

The Perceptions of Peers About Students With Disabilities: An Analysis With Special Reference to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna

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Abstract

A good tertiary education is linked to broad socio-economic advantages when students with disabilities enrol in higher education. Their overall academic performance, retention rates, and graduation rates are similar than ever to those of their non-disabled classmates. A student can be considered as having special education needs if he or she is suffering from learning difficulties or a disability and cannot work equally as peers. The broad problem of the study was what are the existing barriers that hinder the educational inclusion of students with disabilities in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Hence, the key objective of the research was to identify the barriers that hinder the educational inclusion of students with disabilities through the perceptions of undergraduates about their peers with disabilities. The study is a non-experimental, descriptive, and association design between variables using multivariate statistical techniques using 184 sample units from the Humanities and Social Science Faculty, University of Ruhuna. It was found by exploratory factor analysis that the elements that had the most impact on the situation were accessibility and resources that universities must facilitate inclusion; academic staff's willingness to meet the needs of students with disabilities; real implementation of the curricular adjustments; and relationships and participation of students with disabilities and peers. The findings of the study suggest that universities should execute targeted programmes to address the knowledge gap about students with disabilities and the operation of care and support services for them.

Keywords: *Factor Analysis, Higher Education; Inclusive Education; Perceptions, Students With Disabilities*

1. Introduction

Scholars including (Morgado et al., (2016), and Caidi and Allard, (2005) have defined inclusive education as an educational model in which all students can learn, participate, and are welcomed as valuable members of the university. Also, it is an attempt to break down barriers that prevent full participation in social life.

Recognizing the trends, expansion and challenges of inclusive education has become a major concern in the modern era. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has established education as a basic human right for all⁵. Article 24 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which requires States Parties to improve their educational systems and take other steps to ensure that people with disabilities have access to high-quality inclusive education, contributed to the global movement towards inclusion (United Nations, 2006). Similarly, *Goal four* of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2012). Under this recommendation, several national and regional level projects were implemented to upgrade Inclusive Education which covers the equal rights of the Students with Disabilities (SWDs) in the college and university levels.

According to the definition based on national laws and regulations, "a person with a disability means any person who, as a result of any deficiency in his physical or mental capabilities, whether congenital or not, is unable

⁵ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

by himself to ensure for himself, wholly or partly, the necessities of life". However, according to the international definition, "Disability results from the interaction between people with impairments and behavioural and environmental barriers that prevent their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others"⁶. Here, the students with special education needs will become a focal topic to be discussed. SWDs refer to students with learning, physical, and developmental disabilities; behavioural, emotional, and communication disorders; and learning deficiencies⁷. A student can be considered as having a disability if he or she is suffering from a learning problem or a disability and cannot work equally as peers. Since the adoption of the Universal Free Education Policy in 1945 and the Compulsory Education Policy in 1998, Sri Lanka has fought for equal access to education for all students⁸. In 1994, the government signed an agreement to develop inclusive education because of the Salamanca Conference (Jayawardena & Abeyawickrama, 2016). In 1996, Sri Lanka enforced the Protection of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28. This was a major initiation to address the issues faced by persons with disabilities. Throughout the Drafted National Policy on Inclusive Education in 2009, the Ministry of Education (MoE) expected to create equality among students with and without disabilities by providing more attention to students with SWDs (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003). MoE launched the Framework of Action for inclusive education in the same year

⁶ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006

⁷ Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, No. 28, 1996

⁸ UNICEF, Disability-Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka, 2021

it drafted the national policy on inclusive education. Recently, Sri Lanka developed the Inclusive Education Plan for 2019–2030 to strengthen the SWDs aligning with the SDGs (United Nations, 2022).

2. Research Problem

Though there are several implementations to strengthen and protect the equal rights of the SWDs, some barriers still exist to overcome the issues related to the day-to-day activities of those students at the college and university levels. However, we could find that more research should be done at the university level to understand the barriers to inclusive education since the government of Sri Lanka, particularly the Ministry of Education has yet failed to adequately implement a proper mechanism to address the issues of SWDs. Therefore, the present study focused on the ground-level objectives to be achieved as the first stage of ongoing research. Accordingly, this study has investigated the barriers that hinder educational inclusion for students with disabilities through understanding the perceptions of peers.

