Perception Of Students Of Higher Education Institutions On Community Engagement In Southern Assam

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Abstract

Social responsibility occupied an important and inherent part of the universities globally alongside the traditional mission of imparting education and research. The recent debate and focus of the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have been upon rankings, quality, financing, students, etc. But with the change in time, new urgency such as aftermath of pandemic, climate change, gender issues, so on has called for a transition of shift of the HEIs towards emerging social issues. The engagement between HEIs and community represent a bi-directional flow of information and exchange of knowledge that can be at the local, regional, national or even at the virtual level. This engagement takes new approaches for the construction of knowledge that link community people with the students. This broader engagement of the students with the society provides opportunities for them not only for career advancement but also as an active citizen and develop social leadership skills. By delving deep the study attempts to understand the perspectives of students about community engagement and also to understand the strategies to enhance community engagement in HEIs in Assam.

The study employed mixed method of data collection where both quantitative and qualitative method was used to collect primary data from students. Interview schedule was constructed for collecting data from the students to understand demographic information, discipline, awareness about community engagement and available opportunities, involvement of their HEIs in community engagement and so on. 268 samples from 10 colleges of South Assam were proportionately chosen using the formula given by Krejcie and Morgan. Descriptive statistics, percentage analysis and word cloud are used for analysis and interpretation. The study revealed that many students expressed a genuine desire to make a positive difference in society and viewed community engagement as an integral part of their personal and professional development. Moreover, the students suggested strategies for active community engagement that includes encouragement through awareness and sensitization towards local issues, exposure visit to local communities, interacting with the people that foster a sense of responsibility towards the society. Structured initiatives from the HEIs through Unnat Bharat Abhiyan as well as undertaking research activities to address the local issues helps in establishing effective community engagement.

Keywords: *Higher Educational Institutions, Community Engagement, Students, Perceptions*

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I. Introduction

Social responsibility in today's time is no longer a fashionable or alien term in education particularly in the context of higher education. Over time, social responsibility occupied an important and inherent part of the universities globally alongside the traditional mission of imparting education and research. The recent debate and focus of the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have been upon rankings, quality, financing, students, etc. But with the change in time, new urgency such as aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, gender issues, violence and so on has called for a transition of shift of the HEIs towards emerging social issues. Therefore, in an effort to make education more socially relevant, efforts are been made pertaining to curriculum development, courses and programs redesigning and so on to make the students understand and learn concepts through experiences gained from societal engagement. Thus, HEIs plays an important role in shaping individuals and their engagement with the broader community. It serves as a platform for students to develop a sense of social responsibility and contribute to the betterment of society (Warren, 2020).

HEIs as an important stakeholder has an instrumental role in the country's development along with addressing the pressing social issues. The institutional social responsibility extends beyond the academic realm and creates a wholeness and completeness for the institution and leave behind an experience on the holistic development of the students. Community university engagement as a concept is a mutually beneficial relationship between the two by adopting a bidirectional flow of information that can be at the local, regional, national or even at the virtual level. This engagement takes new approaches for the construction of knowledge that link community

people with the students. This broader engagement of the students with the society provides opportunities for them not only for career advancement but also as an active citizen and develop social leadership skills. The perspectives of students can provide valuable insights and help inform the development of effective community engagement initiatives within HEIs. Students with their fresh and critical viewpoints and direct connection with contemporary social issues can offer unique insights and develop design and strategies to help addressing issues faced by communities in local context. By actively seeking and incorporating the perspectives of students, HEIs can ensure that community engagement efforts are relevant, meaningful, and impactful for all stakeholders involved. This engagement allows the students to witness the direct applicability of classroom teaching to address real world problems fostering a sense of social responsibility and empathy.

Integrating the perspectives of students can also foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among the student body, as they play an active role in shaping their own educational experiences and the impact they have on their communities. This inclusion of students' perspective creates a more inclusive and collaborative environment, where students feel valued and respected as active participants in the learning process and in the broader community. In addition, by considering the perspectives of students, higher education institutions can tailor their communication and engagement strategies with alumni (Mann, 2007). This can strengthen the bond between the institution and its alumni, creating a mutually beneficial relationship that supports the goals of both parties. By acknowledging and supporting the perspectives of students, HEIs can enhance their community engagement efforts and create a positive impact on society (Warren, 2020). Moreover, this approach aligns with the core values of higher education, such as equitable access, accountability, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. Overall, incorporating the perspectives of students in community engagement initiatives within higher education institutions has practical implications on the interactions between the institution and its alumni, enhances communication.

Moreover, HEIs with its enormous resources that is human, physical and digital has the ability to address the learning and collaborate deficit in the achievements of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education is one key aspects of SDGs with SDG 4 specifically dealing with ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all by 2030. The introduction of the NEP 2020 in India has shifted the attention of HEIs and emphasised the alignment of teaching and research with SDGs. Further, the NEP 2020 strongly recommended on the production of locally relevant knowledge systems that build a strong social relationship with local communities ensuring academic pursuits are grounded in real world contexts and contribute to meaningful local development. By bridging the gap between academic knowledge and community needs HEIs can play a crucial role in creating sustainable solutions tailored to specific regional challenges while contributing to broader goals of SDGs.

In context to Assam, the gateway to Northeast India, presents a unique educational landscape that is shaped by its unique ethnic tapestry and distinctive geographical features. Though Assam is one of the most populous states in the region and second largest in area still the state is grappled with multitude of challenges that includes infrastructural challenges, political instabilities, connectivity issue and so on. All these factors significantly influence the educational ecosystem of the state particularly the HEIs. However, in recent years with the concerted efforts of both central and state government substantial progress in the educational landscape in Assam has been made. In Assam, (Government of Assam, 2023) there are 2 central universities, 13 state universities, 1 state university in BTAD (under sixth schedule), 6 private universities, 26 polytechnic institutions, 1 IIT, 1 NIT and there are 301 nos. of Govt. Provincialised Colleges. The establishment of these HEIs has been a cornerstone of this development that helps in addressing the specific needs and aspirations of the state. These institutions are not merely centres of learning but are becoming active agencies of community engagement and social transformation. Under the flagship program of Unnat Bharat Abhiyan, the Government of India largely focusses on serving the rural communities residing within the vicinity of the HEIs. In line with this program, the HEIs in the state are actively engaged in various community engagement activities that helps the students in applying their academic knowledge along with applying the communities' own knowledge in conducting research and integrating it into design.

