



THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF LIFE SKILLS AMONG DISABLED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Life skills are indispensable competencies that facilitate the successful resolution of personal, academic, and professional challenges. Life skills, including communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and emotional regulation, are essential for the development of autonomy, employability, and social inclusion in students with disabilities in higher education. Despite the implementation of progressive policy frameworks such as the RPwD Act (2016) and NEP 2020 in India, disabled students continue to encounter substantial obstacles, such as infrastructural inaccessibility, exclusionary pedagogical practices, attitudinal barriers, and inadequate student support services. Nevertheless, there are new opportunities that are emerging as a result of inclusive education policies, assistive technologies, peer mentoring, and skill-based programs. This investigation, which is predicated on qualitative and descriptive secondary research, investigates the technological, pedagogical, and structural factors that influence the development of life skills among disabled students in higher education. It emphasizes both the barriers and the facilitating practices, and it offers suggestions for developing skill-oriented and inclusive educational environments. The paper promotes a multi-stakeholder approach to guarantee that disabled students can flourish in both their academic and social pursuits.

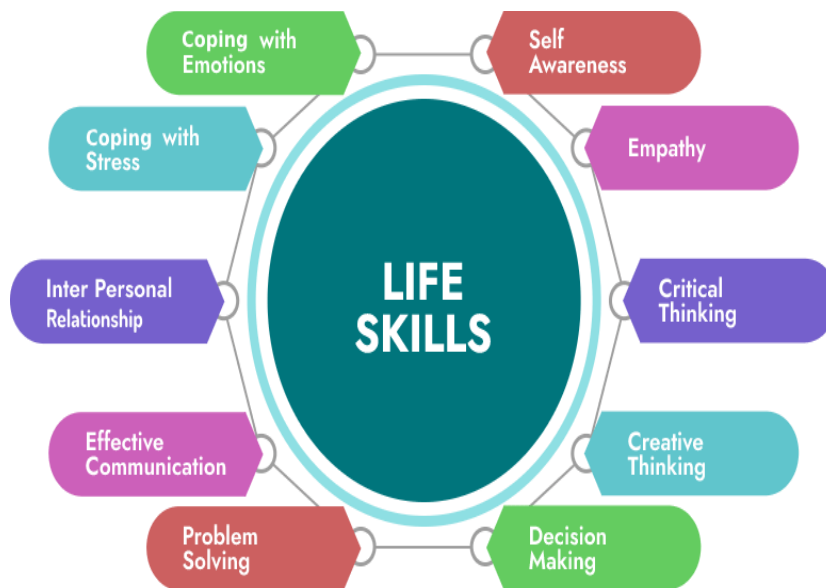
Keywords: *Life Skills, Higher Education, Students with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, RPWD Act 2016, Challenges and Opportunities*

Introduction

Life skills, defined as the ability to adapt and constructive conduct that allow people to deal well with the Challenges and Opportunities of everyday life, are critical for personal and professional growth. These abilities include critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, decision-making, and emotional and relational management. Students at the higher education levels require life skills for academic achievement and future employability. Life skills comprise essential talents that enable individuals to effectively manage the challenges and demands of everyday life.

These abilities include the ability to solve problems, make decisions, think critically, communicate effectively, and control emotions. Life skills are especially important for higher education students as they are ready to move from academic to professional and social contexts (WHO, 1999).

The key role of life skills in the context of higher education is widely recognised as a critical enabler of individual well-being, academic success, and social inclusion. Communication, decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, empathy, and the capacity to manage stress and emotions are among the skills that the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines as the "skills for adaptive and constructive conduct that help people to properly handle the responsibilities and obstacles of daily life" (WHO, 1999). Life skills are not only instrumental in academic success in higher education but also in the development of students' independence, employability, and civic engagement (UNESCO, 2012). The development of life skills is especially important for students with disabilities, as it directly impacts their capacity to self-advocate, surmount socio-cultural barriers, and lead independent, dignified lives.



