

Students With Disabilities in Higher Education in Sri Lanka: Challenges, Impediments, and the Way Forward

Samannala Dorabawila*, Anoma Abhayaratne and Sakunthala Yatigammana
Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya
samanmald@yahoo.com*

Abstract

Access to education is well-accepted as a universal right. However, for Students With Disabilities (SWD), providing equal access to higher education and ensuring they can pursue their education on par with their peers without disabilities in universities is still a challenge. This paper aims at identifying the existing facilities for the SWDs in universities, their needs, requirements, obstacles, and challenges faced by them in participating in higher education. The study is based on the data collected in a baseline survey. Data were collected using structured questionnaires from a sample consisting of five groups of stakeholders from four Sri Lankan partner universities of the IncEdu project. Descriptive statistics are used to organise and summarise data. The survey identified several challenges faced by SWDs, including limited access to physical infrastructure, inadequate support services, insufficient availability of assistive technologies, lack of awareness and understanding among stakeholders, and financial constraints that significantly impact academic progress, social integration, self-esteem and the overall well-being of students with disabilities. The absence of reasonable accommodations and inclusive policies creates barriers that hinder their participation and limit their educational opportunities. Implementing appropriate interventions is required to create an inclusive educational environment that ensures equal opportunities. This paper proposes a way forward by highlighting potential strategies to address these challenges including implementing inclusive policies and guidelines, ensuring accessible infrastructure, providing assistive technologies and support services, conducting disability awareness and sensitivity training for faculty and students, and establishing peer support networks. A collaborative effort involving all stakeholders is also important to create an inclusive higher education environment.

Keywords: *Assistive Technology, Higher Education, Inclusive Education, Students With Disabilities*

1. Introduction and Research Problem

Access to education is well-accepted as a universal right. While there has been remarkable progress in education attainment globally, there is still evidence to suggest that many children with disabilities are still being left behind. The participation and completion rates of education of children with disabilities are low compared to their peers without disabilities (World Health Organization and the World Bank, 2011). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates suggest that globally, children with disabilities make up one-third, or approximately 19 million, of the 58 million out-of-school children. Several factors contribute to the fact that a large number of children with disabilities are out of school. These include; lack of assistive technology, limited skills of teachers on inclusive teaching, lack of appropriate and accessible infrastructure in schools, and limited scope in curricula, among others.

According to the estimates of the WHO, 1.3 billion people – or 15% of the global population – experience a significant disability today (WHO, 2023). The Department of Census Statistics of Sri Lanka (2012) reports that 8.7% of Sri Lanka's population or nearly 1.2 million people have some form of disability. These figures, which are significantly lower than the WHO and World Bank estimates, reflect the underreporting of disability in Sri Lanka. This underreporting points to persistent challenges in identifying and measuring disability, which could lead to a large population of children with disabilities being excluded from education and other social services.

Sri Lanka has made several achievements in providing education for all children since the introduction of the Universal Free Education Policy in

1945 and the Compulsory Education Policy in 1998 which strived to afford equal educational opportunities for all children at all levels. In 2020, the country recorded a 100.3% net enrolment rate with almost 100% of students completing primary education (UNESCO, 2020). Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka in mainstreaming children with disabilities in regular classrooms and special education units in schools, a larger percentage of them continue to face several barriers to access, participation and achievement in education.

As a direct outcome of the low participation in education and the high competition in entering national universities, only a limited number of students enter the universities every year. However, for Students With Disabilities (SWD), providing equal access to higher education and ensuring that they can pursue their education on par with their peers without disabilities in universities remains a challenge.

Understanding the challenges faced by SWDs and implementing appropriate interventions is required to create an inclusive educational environment that ensures the provision of equal opportunities for all learners. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education and provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers supporting SWDs.