The students' perception of higher education in Assam are evolving in tandem with these developments. The students increasingly view HEIs as platforms for holistic development and not just as an academic growth. Reference can be made to IIT Guwahati where various projects are being undertaken by the students engaged in identfying relevant challenges faced by the communities and working towards it as part of their academic requirements. Students from Assam University, Silchar are engaged in various community engagement activities particularly from the Department of Social Work through their 5-year integrated course and concurrent field work. The student trainees organise various camps such are health check-up camps, awareness camps, conduct surveys and many more activities pertaining to the curriculum. The department also undertake various research projects funded by central agencies. Through the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS) at Assam University various research activities focussing on indigenous local foods and agricultural practices, indigenous handlooms are conducted with the motive of supporting the local communities

in entrepreneurial development, facilitate effective marketing of their products, secure patents, documenting their practices which are on the verge of getting lost. Additionally, through collaboration with other departments, the centre extends platforms for local artisans and communities through workshops, Melas to display and showcase their products, share knowledge, and preserving traditional methods and techniques. Students from Tezpur University conducted various outreach activities through various departments such as English, Sociology, Hindi, Maths, Mass Communication and Journalism where free teachings in the schools of nearby area are conducted. Research studies are undertaken by various departments such as Department of Energy under their MTech course on energy consumption pattern, energy recovery from locally available biomass etc. In Gauhati University various departmental research studies are conducted addressing various pertinent social issues. As part of outreach and extension services by various departments are engaged in activities such as plantation conservation, biodiversity awareness programs, awareness campaigns, community radio service, campaign on media literacy in the communities, developing TLM for Persons with Disabilities for community mobilisation, training for Master trainer and in-service teacher in special education and rehabilitation centres, literacy programs etc. are done. Further, through NSS volunteers can develop a sense of civic and social responsibility for adhering to social standards as well as rules and regulations in different contexts. A crucial component of the National Service Program, Special Camp attempts to connect young people with the community and inspire them to take action to better their lives. Youth find it particularly appealing since it offers them rare chances to live in groups and have collaborative experiences (Joseph & Molankal, 2020). The NSS unit of Assam university Silchar is also contributing to the society by engaging volunteers to render service in the form of blood donation, cleanliness drive, national integration camp and community engagement through special camps and other various outreach activities. Active steps are also taken by the NSS unit of Tezpur university by adopting 4 villages and conducting various activities such as regular healthcare and educational activities, Plantation drives for school children, Animal Training Camps.

Given this background the study attempts to understand the perspectives of students about community engagement and also to understand the strategies to enhance community engagement in HEIs in Assam.

II. Objectives

The objective of the study is to critically understand the perspectives of the students about community engagement of the HEIs in Southern Assam. Further, the study also aims to understand the strategies to enhance community engagement in Southern Assam.

III. Methodology

The study employed mixed method of data collection where both quantitative and qualitative method was used to collect primary data from students. Interview schedule was constructed for collecting data from the students to understand demographic information, discipline, awareness about community engagement, available opportunities for community engagement, involvement of their HEIs in community engagement and so on. Descriptive statistics, percentage analysis and word cloud are used for analysis and interpretation. SPSS is used to analyse the data quantitatively.

Sampling Method adopted:
1. Out of 31 institutions located in South Assam, 10 colleges were selected using lottery method.
2. The sample size of the study was determined by using the formula given by Krejcie and Morgan i.e. Students were chosen proportionately.

Table 1: List of Institutions

Sl.No	Districts	Name of the Institutions (2from each district)	No. ofStudents	SelectedSample
1	Cachar	G. C. College	4158	41
		Women's College, Silchar	864	9
2	Karimganj	Karimganj College	2129	21
		N C College	1813	18
3	Hailakandi	S S College	1542	15
		Lala Rural College	604	06
4	DimaHasao	Haflong Govt. College	1360	14
		Maibong Degree College	574	06
5	Karbi Anglong	Thongnokbe College	1366	14
		Diphu Govt. College	4025	40
6	Central Institutions	Assam University, Silchar	4811	48
		NIT, Silchar	3706	36
Total			26,952	268

