation.

The measured impact of the taster days, however, was very positive. In particular, the colleges who ran the taster day both reported an increase in their applications the following year. Additionally, the post- and pre-event surveys and interviews conducted by the researcher highlighted that students who attended the event were overwhelmingly positive about participating in the event and that the information shared during the event was useful to the students who did apply to HE. The survey data clearly showed that participants prior to the event overall felt that they did not have the necessary information to make informed decisions about HE—although some differences were noted across genders and caste groups. In contrast, after the event, participants declared feeling more confident about choosing the right college and course, as well as with navigating the admission process. Finally, in interviews 10 months after the event, the researcher found that more women had accessed HE than men—due to men opting for the employment route—and that women were more informed regarding the admission process and more confident in finding the relevant information as a result of the event. Of the women who were able to be interviewed, most did carry on to HE, almost all of them joining public colleges in the same area or close by. Only men seemed to have been able to travel to other districts or cities to prepare for or participate in employment in some form.

Women's access to local public colleges makes it extremely important for those colleges to be high quality institutions of education as, in a lot of cases, they are the students' only option to enter HE. Furthermore, it also becomes important for these colleges to be active participants in enabling students' access to HE by providing reliable information and guidance to students and their families. Outreach can be an effective tool in ensuring the role of the institution in helping students navigate these choices and building their confidence to make leaps and fulfil their potential. This research has found that colleges are equally enthusiastic about being able to provide this type of support to students.

7. Recommendations

7.1 The role of the government

- The application process should be made multimodal (offline and online) to make it easier for rural students to apply to HE.
- Funding should be made available for colleges to organise taster days and other outreach activities.
- Staffing shortages should be addressed to facilitate the role of staff in important activities such as outreach. Moreover, faculty members' additional duties that are not related to higher education (e.g. assisting with elections) should be reduced to allow further concentration on core duties.

7.2 The role of colleges

- Colleges, especially public colleges, should carry out some form of outreach to bridge the gap in information and knowledge and make access to HE easier.
- Families should be invited and involved in the outreach efforts.
- Informational brochures should be distributed in hard copy to give students all the necessary information about a particular college.
- It would also be useful if there were members of staff hired to solely look after the admission process who could be responsible for outreach and improving access.
- Colleges should recognise and reward existing outreach practices that are occurring and faculty members' endeavours in this regard.
- When colleges organise events such as taster days, they need to consider:
 - Appointing a key in-charge faculty member to oversee the event.
 - Including a number of other faculty members in the planning.
 - Plan for bus transport and refreshments.
 - Arrange the programme.
 - Ensure the venue has audio-visual equipment.
 - Work with local schools to attend.
 - Consider using a questionnaire to evaluate the success of the event.
 - Try to invite parents and other family members as well as school students.

For further guidance on setting up a taster day, please see the FCF Project's Outreach Activity Resource.³

7.3 The role of schools

Schools should work with local colleges to support their students attending taster days or invite faculty members to the college to provide information on HE.

³ Find the FCF Project Outreach Activity Resource at:
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/rlaaa3083/output/fair_chance_for_education_outreach_activity_resource_published.pdf

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