The 10 Core Life Skills by WHO

The necessity of establishing higher education environments that facilitate the comprehensive development of all students, including those with disabilities, has been underscored by the global movement towards inclusive education (UNCRPD, 2006). In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 have established frameworks for inclusive and equitable education. These frameworks mandate the adoption of assistive technologies, the development of educators' capacity, the implementation of barrier-free campuses, and the adaptation of curricula (Government of India, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020). These policy frameworks acknowledge that higher education institutions (HEIs) are obligated to cultivate critical life competencies that facilitate students' transition into maturity and the labour market, in addition to providing academic instruction.



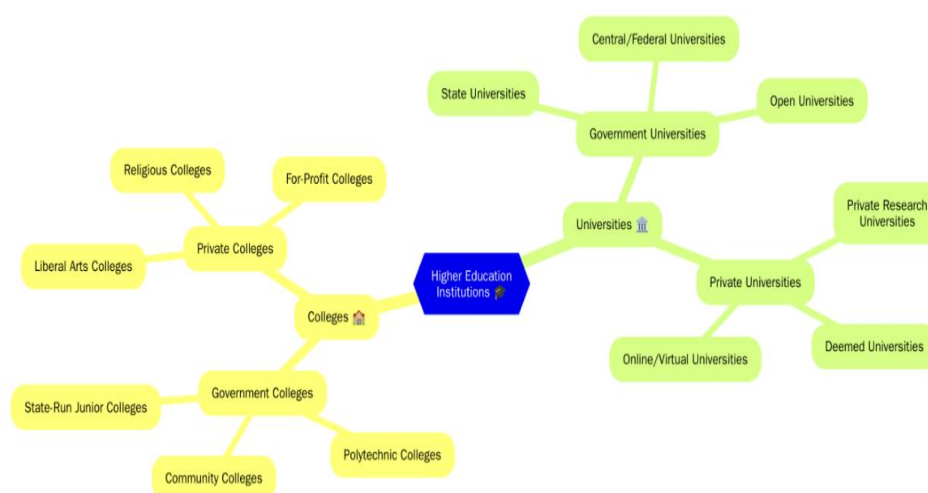
Types of Disabilities under the RPWD Act, 2016

Nevertheless, students with disabilities continue to encounter numerous obstacles in their pursuit of life skills in higher education environments, despite these policy advancements. Attitudinal barriers, physical inaccessibility of college infrastructure, absence of inclusive pedagogical practices, and inadequate support services are persistent obstacles (Moriña, 2017; Singal, 2015). For instance, students with physical disabilities may be unable to fully engage in academic and extracurricular activities due to the inaccessibility of classrooms and hostels. Additionally, the absence of learning materials in alternative formats can disadvantage students with sensory or cognitive impairments. Moreover, the social exclusion that frequently results from the lack of awareness and sensitivity among faculty and peers further restricts the opportunities for disabled students to develop emotional and interpersonal coping skills (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005).

Simultaneously, there are numerous opportunities to cultivate life skills in higher education students who are disabled. The integration of assistive and adaptive technologies, including screen readers, speech-to-text tools, and communication aids, has significantly improved the capacity of disabled students to access learning content and express themselves, thereby fostering

digital literacy and autonomy (Al-Azawei, Serenelli, & Lundqvist, 2016). According to Kumar and Sarangapani (2019), workshops that emphasise leadership, communication, and stress management, inclusive student organisations, and peer mentoring programs have also demonstrated beneficial effects on the development of life skills. Additionally, the institutionalisation of disability support cells and counselling services in certain universities has enabled the provision of targeted interventions that promote self-esteem, emotional resilience, and goal formation.

The objective of this paper is to offer a thorough examination of the Challenges and Opportunities that are linked to the development of life skills among disabled students in higher education. The objective of this paper is to investigate the structural, pedagogical, and technological factors that influence the acquisition of life skills by utilising empirical research, policy analysis, and case studies. It also emphasises excellent practices and suggestions that can be used to develop more inclusive and effective strategies in higher education institutions.



Types of Higher Education Institutions

Delimitations of the Study

- This study focused on the Challenges and Opportunities.
- This study focused only on undergraduate and postgraduate level higher education disabled students.
- This study focused on only life skills.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify the key challenges of Life Skills among Disabled Students in Higher Education.
- To analyze the opportunities for Life Skills among Disabled Students in Higher Education.