# IV. Findings And Discussion

Age of the respondents

Figure 1: Age of the respondents

Age
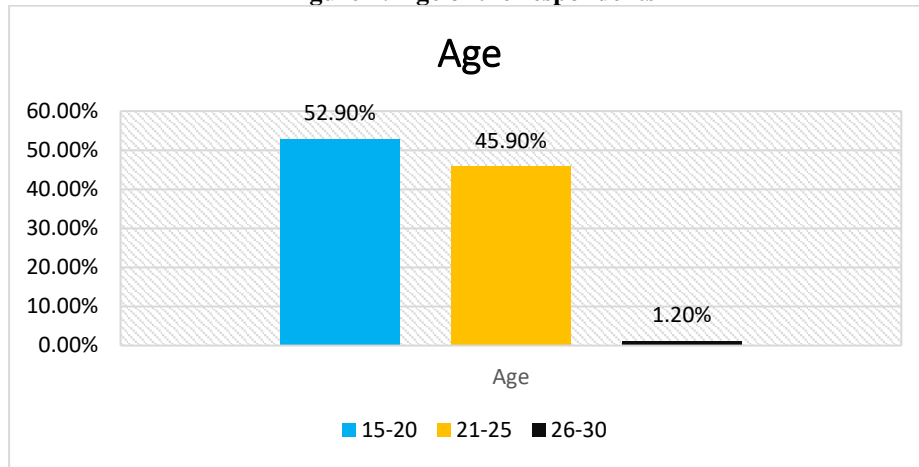
The above figure represents the age of the students. It can be seen from the above data that a little more than half of the respondents 52.9% is in the age category of 15-20 years. Whereas, more than two fifth 45.9% out of 268 respondents belongs to the age category of 21-25 years and only 1.2% out of 268 respondents were from the age category of 26-30 years. The mean age of the respondents is 20.48 and Std div. is 1.686.
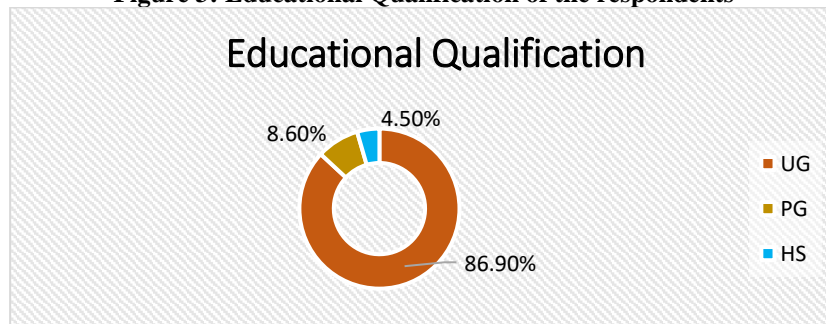
Gender of the respondents:

Figure 2: Gender of the respondents
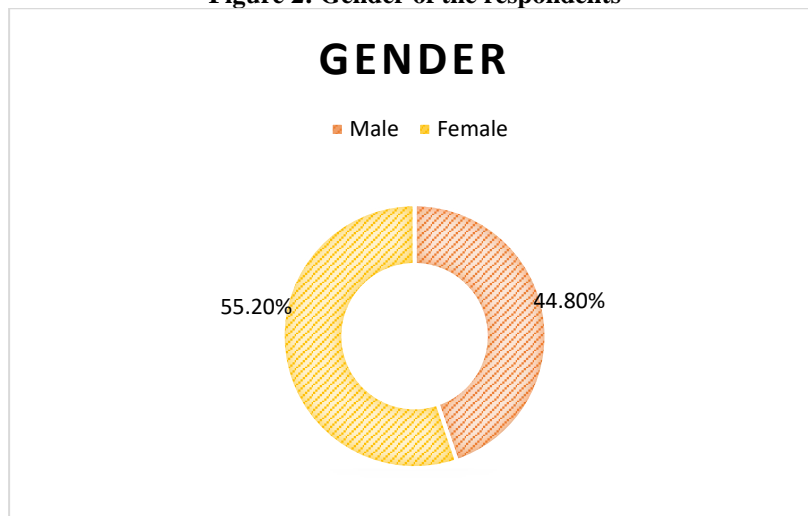
GENDER

The above figure represents the gender of the respondents. It can be seen that out of 268 respondents more than half 55.2% were female and 44.8% were male respondents.

**Educational Qualification of the respondents**

Figure 3: Educational Qualification of the respondents

Educational Qualification

The above chart describes the educational qualification of the respondents. It can be depicted from the data above that more than four fifth 86.9% of the respondents were pursuing Under Graduation, less than one tenth 8.6% of the respondents were pursuing Post Graduation and only 4.5% out of 268 respondents were pursuing Higher Secondary.

Discipline of the respondents

Figure 4: Discipline of the respondents
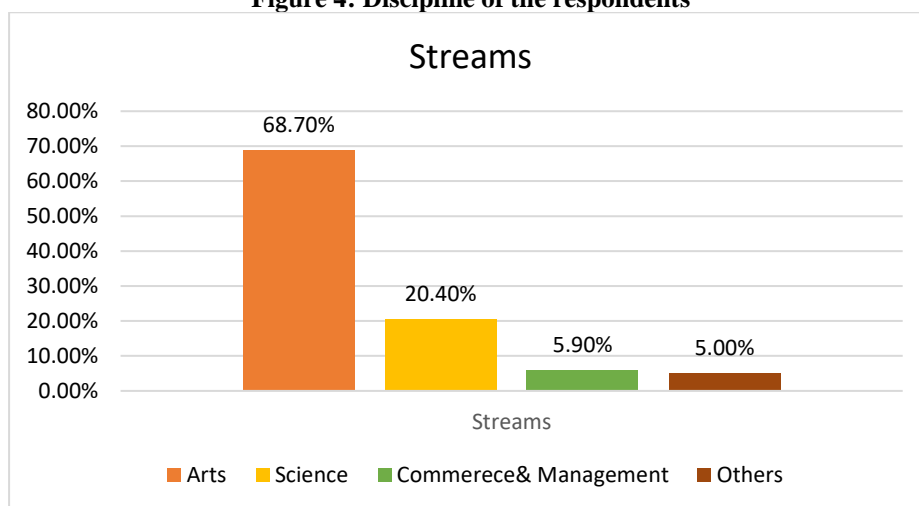
The above figure represents the streams chosen by the respondents. It can be seen that more than three fifth of the respondents 68.7% were from Social Science that is Arts stream, a little more than one fourth 25.4% were from Science and Engineering background and a less than one tenth that is 5% out of 268 respondents were from commerce and management stream.

