

BEYOND ACCESS

A Symposium on Reimagining Student Support in Indian Higher Education
27- 28 March 2026, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru Campus

Higher education in India has undergone dramatic growth in the 21st century. Catalysed by a series of policy interventions, the number of public and private universities has more than doubled since the turn of the millennium. Alongside constitutional instruments of affirmative action, this expansion in institutional capacity has greatly widened the social base of higher education. Today, our universities and colleges welcome more first-generation learners and students from communities historically excluded from elite educational pathways than ever before. This is a profound democratic gain, with potentially transformative consequences.

The rapid expansion, however, has brought to the fore a set of critical issues that have not received the urgent deliberative and institutional attention they require. First, we need a better understanding of the new institutional landscape of academic support and skilling, across social sector organisations and for-profit actors that work with socially and educationally disadvantaged high-school students in carving out higher educational pathways for them. Secondly, once past the entry barrier, we need to reckon with how to actualise inclusive classrooms in higher educational spaces from both educational and social standpoints: What kinds of institutional frameworks and support infrastructures are necessary for this purpose? How do we ensure that university classrooms and the wider campus do not become new theatres of exclusion? If we are to meaningfully realise the transformative promise of higher education, then addressing and acting on these questions is an urgent need of our times.

One thing is clear: simply democratising access to higher education is not enough. Providing sustained academic and co-academic support across the student life cycle is just as important. For students from marginalised backgrounds, co-academic support is key. Systematic investment in this ranging from bridging foundational capacities in reading, writing and quantitative reasoning to cultivating multimodal literacy and numeracy, communicational abilities, and digital competencies is essential not just for better curricular engagement. It is equally important for life beyond the degree, for securing dignified livelihoods and holistic flourishing in the contemporary world. And this support cannot be provided only through the classroom. We must, therefore, imagine and institute other kinds of spaces in our universities where co-academic learning can happen.

This two-day symposium, hosted by Azim Premji University at the Bengaluru campus, aims to bring together a wide gamut of actors and stakeholders to discuss the current and emergent landscape of student support towards and within higher education. We look forward to learning from grounded models of academic and co-academic support across diverse institutional and extra-mural contexts. Our emphasis is on spaces and practices that are inclusive by default attentive to linguistic diversity, disability and neurodiversity, and socioeconomic realities so that the democratic gains of expanded access to higher education translate into durable forms of academic, intellectual, and professional flourishing.

Possible panel themes:

Bridging the Transition

Explores how institutions support students entering higher education by addressing foundational learning gaps and readiness challenges produced by the systemic learning inequities in K-12 schooling.

Topics may include:

- Foundational literacy, numeracy and reasoning skills
- Supporting first generation and rural learners by addressing readiness gaps
- Designing and implementing equitable entry and orientation pathways

Designing and Governing Co-academic Support Infrastructures

Examines the institutional logics, policies, and frameworks that enable equitable, inclusive non-classroom learning support.

Topics may include:

- Institutional systems and policies for psychosocial support
- Inclusive access frameworks for disabled and neurodivergent learners
- Collaborative and equitable feedback mechanisms

Intermediary Learning Spaces and Informal Academic Communities

Explores peer-led and informal learning environments that complement classroom instruction and foster academic engagement.

Topics may include:

- Peer-learning models, student-led study circles, reading groups, and learning collectives
- Writing centres, tutoring labs, and intensive training programmes
- Knowledge resource centers and extra-mural support initiatives

Digital Futures: AI, EdTech, and the Reshaping of Learning Support

Discusses the opportunities and risks posed by digital tools - particularly generative AI and platform-based learning - as they transform the ecology of student support.

Topics may include:

- Generative AI as a learning companion and its pedagogic implications
- Democratising data literacy and digital competencies
- EdTech-led models of upskilling and critical digital pedagogies

Language and Inclusion

Considers how linguistic diversity acts as both a barrier and resource for inclusion in higher education and the support needed for multilingual learners.

Topics may include:

- English language support for the demands of higher education
- Multilingual pedagogies and translanguaging
- Language labs and digital platforms for interactive language learning

Beyond the Degree: Broader Life Skills and Professional Competencies Focuses on skills, literacies, and dispositions learners need for civic participation, professional mobility, and/or continued intellectual growth.

Topics may include:

- Workplace communication, professional literacies, and job readiness
- Continuous upskilling and digital/data competencies for evolving labour markets
- Critical, reflective, and interdisciplinary thinking across domains