Questions of the study

The questions of the study are as follows:

- What are the key challenges of Life Skills among Disabled Students in Higher Education?
- What are the major opportunities for Life Skills among Disabled Students in Higher Education?

Literature Review

Some literature reviews related to the study are discussed below:

Fernández-Batanero et al. (2022) studied “Access and Participation of Students with Disabilities: The Challenge for Higher Education.” This study examined that access to higher education is a fundamental privilege for all individuals; however, individuals with disabilities continue to face obstacles in achieving this goal. Based on a systematic review of the literature, the objective of this study is to document the obstacles encountered by students with disabilities in their pursuit of higher education. Twenty studies were published between 2011 and 2021 as a consequence of the systematic review of four databases. The findings suggest that students with disabilities encounter a multitude of obstacles when attempting to enroll in university education. Strategies are suggested to ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities and achieve success in higher education, as indicated by the findings.

Hanafin et al. (2006) discussed “Including young people with disabilities: Assessment challenges in higher education.” This study said that higher education access for underprivileged groups, including those with dyslexia and physical disabilities, in Ireland sometimes emphasizes technical and practical support. Nonetheless, environmental impediments, curriculum design, inadequate assistive technology, and staff attitudes continue to be issues with assessment methods. These problems expose how

narrowly defined access has been, therefore neglecting important factors, including pedagogy and fair evaluation. More general, inclusive strategies are required to guarantee fair learning conditions for every student.

Moriña (2018) conducted “Inclusive education in higher education: challenges and opportunities.” This study analysed that implementing inclusive education in higher education is challenging, as it was originally designed for younger students. However, with more students with disabilities progressing to higher levels, inclusive practices have become essential. This article explores inclusive education in higher education through three sections: the current state of inclusion for students with disabilities, a literature review on the experiences of students and faculty, and a discussion on transforming universities into inclusive spaces through effective policies, strategies, and actions. The goal is to ensure equal opportunities and success for all students, regardless of disability, by fostering a truly inclusive academic environment.

Research Methodology

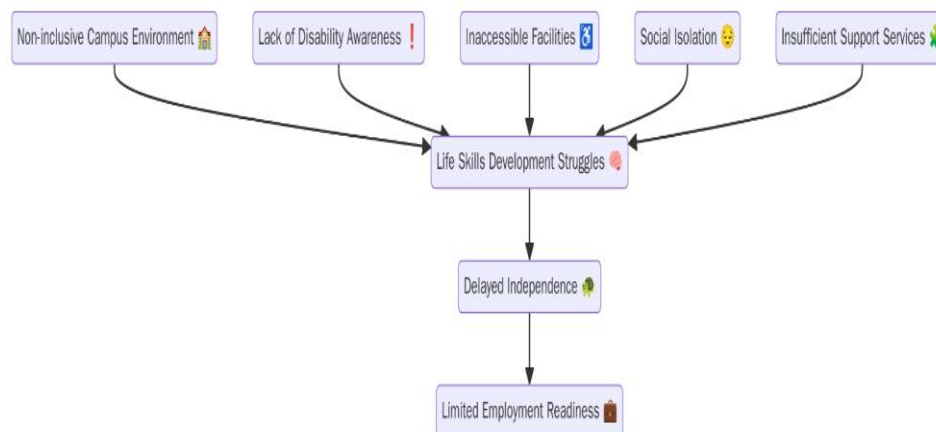
This study applied qualitative and descriptive research approaches. Using particular techniques depending on study needs, secondary data is examined. This study made use of secondary materials like books, e-books, journals, articles, websites, company reports, the internet, printed materials, etc. It integrates research from a variety of contexts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of life skills among disabled students in higher education.

Findings and Discussion

Findings and discussion are analysed based on the objectives of the study.

Objective-1: The Challenges of Life Skills Among Disabled Students in Higher Education

The acquisition of life skills is essential for all students in the context of higher education, as it has a significant impact on their employability, personal development, and academic success. Life skills, as defined by the World Health Organisation (1999), are "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." These skills include resilience, critical thinking, decision-making, communication, coping with emotions, and interpersonal competence. Nevertheless, the acquisition of these competencies is frequently impeded by a variety of personal, social, and institutional obstacles that can impede the holistic development of students with disabilities.