Membership of the respondents

Figure 5: Membership of the respondents
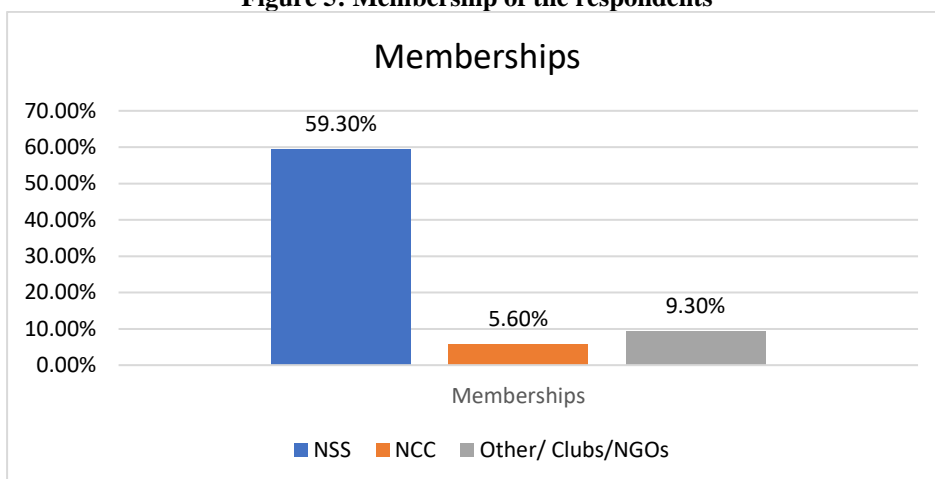
The National Service Scheme (NSS) and the National Cadet Corps (NCC) are two of the most significant youth organizations in India, offering invaluable opportunities for personal growth, community engagement, and the development of essential life skills. These programs play a crucial role in shaping the character and civic responsibility of young students, preparing them to become active and informed citizens (Crisostomo et al., 2016). The above bar chart depicts that a little less than three fifth 59.3% of the respondents were members of National Service Scheme (NSS), less than one tenth 9.3% out of 268 students were members of other clubs/ NGOs and only 5.6% out of 268 respondents were members of National Cadet Corps (NCC).

Awareness on Community Engagement of the students

Figure 6: **Awareness on Community Engagement of the students**
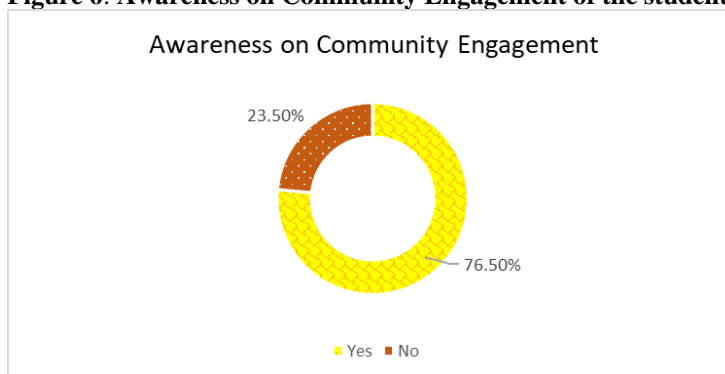
The above pie chart depicts the awareness level of the students on community engagement. Here, it is seen that a little more than three fourth of the respondents 76.5% were aware about the concept of community engagement whereas a little more than one fifth 23.5% out of 268 respondents were not aware about the concept of community engagement.

Awareness on Unnat Bharat Abhiyan of the students

Figure 7: **Awareness on Unnat Bharat Abhiyan of the students**
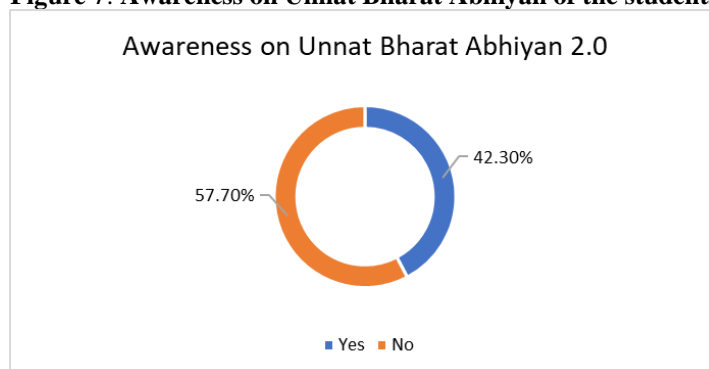
The Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) 2.0 is a visionary initiative by the Government of India that aims to transform the lives of rural communities through a comprehensive and holistic approach to development. This program, which builds upon the successes of its predecessor, Unnat Bharat Abhiyan 1. 0, seeks to address the multifaceted challenges faced by rural India, ranging from access to essential services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities to environmental sustainability and social equity (Sarkar & Bharat, 2021). The above chart depicts that more than half of the respondents 57.7% out of 268 respondents were not aware about this programme whereas a little more than two fifth 42.3% out of 268 respondents were aware about the programme.

**Available opportunities of Community Engagement**

Figure 8: Available opportunities of community engagement
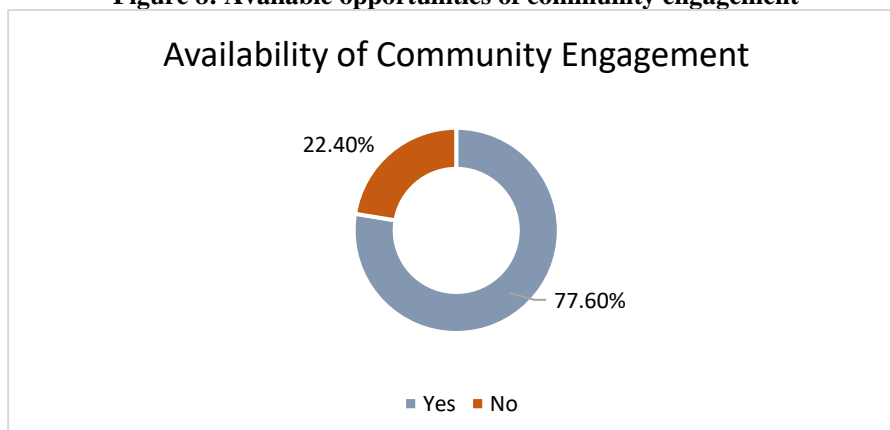
The above chart represents the available opportunities of community engagement for the students. Here, in this chart it is seen that a little more than three fourth 77.6% out of 268 respondents said that they have community engagement related activities and a little less one fourth of the respondents said that they do not have available opportunities of Community Engagement activities at their institutions.

