

Breaking Down Barriers: Exploring the Mechanisms for Social Inclusion Within the University of Peradeniya

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Abstract

Promoting social inclusion within higher education settings is crucial. However, despite the growing concern about social inclusion, there are barriers that prevent students, including those with disabilities (SWDs), from fully participating in university life. This study aims to explore the obstacles to inclusive environments in higher education settings and the mechanisms for social inclusion, using the University of Peradeniya as a case study. This qualitative study postulates three research questions: What are the barriers to social inclusion for students, including SWDs, in the University? What mechanisms promote social inclusion in this environment, and how can the University improve its efforts to promote social inclusiveness? Five in-depth interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data, aiming to understand how different stakeholders in the University experience social inclusion, their perceptions of the University's efforts to promote it, and their suggestions for improvements. The respondents were selected using convenience sampling with their voluntary participation. Research ethics were maintained, and the data were analysed thematically. The study found that limited access to resources and opportunities, social isolation, financial difficulties, lack of awareness, and social stigma as common barriers to social inclusion. While addressing the above-mentioned common barriers, the study recommends providing resources, creating a welcoming and inclusive university culture, and promoting social inclusion through awareness and existing adaptive mechanisms. Multidisciplinary teamwork including research and interventions can further enhance the creation of an inclusive university culture.

Keywords: *Disability, Empowerment, Higher Education, Social Inclusion, Students With Disabilities*

1. Introduction and Research Problem

Promoting social inclusion within higher education settings is crucial. True social inclusion means tackling the root causes of social exclusion and promoting equity and fairness for all community members. Moreover, social exclusion refers to insufficient social involvement, absence of social integration, and lack of power, which have a negative impact on both individuals' quality of life and the equity and cohesion of society in general (Room, 1999; Kronborg Bak, 2018). Conversely, social inclusion entails enhancing individuals' abilities and opportunities to participate completely in society, encompassing economic, social, psychological, and political aspects (The World Bank, 2013). Overall, social inclusion ensures greater participation in decision-making processes that affect the overall quality of life and promotes fundamental rights.

According to the context of this research, social inclusion is a multi-dimensional process that ensures equitable access to essential resources and support for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances, to succeed and fully participate in university life. This process creates an inclusive environment that enables students to thrive and excel in higher education, research, and scholarly activities across different disciplines. In line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) 2006, we define students with disabilities (SWDs) as individuals with chronic or acute impairments that restrict their full participation in learning and other life activities (United Nations, 2006). In this study, social inclusion for SWDs entails valuing their diversity and empowering them to lead independent lives in all aspects of university life, including education and social activities,

without encountering any barriers or discrimination. This definition is crucial because social inclusion has a positive impact on academic achievements, learning experiences, student satisfaction, and overall well-being (Gidley et al, 2010). Therefore, promoting social inclusion in higher education is a necessary step towards achieving a more equitable and just society that values diversity and respects the rights of all individuals.

Despite the growing recognition of the significance of social inclusion, various barriers still impede the complete participation of students in university life, including those with disabilities. As a result, higher education institutions bear a heightened responsibility to foster social inclusion and overcome these hindrances to guarantee that all students possess equal prospects for success and full engagement (Barnett, 2016). In Sri Lanka, the higher education system has faced criticisms for being inaccessible to specific social groups including those experienced by SWDs, due to factors such as language barriers, remote geographical locations, and financial constraints (INCEDU Need Assessment Survey Report, 2021; Abayasekara, 2018). Thus, higher education institutions hold a greater obligation to promote social inclusion and address these barriers to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have equal opportunities for success and full participation.

To address this complexity and void, this paper examines the obstacles to inclusive environments in higher education settings and the mechanisms for social inclusion, using the University of Peradeniya as a case study. Hence, this study aims to identify barriers and explore existing mechanisms adopted by the University. By understanding these mechanisms, this study aims to provide insights into how institutions of higher education can promote social

inclusion and address barriers to inclusion more broadly, particularly in similar settings where the need for social inclusion is particularly acute.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the barriers to social inclusion within the University of Peradeniya and explore the existing mechanisms to address barriers and create effective strategies for promoting social inclusion. The University of Peradeniya, the largest and oldest university in Sri Lanka, was selected as a case study due to its efforts to accommodate the highest number of SWDs and create an inclusive academic environment.