1. Physical and Environmental Barriers: Physical inaccessibility is one of the most significant challenges encountered by students with disabilities in higher education. Students with mobility or visual impairments find it challenging to independently navigate campuses due to the absence of adequate infrastructure, including ramps, lifts, accessible restrooms, and tactile pathways, in numerous institutions, particularly in developing countries like India (Singal, 2015). This inaccessibility encompasses libraries, laboratories, hostels, and recreational facilities spaces that are indispensable for academic pursuits, as well as for incidental learning and socialisation that contribute to life skills such as communication, leadership, and collaboration. Additionally, classroom environments are frequently inadequately equipped to facilitate students with sensory impairments. For instance, the absence of visual aids or assistive listening devices, poor acoustics, and inadequate illumination can impede the participation of students with hearing or visual disabilities, thereby restricting the emergence of self-confidence and interactive competencies (Moriña, 2017).

2. Pedagogical Exclusion and Curriculum Limitations: In numerous higher education institutions, traditional, lecture-based teaching methodologies are implemented, which presuppose a uniform student body. This frequently excludes students with cognitive, learning, or sensory disabilities, who may necessitate customised learning materials, alternative assessment methods, or differentiated instruction (Puri & Abraham, 2004). In the absence of these accommodations, students may encounter difficulties in the development of critical life skills, including independent learning, time management, and problem-solving, in addition to academic performance. The absence of inclusive curriculum design can exacerbate the alienation of disabled students.

Textbooks and educational resources are seldom accessible in formats that are compatible with screen readers, large print, or Braille. This not only impacts academic performance but also reduces students' ability to engage in self-directed learning and digital literacy, which are essential skills for success in contemporary society (Al-Azawei, Serenelli, & Lundqvist, 2016).

3. Attitudinal Barriers and Social Exclusion: The negative attitude or lack of awareness among peers, faculty, and administrative staff is likely one of the most pervasive challenges encountered by disabled students. Research has demonstrated that a significant number of educators are either unwilling or unable to implement inclusive practices, which can result in stigmatisation, diminished expectations, and diminished opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities, group work, or class discussions (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005). Peers may also be unprepared or unwilling to engage in inclusive interactions with disabled students, which can result in social isolation. This impacts the development of emotional resilience, collaboration, and interpersonal skills. Self-esteem, communication, and self-advocacy can be further eroded by the stigma associated with disability, which can make it challenging for students to assert their needs or seek support (ILO, 2017).

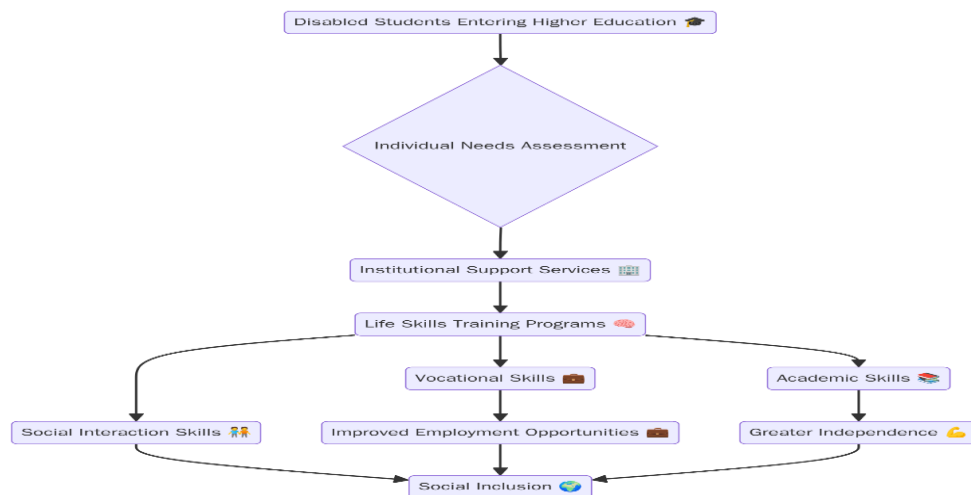
4. Limited Access to Support Services: Even though numerous universities have established disability support cells or resource centres, these entities are frequently inadequately funded or inadequately incorporated into the broader institutional framework. Consequently, students may not receive timely or sufficient assistance in areas such as academic accommodations, counselling, assistive technology provision, or skill-building seminars (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2019). The problem is further exacerbated in rural or resource-constrained institutions by the scarcity of trained professionals, such as special educators, counsellors, and sign language interpreters. Moreover, the formalisation of life skills training within higher education curricula is uncommon, and it is even less common when students with disabilities are the focus. Although some institutions provide career readiness or personality development programs, these programs are frequently generic and do not account for the unique requirements of disabled students (UNESCO, 2012).