Subject related to Community Engagement

Figure 9: Subject related to community engagement
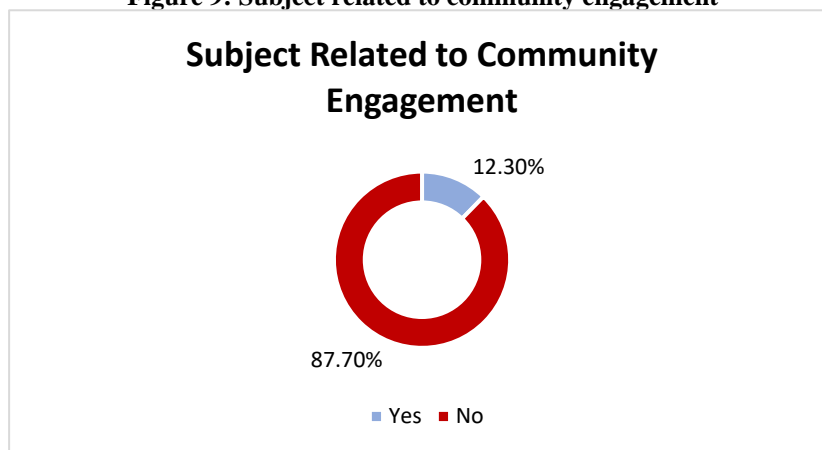
The above chart represents the availability of community engagement as a subject in the HEIs. It can be seen that majority of the respondents 87.7% out of 268 respondents said there is no proper subject related to community engagement whereas only 12.3% of the respondents said they have subject related to community engagement. The data represents a significant gap in community engagement education within the HEIs. The absence of community engagement as a structured subject will definitely hinder the learning and understanding of the students on issues and matters related to communities, their role in the society and skills that is requisite for effective civic participation. This stark gap will hinder the development of socially responsible students and the ability of the institutions to foster meaningful community buildings and connections.

Involvement of institution in different community engagement activities

Table 2: Community Engagement activities undertaken by Institutions

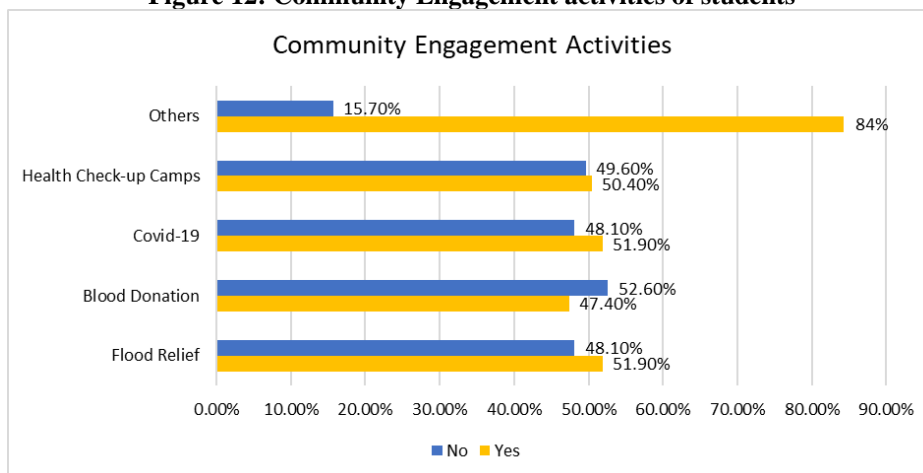| Sl No.	Community Engagement Activities	NI	RI	SI	VI	AI	Mean	Std. Dv
1	Not for credit	38.4%	17.9%	19.4%	5.2%	19%	1.49	1.5
2	Credit Based	53.4%	15.3%	18.7%	5.6%	7.1%	.98	1.26
3	Community Based Research.	33.6%	20.5%	24.6%	9.3%	11.9%	1.46	1.35
4	Community Based Internships	48.5%	16.4%	19.4%	5.6%	10.1%	1.12	1.34
5	Student Initiatives/ Innovations	23.9%	23.9%	25%	11.9%	15.3%	1.71	1.35
6	Faculty consultation Service to Community.	27.2%	15.7%	30.6%	8.2%	18.3%	1.75	1.41
7	Active Teaching Methods in the Existing Subjects	28.7%	16.4%	23.9%	12.3%	18.7%	1.76	1.46
8	Knowledge Sharing with the Community	17.9%	17.5%	24.3%	17.9%	22.4%	2.0	1.40
9	Practitioner from the field to Co- teach the subjects	87.6%	12.4%	0	0	0	1.36	1.41
10	Faculty/ student Initiatives/ Innovations	25.7%	16%	26.9%	13.8%	17.5%	1.81	1.41

(NI- Never Involved, RI- Rarely Involved, SI- Sometimes Involved, VI- Very Often Involved, AI- Always Involved.)

The above table indicates the views of the students in involvement of HEIs in different community engagement activities. As per the above data, students are of the view that their institution engaged in the way through their knowledge sharing about various social issues, information related various programmes services meant for the community people with a highest mean score of 2.0 followed by the initiatives by faculty/student and innovations with a mean score of 1.81. The table also shows that the active teaching methods like experiential learning, service learning, field work etc. in existing subjects with mean score of 1.76. the students view these

three as the top community engagement practices by the HEIs. Following this, the other community engagement practices are also prevalent in the study area as displayed in the above table.