This paper also proposes a way forward by highlighting potential strategies to address these challenges. These strategies include implementing inclusive policies and guidelines, ensuring accessible infrastructure, providing assistive technologies and support services, conducting disability awareness

and sensitivity training for faculty and students, establishing peer support networks, and promoting financial assistance programmes for SWDs. The paper also identifies the importance of a collaborative effort involving higher education institutions, policymakers, and other stakeholders to create an inclusive higher education environment.

2. Research Methodology

The study is based on the data collected in a baseline survey. Data were collected from the sample using structured questionnaires. The sample of this study included five groups of stakeholders from all four Sri Lankan partner universities (University of Peradeniya, University of Ruhuna, Eastern University and Sri Lanka Technological Campus (SLTC)) of the IncEdu⁴ project. The five groups of stakeholders that were included are SWDs (32), peers of the SWDs (200), parents of SWDs (32), members of the academic staff (200), and administrative staff (100). The total population of SWDs of the four universities was included in the study, as the number of SWDs in the universities is small. For the same reason, the total population of the parents of the SWDs was included in the survey.

A set of five different questionnaires were used to collect data from five groups of stakeholders. All the questionnaires were piloted prior to the main data collection in order to identify the questions that should be eliminated

⁴ IncEdu is an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher education project on “Developing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lankan Universities” funded by the EU.

or modified due to ambiguities, lack of clarity, contrary to initial expectations, or which turned out to measure something irrelevant.

The questionnaires were administered in two forms; through printed questionnaires and by circulating electronic copies using Google Forms. In analyzing data, descriptive statistics are used to organise and summarise data to easily determine what information they contain and describe what the data shows.

3. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to identify the existing facilities for the SWDs, raise awareness of their needs among peers and university academic and non-academic staff, and parents of the SWDs.

4. Scope and Significance of the Study

It is expected that the findings of the survey will provide a clear understanding of the needs and requirements of the SWDs to provide them opportunities for higher education on equal terms with their peers without disabilities. Additionally, the survey aims to identify obstacles in providing access to higher education and the improvements required in physical, technical, and human capacities. The outcome of this survey will guide activities that aim to develop a system of support to equalise opportunities for SWDs in Sri Lankan universities.

5. Review of the Relevant Literature

The inclusion of SWDs in higher education has globally increased in recent years (Majoko, 2018). In Sri Lanka, a limited number of SWDs are annually admitted to the state universities, with only a slight gradual increase in the enrollment rate over the years (University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, 2013). In these circumstances, the sustainable development of inclusive education in higher education will be more favorable and afford more opportunities for SWDs.

However, the emergence of challenges together with this process is unavoidable. These include attitudes of the society, accessibility, awareness of the needs of the disabled, unavailability of assistive technology, lack of resources (physical and human), intervention of stakeholders, and employability.

Social acceptance is directly related to the attitudes of different stakeholders in society, which directly affects inclusive education. The attitudes of society toward individuals with disabilities are mainly influenced by people's knowledge of the disability and their contact with individuals who have disabilities (Wang et al., 2021).

Attitudinal barriers include negative attitudes of students without disabilities towards those with disabilities (Chikwature et al., 2016; Jenjekwa et al., 2013; Liasidou, 2014) and disablist practices and attitudes of staff in higher education institutions (Macleod & Cebula, 2009; Madriaga, 2010). Past studies have indicated that teachers require in-service training to be equipped with the positive attitudes, knowledge, skills,

competencies and understanding to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities in higher education institutions (Chiparaushe et al., 2010; Phiri, 2013). Most importantly, social change in the attitudes of students and faculty toward people with disabilities is necessary for social inclusion and equal opportunities for SWDs (Saches et al., 2011).

The accessibility barriers that the SWDs encounter can be mainly of three forms: structural barriers, attitudinal barriers, and technical barriers (Alsalem et al., 2018). Structural barriers include barriers in admission to programmes as well as physical barriers. The solution to these barriers solely depends on the responsible authorities such as the legislators, UGC, policymakers, and administrators in higher education. It is important to have proper coordination among these personnel while having a clear understanding of the SWDs' requirements.