3. Research Methodology

The study is a non-experimental, descriptive, and association design between variables using multivariate statistical techniques. The population in the study is the undergraduates of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka excluding the 1000 level (first year) students since they lack experience as newcomers to the university. The population consists of 1, 841 units representing 697 from the 2000 level (second year), 742 from the 3000 level (third year) and 402 from the 4000

level (fourth year) registered under the 2022/23 academic year. To guarantee the representativeness of the sample out of a total of 1,841 undergraduates, the sample was made up of 10% of the population with 184 sample units proportionately, whose distribution by levels is the one shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Sample of the Study

Level (Year of study)	Population	Sample
2000 level	697	70
3000 level	742	74
4000 level	402	40
Total	1,841	184

Source: FHSS_UOR, 2023 & Authors' calculation, 2023

The questionnaire, which was based on the scale created by Rodriguez-Martin and Alvarez-Arregui, was adopted. It consists of a series of items related to the educational response towards undergraduates concerning their peers with disabilities and uses a Likert-type scale with four response options based on the degree of agreement (from lowest to highest) (Martín & Arre, 2013). The instrument has shown satisfactory psychometric qualities of validity and reliability.

It served as the study's initial section and contained basic information identifying items organised by gender, year of study, number of peers with educational needs they are engaged with and whether they have received any training activities related to the support of peers with educational needs after they got registered in higher education. In the second part, twenty-eight

items were used to identify the barriers that hinder educational inclusion into SWDs.

The sample frame of the study was based on the students' registration list of the faculty under the 2022/23 academic year. The primary data collected through an online Google form representing each level and the required units were selected by using a two-stage stratified random sampling approach under the probabilistic sampling method. As they were deemed appropriate resources for this research, after the sample questionnaire was filled out, the data analysis was carried out using the software programme Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS version 26), following the analytical approach utilised.

To display, arrange, simplify, and summarise the obtained data in the most relevant manner, descriptive information of the data was identified using descriptive statistics approaches. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy were used to evaluate if the data were appropriate for exploratory factor analysis. Overall consistency and repeatability have been assessed using the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient.

4. Objectives of the Study

The key objective of the research is to identify the barriers that hinder educational inclusion for students with disabilities through the perceptions of undergraduates in relation to peers with disabilities. The study formulated

two specific objectives which cover different levels of barriers to inclusive education. They are:

- I. to investigate the availability of training for applying measures to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education institutes.
- II. to analyse challenges encountered by the university/higher education institute when implementing curricular adaptation for inclusive education.

5. Scope, Significance and Limitations of the Study

A good tertiary education experience is linked to broad social and economic advantages after individuals with disabilities are enrolled in higher education. The kind and calibre of interactions a student has with their peers influence their academic performance to some extent. Therefore, peers have a significant role in determining the calibre of undergraduates with disabilities in higher education since they are individuals who deliver academic instruction and contribute to establishing the university atmosphere.

The post-secondary success of SWDs may be impacted by a variety of university peers' priorities and behaviours, including their understanding of pertinent law, their willingness to make accommodations, their use of effective instructional strategies, their familiarity with disability characteristics, and their observance of proper disability etiquette. There may be significant discrepancies between instructors' views, attitudes, and their actual actions. Considering this, it is crucial to look at how seriously

undergraduates take the challenges in connection to educating peers with disabilities.

It is expected that this study's findings will address a research vacuum in the Sri Lankan higher education context while also offering insightful information on how inclusive education for SWDs is progressing in Sri Lankan universities.

However, the population of the study has been limited to one faculty of a university and the sample respondents were only 168 undergraduates. Therefore, the study has its own limitations when generalizing its findings and making conclusions.

6. Review of Literature

Jessica L. Sniatecki, Holly B. Perry, and Linda H. Snell conducted a study about faculty attitudes and understanding towards college students with various forms of impairments. Three primary research topics investigated here were: What current views do faculty members have regarding SWDs? What degree of expertise does the faculty have in SWDs and service delivery? Are academics interested in SWD-related professional development opportunities? These questions have been graded on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with the response alternatives "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree." The results were analysed using the Cronbach alpha reliability test, and one-way ANOVA was utilised to examine faculty replies to survey questions on their views regarding SWDs. Based on the type of handicap, post-hoc analysis identified the disparities in teacher reactions. The findings

indicate that while faculty members typically have good attitudes regarding SWDs, they are more likely to have negative attitudes toward learners and students with mental health disabilities than they are toward those with physical impairments. This study has also uncovered several misunderstandings and information gaps about offices of disability services and accommodation provision that may have a detrimental effect on students (Sniatecki et al., 2015).

In a collaborative study, Sheila Garca-Martn, Rosa-Eva Valle-Flórez, Ana Mara de Caso Fuertes, and Roberto Balelo discussed how academics saw the inclusion of university students with impairments in 2021. The study's main goal was to examine the challenges academics face while advocating for inclusive education and tailoring training to students' needs. It was decided to use the scale created by Rodriguez-Martin and Alvarez-Arregui. Several issues linked to the educational response to SWDs were included in the survey, and a Likert-type scale with four response alternatives was used to gauge respondents' levels of agreement (from lowest to highest). The Mann-Whitney U analysis and Cronbach alpha reliability test were used to see whether there were any differences between men and women.