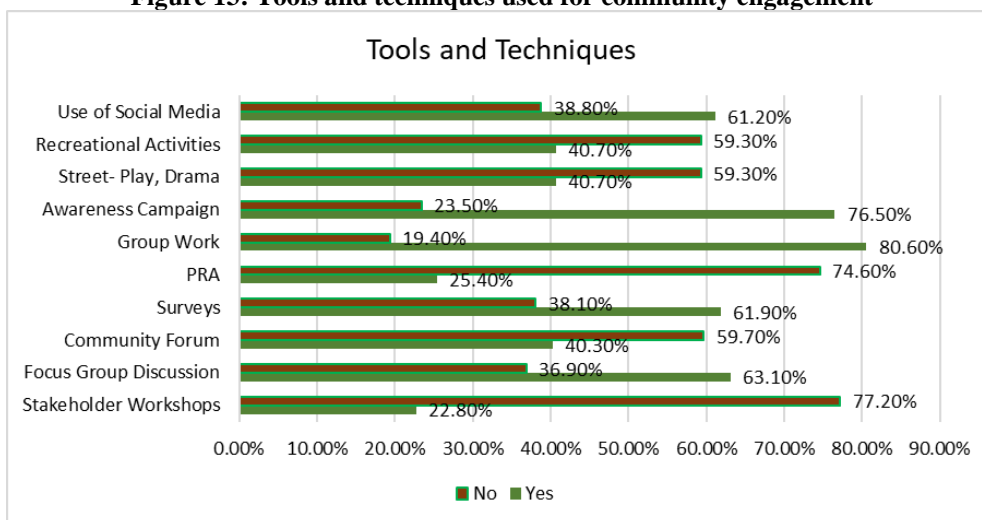**Community Engagement activities of students**
Figure 12: Community Engagement activities of students

The above chart shows multiple responses of students related to community engagement activities. It can be seen that more than four fifth of the respondents that is 84% of them are engaged in different activities like concurrent field work, awareness camps on various social issues etc. Half of the respondents 51.9% were engaged in health check-up camps organised by their departments or institutions in their nearby communities. Subsequently NSS, NCC and other departments organises blood donation camps on a regular basis where half of the respondents 52.6% said they were part of that camps. It can be noted that during Covid-19 pandemic many educational institutions have come up to support communities in a various way through awareness generation, through distributing safety kit, foods to the needy etc. Here it is seen that 51.9% of the respondents said that their institutions have taken different initiatives during the pandemic. During devastating flood in the year 2022 in Southern Assam it is found that the students, faculties, NSS Volunteers and NCC cadet were actively engaged for flood relief and rehabilitation work. In this context, 51.9% out of 268 respondents were involved in relief work.

Tools and Techniques used for community Engagement
**Figure 13: Tools and techniques used for community engagement**

Community engagement activities need effective tools and technique for better results. The above chart shows multiple responses from the respondents about their preferred tools and techniques that they used and want to use in future for better and effective community engagement activities. Here, it is seen that four fifth of the respondents 80.6% out of 268 respondents preferred group work as an effective tool for community engagement. Awareness campaign is another tool preferred by the three fifth respondents 76.5%. It is seen in the above chart that more than three fifth of the respondents 63.1% prefer to use Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as an effective

tool. Three fifth of the respondents 61.9% out of 268 respondents prefer Survey as a tool, social media like facebook, whatsapp. X were an effective tool considered by a little more than three fifth 61.2% of the respondents. Two fifth of the respondents that is 40.7% responded street play, drama and recreational activities are an effective tool for community engagement activities.

Collaboration between your institution and other NGOs/Organisations/ Communities
**Figure 14: Collaboration between Institution and other NGOs/Organisations/ Communities**
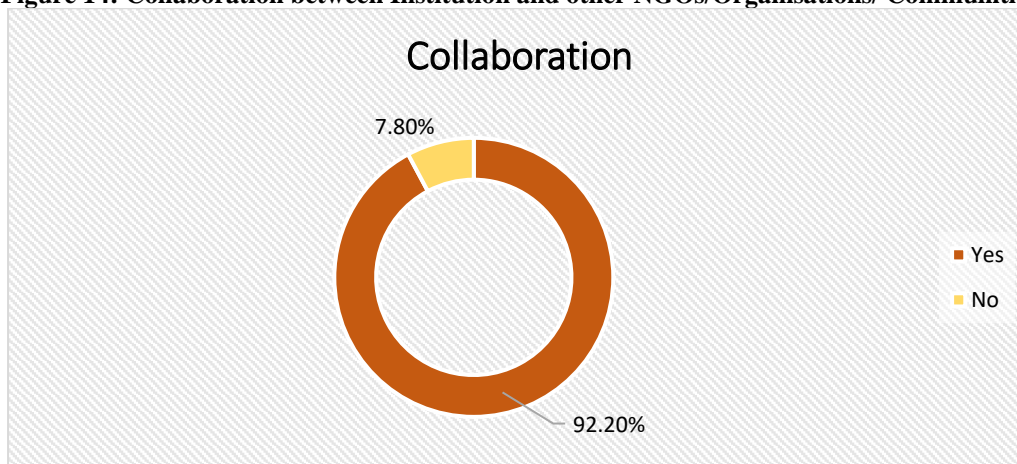
The above chart strongly indicate towards collaboration between HEIs with other Government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is perceived as crucial and beneficial for the development of the community. A vast majority of the respondents that is 92.2% believe that collaboration with organisations like Rotract club, Lions Club, Local NGOs, Hospitals and Govt. offices provide a great opportunity for them to practice community engagement activities and reaching out to the communities more effectively. Only 7.80% of the students disagreed with this viewpoint. These partnership with such organisations can significantly help the students in offering a real-world experience and expanding their understanding at the societal level as well as building a sustainable community development initiatives benefitting both the HEIs and community they serve.