5. Digital Divide and Technological Inaccessibility: However, disabled students frequently experience a “double exclusion” in this domain, despite the immense potential of digital tools to support the development of life skills. Numerous educational platforms, applications, and institutional websites do not intend to comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), rendering them inaccessible to students who utilise screen readers or alternative input devices (Al-Azawei et al., 2016). Additionally, the development of ICT literacy – a life skill that is becoming increasingly important in the digital learning environment of today may be impeded by the limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, or technological training that students with disabilities from rural or low-income backgrounds experience (G3ict & World Bank, 2016).

6. Psychological and Emotional Challenges: The cumulative impact of the aforementioned barriers frequently results in elevated stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy among students with disabilities. Emotional resilience and coping mechanisms, essential components of life skills, can be compromised by the challenge of navigating a hostile or indifferent academic environment. In numerous instances, students may internalise societal stereotypes, resulting in diminished motivation to participate in academic or social activities and self-doubt (Moriña, 2017). Furthermore, students may be discouraged from obtaining psychological assistance when necessary due to the cultural stigmas associated with mental health and disability, as well as the absence of readily accessible mental health services (WHO, 2011). This can lead to academic attrition and a decline in well-being, impeding the long-term development of life and career skills.

Objective-2: The Opportunities of Life Skills Among Disabled Students in Higher Education:

The move to higher education is a critical phase in the lives of young adults, providing a plethora of opportunities for personal, intellectual, and professional development. This phase can be a double-edged sword for students with disabilities, as it presents unique opportunities to develop essential life skills, including communication, problem-solving, resilience, self-advocacy, and digital literacy, while also posing challenges. Autonomy, academic success, employability, and full participation in society are all enabled by these skills (WHO, 1999; UNESCO, 2012).



1. Policy Frameworks Promoting Inclusion and Skill Development: The development of national and international policy frameworks that prioritise inclusion, accessibility, and skill development for students with disabilities presents one of the most significant opportunities. In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) mandated that state parties ensure equal access to education, promote full participation, and develop life skills that support independent living and employment. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act) in India legally recognises the rights of disabled individuals and requires the provision of inclusive education, barrier-free infrastructure, reasonable accommodations, and skill development programs (Government of India, 2016). In the same vein, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 prioritises inclusive and equitable education, emphasising the importance of critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy as fundamental skills for all students (Ministry of Education, 2020). The effective implementation of these frameworks creates institutional obligations that provide disabled students with an environment that is conducive to the acquisition of life skills.

2. Access to Assistive Technologies and Digital Platforms: Assistive technology and inclusive digital platforms have revolutionised the educational experience of disabled students, providing essential opportunities to cultivate digital communication skills, time management, and autonomy. Screen readers, speech-to-text tools, Braille displays, audio books, and accessible Learning Management Systems (LMS) promote increased academic engagement and empower students to manage their learning processes (Al-Azawei, Serenelli, & Lundqvist, 2016). Digital literacy, which is now a necessity for all professionals, is a life skill that is cultivated through consistent interaction with these technologies. Additionally, the development of communication, critical thinking, and collaboration skills, all of which are indispensable for personal and professional growth, is facilitated by participation in online forums, virtual classes, and collaborative tools.

3. Inclusive Campus Initiatives and Peer Interaction: Many higher education institutions have initiated the promotion of inclusive practices by establishing disability support cells, student organisations, awareness programs, and peer mentoring systems. These initiatives not only promote academic inclusion but also cultivate social integration, self-confidence, and leadership, essential life skills. Empathy, negotiation, collaboration, and respect for others' perspectives are fostered by interactions with diverse peers in inclusive environments (Moriña, 2017). Peer mentoring programs, in particular, have been recognised as having a significant impact, as they enable disabled students to effectively navigate academic and social challenges, share experiences, and receive guidance. These programs foster a sense of belonging within the campus community by enhancing emotional resilience and interpersonal skills (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2019).