A Kruskal-Wallis analysis was conducted using the seven distinct age groups to see whether there were statistically significant differences based on the participants' age ranges. According to the data, there are statistically significant variations in the criteria listed by sex, age group, teaching experience, and experience working with kids who need extra help in school. The study's findings are accompanied by several recommendations

to enhance the training required of university professors to advance inclusive education (Valle-Flórez, et al. 2021).

7. Results and Findings

The sample was made up of 85% female students and 15% male students (Table 03). The results have emphasised that the highest percentage in the level of studying corresponds, in 38% of the cases, to the 2000 level (second year), nearly 40% of the respondent sample is in the 3000 level (third year) and 22% of respondents are in the 4000 level (fourth/final year). Regarding the number of peers with educational needs engaged, there were 40% of respondents under the “none” category. However, a significant percentage of the respondents (50%) have engaged in helping 1 to 3 peers. 8% of respondents have engaged in helping 4 to 6 peers who were in the educational need category. However, only 2% responded that they have engaged in helping more than 6 peers. In the meantime, it was found that none of the respondents had received any training activities related to supporting a peer with educational needs after they got registered for higher education.

Table 2: Sample Description

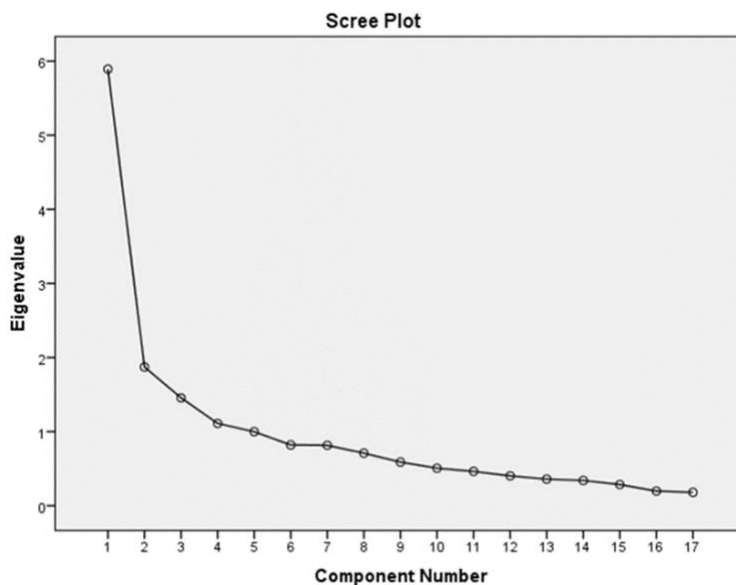
Type	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	15%
	Female	156	85%
Level of studying	2000 level	70	38%
	3000 level	74	40%
	4000 level	40	22%
	None	73	40%

Number of peers with educational needs that the respondents engaged in helping	Between 1 and 3 peers	92	50%
	Between 4 and 6 peers	15	8%
	More than 6 students	04	2%
Whether received any training activities related to supporting a peer with educational needs after registering for the higher education	Yes	00	0%
	No	184	100%

Source: Authors' calculation, 2023

The Bartlett's test significance level was 0.001 and the KMO value was 0.843, indicating that the data may be used for factor analysis. The framework's latent variables are then extracted from the survey results using the principal axis factoring procedure with varimax rotation. We utilised the Kaiser eigenvalue-greater-than-one criteria as an assessment criterion to establish the right number of latent variables to be extracted during the component analysis. One latent variable's intermediate value was discovered in the data because of a mismatch between the indicated number of latent variables to be extracted based on parallel analysis and the eigenvalue test.

Figure 1: Scree Plot of the 28 Items



Source: Authors' calculation, 2023

On a screen graph, the component number and eigenvalue are shown. Four components were the only ones extracted for analysis after looking at Figure 01: screen plot. This would allow us to propose that the variation in the data may be explained by four major components. On their respective constructions, each indicator (factor) substantially loaded over 0.50 ($p < 0.001$). They were maintained in the measurement model because they had large factor loadings. These results confirmed the robust uni-dimensionality and convergent validity of the measurement model (Hair, et al., 2010).

Additionally, Hair Jr., Black et al. suggested that the reliability test be conducted before starting the construct validity study and that the constructs

are considered reliable when Cronbach's alpha is 70 or above (Hair, et al., 2010).

Table 3: Results of Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha Value
Scale	28	0.82
Factor I	08	0.74
Factor II	06	0.76
Factor III	06	0.80
Factor IV	08	0.79

Source: Authors' calculation, 2023

Table 03 shows that all estimated construct values were higher than the recommended value (0.70), indicating good internal consistency and dependability in the model's link measures.