Limitations faced for Active Community Engagement
Figure 15: Limitations faced for active involvement in community engagement
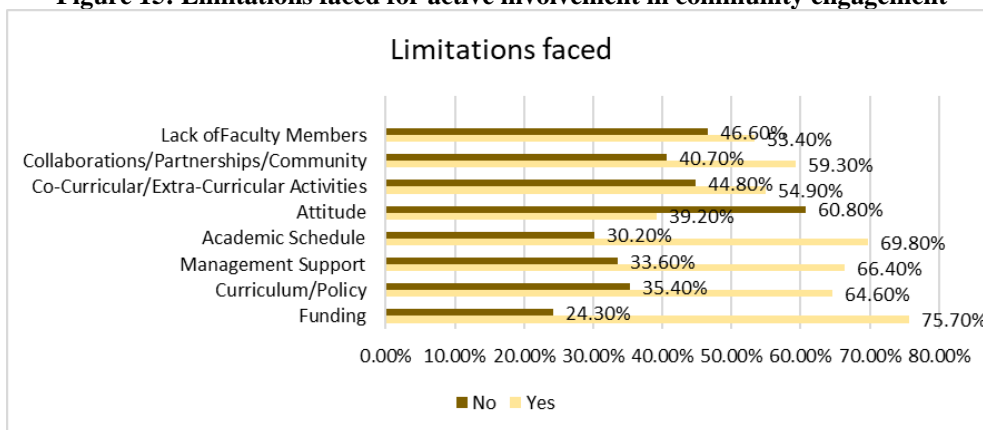
The above chart shows various limitations identified by the students of HEIs for community engagement. Lack of funding (75.7%), academic schedule being hectic (69.8%), followed by poor management support (66.4%) are the three major limitations identified by the students. Moreover, lack of proper curriculum/policy for community engagement (64.6%), lack of collaborations/partnerships with NGOs, Governmental bodies and local Communities (59.3%), lack of encouragement for Co-Curricular and Extra Curricular activities (54.9%), Lack of faculty members (53%) in the institutions are other limitations identified by the students that are challenges for community engagement of the HEIs. These limitations collectively create a very challenging atmosphere for the institutions to effective implementation and sustaining meaningful community engagement initiatives. These diverse nature of the limitations reflects a collective and multifaceted approach required to address these challenges identified.

Benefits that can be achieved for the Communities through engagement with HEIs

Table 3: Benefits for community through engaged with HEIs

Sl. No.	Benefits for Community	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
1	Resolving Concern	10.1%	5.2%	26.1%	38.4%	20.1%	2.53
2	Harnessing Resources	8.6%	9.3%	26.5%	37.3%	18.3%	2.47
3	Impetus to Research	6.7%	11.2%	29.9%	34.7%	17.5%	2.45
4	Sustainability & Scalability (Community Development Work)	8.6%	5.2%	23.9%	38.4%	23.9%	2.64
5	Eco system (Socio-Economic Development)	9.3%	6.7%	17.5%	40.7%	25.7%	2.67

(SD- Strongly Disagree, D- Disagree, N- Neutral, A- Agree, SA-Strongly Agree)

Students has identified various benefits that can be achieved by doing Community Engagement practice. Here in this table, it is seen that students agreed that community engagement activities through HEIs can build a strong ecosystem for socio-economic development of the rural community with a highest mean score 2.67. Further, they agreed that collaborations help in sourcing ideas and creating sustainability and scalability of community development work with the mean score of 2.64. Moreover, the students also agreed on the fact that collaborations help in resolving concerns of community development in the locality including issues like funding, lack of manpower and so on with a mean score of 2.53. It is seem from the above data that collaborations also helps in bringing together the resources and talents in HEIs with the mean score of 2.47.

Benefits for Students from community engagement

Table 4: Benefits for students from community engagement

Sl. No.	Benefits to Students	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
1	Application of Knowledge	8.2%	1.5%	17.5%	45.1%	27.6%	2.82
2	Experiential Learning	7.1%	3.4%	16.4%	44.8%	28.4%	2.84
3	Bridges Gap	8.2%	11.2%	31.3%	32.5%	16.8%	2.38
4	Relevance of Pedagogy.	6.7%	9%	35.4%	32.1%	16.8%	2.43
5	Service Learning	7.8%	6.7%	16%	47.4%	22%	2.69
6	Leadership Skill	7.5%	4.1%	16%	40.3%	32.1%	2.85
7	Communication Skill	6.3%	6%	14.9%	34.3%	38.4%	2.93
8	Personality Development	6%	3.4%	13.4%	37.3%	39.9%	3.02

(SD- Strongly Disagree, D- Disagree, N- Neutral, A- Agree, SA-Strongly Agree)

Community engagement activities undertaken by students in higher education institutions can yield a variety of benefits, both for the students themselves and for the community at a broader level. By actively participating in community-focused initiatives, students can develop a deeper understanding of societal issues, enhance their academic performance, and cultivate important life skills. Students expressed that community engagement would benefit them in various development. Here in this table, it can be deduced that majority of the students agreed by participating in community engagement activities their personality will be developed with a mean score of 3.02. Further, they agreed that it would help them in their communication skill building with a mean score of 2.93. The students also agreed that through working with communities their leadership skills can be developed with a mean score of 2.85. Moreover, the students agreed that they will get opportunity of experiential learning where they would learn better about the rural communities with a mean score of 2.84. Apart from these three highest agreed benefits of the respondents, the students also agreed the other benefits such as application of knowledge with a mean score of 2.83, service learning with 2.69. relevance of pedagogy with 2.43, bridges the gaps of theory and practical with a mean score of 2.38.