4. Development of Self-Advocacy and Agency: Students are frequently encouraged to assume greater autonomy and accountability for their personal and academic lives in higher education environments. The development of self-advocacy, problem-solving, and decision-making skills is critical for students with disabilities during this transition. Important life competencies are developed through the necessity of requesting accommodations, communicating with faculty, managing academic schedules, and navigating administrative procedures (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). In particular, self-advocacy is essential because it enables disabled students to assert their rights, negotiate for equal opportunities, and articulate their requirements. These skills are not only advantageous in academia but also essential for future employment and civic activities.

5. Increased Opportunities for Employment-Oriented Skill Building: Numerous universities have implemented vocational training, apprenticeships, and career readiness programs that are specifically designed for students with disabilities in recent years. These initiatives are designed to address extant gaps in the labour market and improve employability skills, including communication, time management, teamwork, and adaptability (ILO, 2017).

To offer training in entrepreneurship, digital marketing, content writing, and other skill-based areas, certain institutions collaborate with NGOs and government agencies. These opportunities assist disabled students in the acquisition of life skills that are essential for financial independence, social inclusion, and employment.

6. Personal Growth through Cultural and Co-Curricular Participation: Another method of cultivating life skills is to engage in cultural events, athletics, debates, and student-led initiatives. Although accessibility continues to be a concern in numerous institutions, initiatives are being implemented to establish more inclusive co-curricular environments. These activities foster the development of a comprehensive personality by fostering self-esteem, communication, leadership, and interpersonal relationships (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005). When students with disabilities are encouraged to engage in these environments, they redefine societal perceptions of ability and challenge stereotypes, which further reinforces their self-worth and agency.

7. Emergence of Inclusive Pedagogy and Faculty Sensitization: These opportunities for more inclusive classrooms that promote the development of life skills have also been facilitated by the growing awareness and professional development efforts of faculty. The implementation of universal learning design (UDL) methodologies fosters adaptable instructional strategies that accommodate a wide range of learning preferences and requirements (Burgstahler, 2015).

For instance, faculty members who have received training in inclusive pedagogy may incorporate group discussions, case studies, reflective writing, and project-based learning. These methods offer students with disabilities the opportunity to develop and refine their critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities.

Conclusion

For disabled students in higher education to develop holistically, achieve academically, and integrate into society over time, their development of life skills is essential. This summary shows that even though more inclusive learning environments have been created with great success, there are still major obstacles preventing students with disabilities from efficiently acquiring and using fundamental life skills. Important challenges include poor knowledge among teachers, inadequate infrastructure support, lack of qualified workers, and limited access to customized life skills training programs. Low self-esteem, social stigma, and institutionalized discrimination further marginalize these kids, hindering their development of confidence, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving capacity skills fundamental for both personal and professional success. Still, there are chances, and they are progressively growing. Policies of governments, institutional support systems, and growing integration of ICT technologies have created fresh paths for empowerment. Life skills-based courses, inclusive pedagogy, and peer support groups have proven good results in allowing disabled students to negotiate social and academic settings more successfully. Moreover, the application of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with its emphasis on equity, inclusiveness, and skill-based education, offers a major platform for mainstreaming life skills development among all students, including those with disabilities. Higher education institutions have to use a multi-stakeholder strategy, including teachers, administrators, legislators, families, and students themselves, if they are to guarantee significant inclusiveness. Emphasizing inclusive attitudes, funding accessible infrastructure, and including life skills instruction into regular academic courses should help to shape these attitudes. Furthermore, designing more flexible and adaptive interventions depends on giving particular life skills demands of impaired students top priority in research and data collection. In essence, even if obstacles still exist, there are increasing chances for impaired students in higher education to improve their life skills. Higher education may become a transforming environment where every student, regardless of ability, is prepared to lead empowered, autonomous, and socially conscious lives by constant dedication and purposeful action.

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