To identify stakeholders for the semi-structured interviews, the purposive sampling technique was employed, and five stakeholders who were familiar with the University's efforts to promote social inclusion were invited to participate voluntarily. The study participants included an academic, an administrator, two students, and a psycho-social worker in the University setting. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected purposive sample using an interview guide, and research ethics were maintained in all phases of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity of the information were ensured, and verbal consent was obtained before data collection.

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach to identify common themes, which provided a deeper understanding of the examined topic.

3. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the mechanisms that foster social inclusion within the University of Peradeniya. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify existing mechanisms employed by the University to promote social inclusion
- Identify the barriers to social inclusion at the University of Peradeniya
- Propose strategies for enhancing the University's efforts to promote social inclusion

4. Scope and Significance of the Study

From a sociological and social work perspective, this study holds great significance. Firstly, it will make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on social inclusion in higher education; and secondly, it will investigate the experiences of students in general, particularly those who are marginalised at the University of Peradeniya. Thirdly, the study will offer recommendations for enhancing the University's social inclusion efforts, which could be utilised by other universities in Sri Lanka and beyond. Lastly, this study will shed light on future research possibilities regarding social inclusion in higher education in Sri Lanka.

5. Review of the Relevant Literature

'Social Inclusion' is defined as an attempt to break down barriers that prevent full participation (Caidi and Allard, 2005). According to Gidley et al. (2010),

social inclusion can be understood through three dimensions: access, participation, and empowerment. Sri Lanka has implemented policies to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their background. However, children with disabilities still face various barriers to accessing and achieving education, such as inadequate inclusive teaching skills of teachers, inaccessible school infrastructure, and limited curriculum scope. These issues persist in higher education as well.

Social inclusion is crucial for equitable growth and development in any society. Sri Lanka has made progress in providing access to education, including higher education, but significant disparities still exist among various population groups, leading to social exclusion. Language barriers, geographic locations, and financial constraints, including those faced by students with disabilities, are some of the factors that make the higher education system inaccessible to marginalised groups. INCEDU Need Assessment Survey Report (2021) noted that the lack of diversity in the higher education system perpetuates a culture of exclusion, making it challenging for students from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds to find a sense of belonging. Moreover, Liyanage (2017) critiques the charity-based perspective on disability in Sri Lanka, which uses the ideology of *karma* to justify inequality. Despite the National Policy on Disability, enforcement gaps exist, and a shift to a rights-based approach, which requires an integrated approach, and the involvement of the government and civil society organisations is needed.

Moreover, some studies have shown that social inclusion in higher education positively impacts student outcomes, academic achievements, and overall

well-being (INCEDU, 2021; Shukran & Alwi, 2018). However, effective mechanisms for breaking down barriers to social inclusion in universities remain unclear. INCEDU's 2021 report reveals that students with disabilities (SWDs) are predominantly from the Humanities and Social Sciences fields. Surprisingly, 74% of academics do not use special teaching methods for SWDs, hindering their full participation. Moreover, most university peers are unaware of SWDs in their classes, leading to a lack of support and understanding. Universities must prioritise the inclusion of SWDs, implement accommodations, and ensure equal access to education for a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. Thus, this study seeks to identify the mechanisms that promote social inclusion in the higher education system in Sri Lanka and explore the mechanisms to address the barriers to social inclusion.

6. Results and Findings

This section presents the study's findings based on its sub-objectives, which are to discuss the existing mechanisms employed by the University to promote social inclusion, evaluate the effectiveness of social inclusion initiatives, identify barriers to social inclusion, and suggest strategies for enhancing social inclusion efforts. The findings are presented thematically to facilitate the discussion.

6.1. Existing Mechanisms for Promoting Social Inclusion

The University of Peradeniya has implemented several initiatives that promote social inclusion and respect the diversity of its students. One notable initiative

is the approval of a policy on Students with Disabilities (SWDs) in 2021. While most SWDs are enrolled under the 'special provisions' category, mainly in the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines, the University remains committed to providing an inclusive learning environment that offers opportunities and facilities necessary for SWDs to protect their rights, participate fully in university life, and be free from discrimination. The University has also made reasonable adjustments, such as the installation of access ramps and elevators in old buildings, to provide accessibility for resources and places.