For the first factor, the following statements (FI.1 to FI.8) showed markedly higher positive loadings.

FI.1. There are architectural barriers in the faculty.

FI.2. Transport method is provided from the main gate to the faculty to peers with educational needs.

FI.3. Some classrooms favour access/mobility.

FI.4. The classroom space allows group work.

FI.5. The classroom equipment is adapted.

FI.6. There are "Special Educational Needs" (SWDS) support technologies in the faculty.

FI.7. Auxiliary support staff is needed.

FI.8. SWDs do not have the facilities to carry out external internships.

The first factor accounted for 19.893 per cent of the total variation and was identified as “accessibility and resources that universities have to facilitate inclusion”.

For the second factor, the following statements (FII.9 to FII.14) showed strong positive factor loadings.

FII.9. There is coordination between university administration and academics.

FII.10. Academics must adapt the ACTIVITIES of their courses.

FII.11. Academics must adapt the MATERIALS.

FII.12. Academics must adapt the METHODOLOGY of teaching.

FII.13. Academics must adapt the evaluation system.

FII.14. Academics show awareness about the Universal Design of Learning (UDL)

The second factor accounted for 15.764 per cent of the total variation and was identified as the “academic staff’s willingness to meet the needs of SWDs factor”.

For the third factor, the following statements (FIII.15 to FIII.20) showed strong positive factor loadings.

FIII.15. There are certain objectives of modules to SWDs.

FIII.16. There are modifications and/or deletions activities.

FIII.17. There are modifications to the improved resources for SWDs.

FIII.18. There are modifications in the methodology to SWDs.

FIII.19. There are special practical activities for SWDs.

FIII.20. SWDs have more time for exams/work deadlines.

The third factor accounted for 15.672 per cent of the total variation and was identified as the “real implementation of the curricular adjustments” factor.

For the fourth factor, the following statements (FIV.21 to FIV.28) showed strong positive factor loadings.

FIV.21. The relationship between SWDs and their peers is good.

FIV.22. My relationship as a peer with SWDs is good.

FIV.23. In general academics–SWDs are fluid.

FIV.24. There are adequate diversity awareness campaigns.

FIV.25. SWDs participate in extracurricular activities.

FIV.26. SWDs have more difficulties in practices (e.g. Laboratories/ field visits)

FIV.27. SWDs have the same academic problems as their mates.

FIV.28. There are volunteer peers for support tasks.

The fourth factor accounted for 13.253 per cent of the total variation and was identified as the “relationships and participation of SWDs and peers” factor.

8. Conclusions

The overall aim of the present research was to identify the barriers that hinder educational inclusion for SWDs through the perceptions of undergraduates concerning their peers with disabilities: with special

reference to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna. Based on the descriptive statistical analysis, results emphasised that the majority of the students help their SWDs peers, but they have not obtained any training related to supporting peers with educational needs after getting registered for university education. Since the majority of the respondents are in the 2000 and 3000 levels, such activities to understand the SWDS as peers should be introduced or implemented.

Therefore, it can be concluded that universities have not executed the required programmes to address the knowledge gap about SWDs and the operation of care and support services for SWDs. To increase knowledge of certain problems and make them public, it suggests awareness campaigns targeted largely at selected target groups. The same condition was supported by the research findings of Rosa-Eva Valle-Flórez, Ana Mara de Caso Fuertes, Roberto Balelo, Sheila Garca-Martn, Jessica L. Sniatecki, Holly B. Perry, and Linda H. Snell (Sniatecki et al2015) & (Valle-Flórez, et al., 2021).

The results of the factor analysis highlighted four categories that should be addressed since they include varying degrees of impediments to inclusive education in relation to the research location. The first factor (F1), which consists of eight factors, is accessibility and resources available in institutions to support inclusion. Six factors make up the second factor (F2), which is about the academic staff's readiness to accommodate SWDs' requirements. Six elements make up the third factor (F3), which is the actual implementation of the curriculum modifications. Eight factors make up the fourth component (F4), which is the interactions and engagement of SWDs

and their classmates. Through those elements, each component emphasised how it was developed to address the primary challenges that needed to be conquered. By 2021, Rosa-Eva Valle-Flórez, Ana Mara de Caso Fuertes, Roberto Balelo, and Sheila Garca-Martn conducted prior studies that support this theory, which is also supported by the findings of this study. We may infer that higher interest and a stronger desire to care for SWDs via the study programme in the faculty would result from the integration of the training activities and the acknowledgement of the curriculum adaptations.

To confirm the results and verify the components in other social circumstances, further studies might be conducted. Then, it would also be beneficial to carry out additional research on how to accommodate the growth of disability-inclusive education in higher education.

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