Students Perception on Community Engagement Activities

Table 5: Students perception on activities related to community engagement

Sl. No.	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
1	Interface between HEIs & community in the present-day context is very essential.	6%	4.5%	61.6%	28%	3.26
2	A close relationship between community and HEI is required for better functioning	4.5%	6%	60.4%	29.1%	3.14
3	HEIs can change the socio-cultural and socioeconomic life of the communities?	4.9%	7.1%	58.6%	29.5%	3.24

4	Influences of HEIs makes a community better place.	6.7%	5.2%	61.5%	29.1%	3.08
5	HEIs have responsibilities towards involvement of community people in different activities.	5.2%	6.7%	66.4%	21.6%	3.04
6	Involvement of community people in HEI activities increases the accountability of HEIs.	4.1%	8.6%	65.3%	22%	3.05
7	Educational qualification of a community member is not a factor to involve in the higher educational activity	6.7%	15.3%	57.5%	20.5%	2.92
8	Curriculum of HEIS should be framed focusing community needs.	4.1%	11.2%	65.7%	19%	3.0
9	Community support is required to implement some academic requirements of HEIs	4.9%	7.5%	63.4%	24.3%	3.07
10	Aims of HEIs can be fulfilled with the help of community people	5.2%	6.7%	63.4%	24.6%	3.07

The data displays different perceptions of the students on Community Engagement and HEIs. The students reported that interface between HEIs & community in the present-day context is very essential with a highest mean score 3.26. They also agreed that HEIs can change the socio-cultural and socioeconomic life of the communities with a mean score of 3.24. It is also seen that respondents were agreed that a close relationship between community and HEIs is required for better functioning with a mean score of 3.14. Moreover, the students agreed that influences of HEIs makes a community better place with a mean score 3.08. Community support is required to implement some academic requirements of HEIs and aims of HEIs can be fulfilled with the help of community people which was agreed by the respondents with a mean score of 3.07. Another important aspect found that involvement of community people in HEI activities increases the accountability of HEIs with a mean score of 3.05. For effective implementation of community engagement activities respondents agreed that HEIs have responsibilities towards involvement of community people in different activities with a mean score of 3.04. Curriculum of HEIS should be framed focusing community needs is another effective way for community engagement practice with a mean score of 3.0. The students further agreed to the statement that educational qualification of a community member is not a factor to involve in the higher educational activity with a mean score of 2.92.

Thus, through these interactions, it became evident that students perceive community engagement as more than just a requirement or extracurricular activity. The data revealed that many students expressed a genuine desire to make a positive difference in society and viewed community engagement as an integral part of their personal and professional development (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). They emphasized the importance of bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world application, citing community engagement as a means to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Furthermore, the students articulated their expectations from higher education institutions in terms of support and resources for community engagement initiatives (Gazley et al., 2013). They emphasized the need for mentorship, networking opportunities, and access to funding for community projects (Paul et al., 2023). Additionally, the students highlighted the significance of aligning community engagement efforts with their career aspirations, underscoring the potential for experiential learning and skill development through meaningful community involvement. The in-depth interviews with these diverse group of students from various academic disciplines and extracurricular interests reveal the depth of student commitment to community engagement and the specific support and resources they value in this pursuit.

Strategies for better community engagement as suggested by the students

Word cloud 1

After having through and detailed discussions with the students, the following suggestions emerged for a better community engagement that offer valuable insights into enhancing the effectiveness of community participation. These suggestions are depicted from the above word cloud-

- First and foremost, the students feel that encouragement can bring effective community engagement. Encouragement through awareness and sensitization of the students towards local issues, exposure visit to local communities, interacting with the people that foster a sense of responsibility towards the society. However, it is important to ensure that awareness building among the students does not remain superficial. Interactions with local communities should be structured in a way that promote mutual learning and respect rather than reinforcing power dynamics or stereotypical thinking.
- Secondly, structured initiatives from the HEIs can be beneficial in establishing effective community engagement. Reference here can be made to government programs like UBA that presents opportunities for structured engagement with the HEIs. Through such programs can sometimes lead to overly bureaucratic therefore maintaining flexibility and responsiveness to the local needs is crucial rather than strictly adhering to the predetermined goals.
- Another important suggestion provided by the students is in the field of research. The suggestion to focus on research activities to address the local issues is commendable. Through research the HEIs can identify the pressing local problems faced by the communities within the vicinity of the institutions and can take pro-active step in dealing with the issues through developing short-term as well as long-term strategies. Participatory research methodologies should be encouraged among the students so that the community members can take active part in the research process rather than just mere subject or silent spectator. However, while conducting research in the communities it should not become burdensome for these local people which might lead to loss of interest of the community people.
- The students suggested that making community engagement as a mandatory part of their curriculum can bring positive development in engaging and working with the community members. But, the involvement of the students with the community members should not be solely acknowledged through the glance of scoring marks but with the motive of bringing positive change in the society which can be beneficial to these people.
- Furthermore, the student's recognition of the importance of community representation is crucial for the success of any initiatives or programs. Thus, building good rapport with the community people, understanding their felt needs, respecting their ideas and practices are fundamental that can help the students in better reaching to the communities and successful engagement. But this process is time-consuming that may conflict with the academic schedule. Therefore, addressing the potential conflict and developing appropriate assessment methods can be helpful to the students without reducing the quantifiable metrics.

Understanding these perspectives is crucial for HEIs to tailor their approaches and support systems effectively, ensuring that community engagement initiatives resonate with the diverse motivations and aspirations of the student body. The present study at the HEIs exemplifies the diverse and nuanced perspectives of students on community engagement. This research provides a valuable reference for understanding the multifaceted nature of student perspectives and the implications for HEIs. In conclusion, the insights from the study provide a valuable reference for HEIs, enabling them to better understand and incorporate the perspectives of students in their community engagement initiatives. This understanding can ultimately lead to the development of more relevant, meaningful, and impactful community engagement programs that align with the diverse motivations and aspirations of the students.

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