To ensure that students with disabilities are provided with equitable opportunities during their exams, the University of Peradeniya recommends alternate arrangements based on standard practices that consider the impact of their disability on their academic performance. These adjustments may include options such as submitting assignments and assessments in braille code, time extensions, the use of assistive technology, a separate exam room, the assistance of a reader or a computer, an ergonomic chair, alternative formatting of exam papers, negotiation of an alternative assessment, or any other reasonable adjustments that may be necessary.

Furthermore, the University has designated rooms for students with disabilities during exams and provides specialised medical care for those in need at any time. The Special Needs Resource Center (SNRC) offers a wide range of facilities and services to students with disabilities, including exam preparation training, mediating with the University staff to resolve student issues, providing support and guidance to complete academic and important

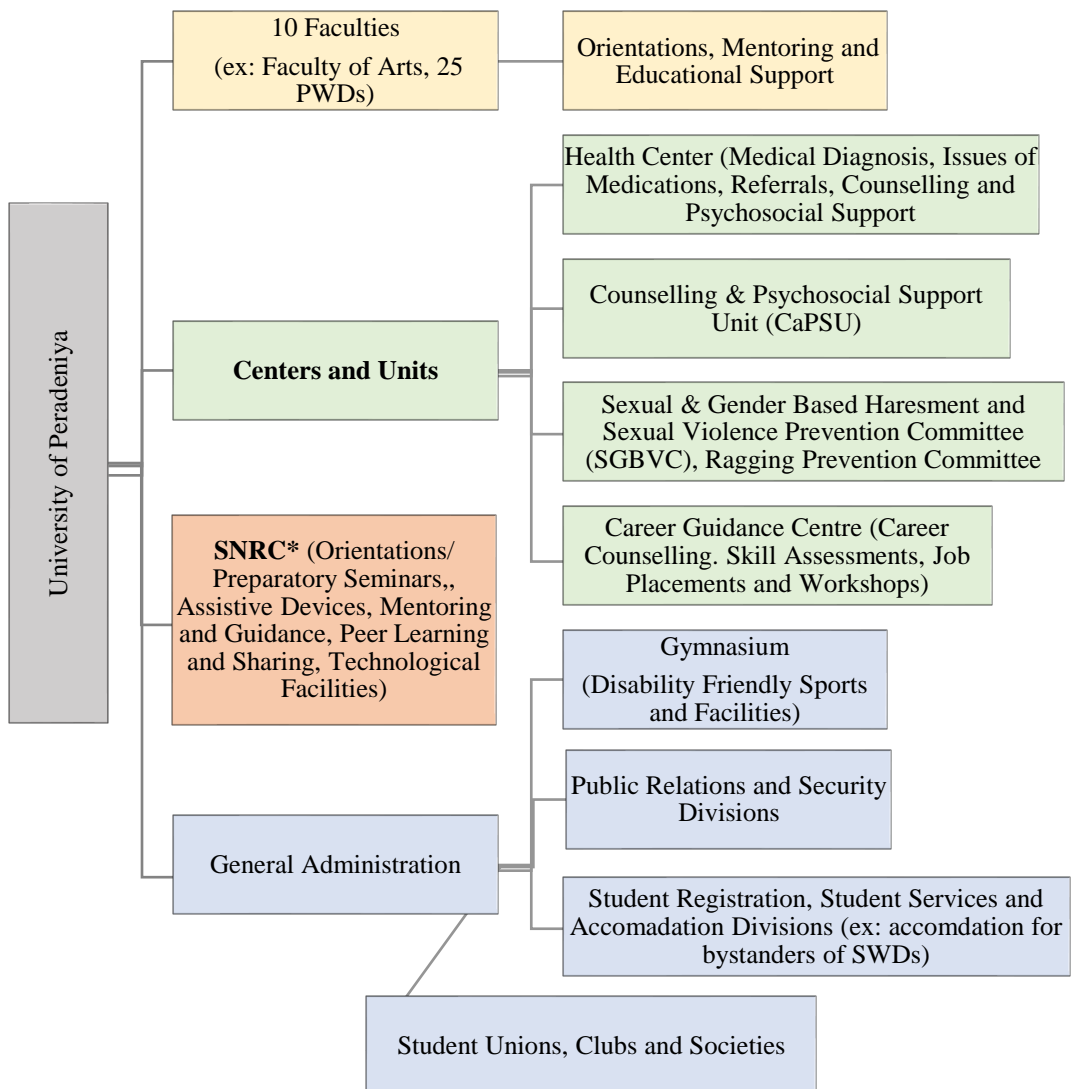
documents, assigning a buddy for lecture halls and examination centers, and offering recreational facilities within the center for students with disabilities.

The University of Peradeniya has taken several steps to create an inclusive environment for all students irrespective of their diverse backgrounds. During the Faculty orientation for new entrants, the University provides information on student services and welfare facilities. Additionally, the University introduces them to student unions and recognised student associations to help them become familiar with the University culture and make use of the available resources. Student unions and other societies extend their hands to newcomers and engage them in their activities. For instance, Pera Wings Club, Roberosia Club, Rotaract Club, etc., provide all students, including SWDs, with the opportunity to develop their personalities and social capital and represent them in the larger student body. The Health Center provides medical and psychosocial support to students, and the Career Guidance Unit provides facilities for students to develop their skills and abilities to compete in the job market in Sri Lanka and overseas. Gymnasium facilities are provided to all the students, including those with disabilities, to promote extracurricular activities including sports, and create opportunities for them to participate in inter-university games and Mini Olympics. In addition, Faculty members are well-informed about the needs of students with disabilities and strive to create inclusive classrooms by pairing them with non-disabled students.

Moreover, the University offers staff development programmes (ex: CTHE) to promote inclusive teaching practices. The aim is to encourage the Faculty to create an inclusive classroom environment that pairs SWDs with non-disabled students (buddy system). Furthermore, the general administration of

the University of Peradeniya provides some special provisions for SWDs. For example, sometimes, bystanders of students with severe physical impairments who need one-to-one support are also allowed to stay with the students within the University residence halls. The following figure illustrates some of these mechanisms and initiatives.

Figure 1



*SNRC= Special Needs Resource Center, Faculty of Arts.

Note: Developed by the authors (2023)

There is a mix of positive and negative feedback from students when evaluating the effectiveness of current social inclusion initiatives at the University. While students are exposed to various opportunities to enhance their university experience, there are still areas where the University and Faculty administration can improve support systems for all students. Students and staff positively evaluate the provision of scholarships and financial aid, the creation of support groups and networks, and the promotion of cultural diversity and awareness. Additionally, the study found that several individuals and groups within the University actively work towards promoting social inclusion.

6.2. Barriers to Social Inclusion

The study findings have shown that, despite successful mechanisms in place, there are several barriers to social inclusion within the University of Peradeniya. It is concerning to note that students belonging to marginalised groups such as low-income backgrounds, women, and students from ethnic and religious minorities face additional challenges in achieving social inclusion. Moreover, the study has revealed that students with disabilities (SWDs) are experiencing discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes.

“I had to reconsider my application for my specialised degree because it wasn't always my passion and frequently depended

on the department's ability to instruct individuals like me”

(Female SWD, 2nd Year)

“Due to the higher workload and a large number of students, sometimes we are unable to provide specific attention to SWDs. As a result, they might feel left behind” (Lecturer, FoA)

They also lack access to resources and support, making it difficult for them to fully participate in academic programmes. For instance, some academic programmes are not accessible due to their technicalities, and SWDs do not have access to the most pertinent information in suitable formats, such as Braille assignments and feedback for students with visual impairments. The study has also revealed that SWDs have limited participation in co-curricular activities, and the COVID-19 pandemic and online education transformation have led to segregation and isolation. In addition, the social support system that students once relied on has become weaker due to the economic crisis.

Unfortunately, the University's policies and procedures are not always effective in addressing these barriers and promoting social inclusion. The scarcity of resources, sustainability of the existing mechanisms, a lack of trained human resources, inadequate policy for addressing all the barriers mentioned above, and addressing social stigma, prejudices, and discrimination are among the issues that need to be tackled.

6.3. Strategies for Enhancing Social Inclusion Efforts

The results of this study highlight the importance of promoting social inclusion within the University of Peradeniya. The mechanisms identified in

the study, such as scholarships, support groups, and awareness programmes, can be further strengthened and expanded to provide greater support to students. Additionally, the University should continue to address discrimination and prejudice through the implementation of effective policies and procedures.

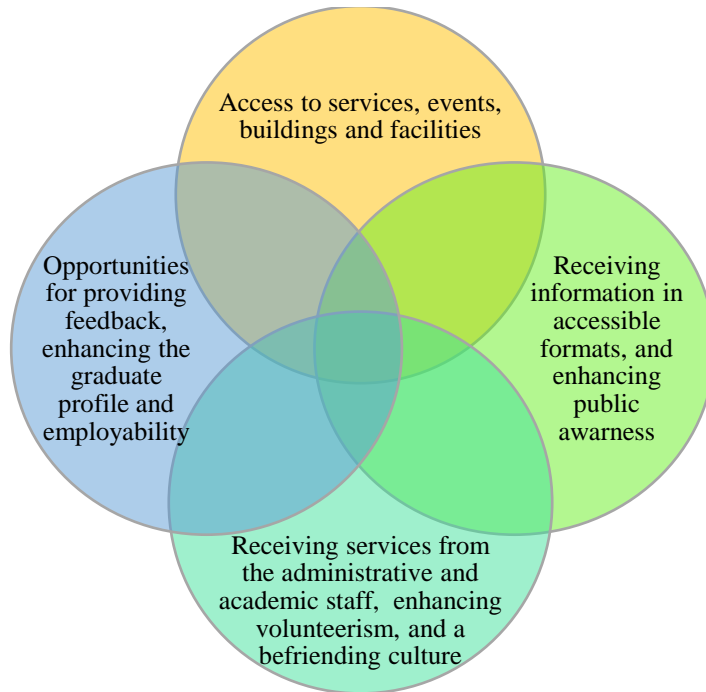
This study emphasises the importance of addressing barriers to social inclusion for marginalised students. The university must foster an inclusive environment with equal access to resources and support for all students.

The findings of this study align with previous research on social inclusion in higher education. A study by Nunan, George, & McCausland (2000) also found that students who feel socially connected to their peers and faculty have higher levels of academic achievement and satisfaction. Similarly, according to INCEDU's study conducted in 2021, support networks and mentorship programmes have been found to be effective in promoting social integration and improving student retention in higher education. Furthermore, the study's findings align with Hofstede's (2001) concept of a significant power distance in the Sri Lankan education system, which highlights the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students (INCEDU, 2021; Hofstede, 2001).

Creating an inclusive classroom environment that fosters equal opportunities for all students to engage in discussions, ask questions, and seek clarification can significantly enhance the learning experience. Furthermore, providing short-term training for staff on disability and teaching SWDs, technical facilities, and identifying and developing strengths and competencies of SWDs can enhance their career counseling services, including job placements,

personality and skill assessments, and intervention for personality development. Workshops on personality development can also be organised to promote self-advocacy and independent living. Moreover, increasing the capacity of the SNRC and connecting it with other available services, can further enhance their support.

Lastly, promoting a befriending, volunteering, and an inclusive university culture creates a more inclusive environment. To promote social inclusion and respect for diversity, several actions can be taken within the university system. Involving students and student unions during the faculty orientation, developing the faculty for inclusive teaching, and offering technical support for formative assessments, enhance support for all students. Providing technical support for formative assessments enhances learning. Increased SWD participation in co-curricular activities fosters inclusivity. Updated laws, policies, and awareness campaigns change negative attitudes toward marginalised groups. A monitoring mechanism suitable for the entire higher education system in Sri Lanka can be developed to ensure continued progress. Furthermore, engaging SWDs in mainstream activities, including decision-making processes, such as student welfare society meetings and hall meetings, can be implemented using a bottom-up approach. Finally, enhancing the graduate employability and profile of SWDs can benefit the individual and the overall university community.

Figure 2: The overall strategies to enhance social inclusion

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study emphasises the importance of promoting social inclusion within the University of Peradeniya by identifying the barriers and mechanisms to social inclusion. By addressing these issues and creating an inclusive environment, marginalised groups, including SWDs, can feel valued and included. It is crucial to create policies that prioritise and promote social inclusion to ensure equal opportunities and access to education and resources, leading to a more diverse and inclusive university community. Moreover, We emphasise the need to utilise available data to advocate for the prioritisation and effective implementation of identified policy measures, aligning them

with the existing legal framework. This step is crucial for making progress toward bridging the gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground practices in disability-inclusive education in Sri Lanka.

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