In the context of accessibility, enrolment rates of SWDs in higher education institutions are used to measure rights to inclusive education in a country. As stated above, the 2012 Population Census recorded that only 0.8% of the total persons with disabilities are engaged in post-secondary education programmes in Sri Lanka.

Technical barriers occur when technology cannot be adopted into another format that can be accessed by assistive devices (Whiteneck et al., 2004). Today, technology has become an important component of all our lives, without which none of us would have survived the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, SWDs in developing countries encounter many technological barriers due to financial constraints.

Much research identifies the inadequacies in facilities and trained personnel, ineffective and inefficient use of technology, lack of funding, and lack of support to teachers practicing inclusion as barriers to implementing inclusion (Furuta, 2009). Parveen (2018) points out many problems such as a lack of well-educated teachers, ill-planned curriculum, inadequate resources, lack of good infrastructural facilities, lack of awareness, negative attitudes, and poor policies as hurdles for extending the concept of inclusive education. However, no studies have been conducted to identify the existing facilities for the SWDs in universities in Sri Lanka, assess the awareness of their needs among peers, university academic and non-academic staff, and parents of the SWDs and the requirements for providing them with a conducive learning environment at the Universities. This study aims to fill this gap.

6. Results and Findings

Among the overall findings, the most significant factor of the study was that the majority of the SWDs were confined to Humanities and Social Sciences. The majority of the academic staff members have had some experience in teaching for SWDs except the Faculty of Veterinary Science. One of the notable factors found in this study was 97% of the academics agreed that equal access to higher education should be made available for SWDs. Furthermore, 74% of academics agreed that they did not use any special mechanism for teaching, for SWDs. Apart from that, 81% of the academics agreed to have SWDs attending their lectures online, if attending physically is difficult. There was more than 50% agreement among the academics on

the majority of the attributes related to willingness to provide special accommodation to SWDs other than providing programmes for raising awareness, as stated in the survey. Only 13% of the academics obtained feedback on their teaching from their students. In the sample, 79% of them agreed that their subjects are suitable to teach for SWDs. However, University of Peradeniya (UoP) had the highest number of academics (13%) who felt their subjects were not suitable for SWDs while this percentage in the University of Ruhuna, SLTC and Eastern University were 2%, 2% and 1% respectively.

The survey revealed that all SWDs were admitted to the university through special intake except for only one student. Around 40% received guidance in selecting universities and 65% of them managed to follow a degree programme of their preference. The survey disclosed that the most common and the rarest disability among SWDs were blind/visual impairments (43%) and mental disability (4.3%), respectively. 52% of the SWDs felt that their disability had a negative impact on their academic life. Only 39% of SWDs were aware of the availability of a Special Needs Resource Center (SNRC) in their universities. 84% of them used at least 01 form of technology available to support their studies. The majority of the SWDs found difficulties in mobility as the greatest barrier to learning at the university.

However, gaining admission to a university is not the only barrier that an SWD will encounter in entering higher education; maintaining regular attendance in classes is another barrier they face, just like the other students. There should be a conducive environment for them to learn within the university. One of the main requirements for most SWDs is physical

accessibility to the university. For instance, although the University of Peradeniya caters to the largest number of SWD admissions in the university system in Sri Lanka, until last year there was not even a disabled-accessible ramp to enter a classroom for learning. Whenever an SWD enters a classroom, either the parents or the peers walk them to the classroom or carry them.

Lack of awareness about the needs of SWDs could be highlighted as another major issue among all stakeholders. Disability awareness is important for academic staff members as a professional development strategy. Furthermore, administrators and nonacademic staff members also need to be educated on disabilities in order to have a more positive attitude and to create an inclusive environment for all students. Research findings also found that awareness programmes are essential for all stakeholders as they would develop positive attitudes toward SWDs (Morin et al., 2008).

According to the data gathered from the SWDs' parents, monthly household income was less than Rs. 31,000, with 40% of them earning less than Rs. 10,000. Around 22% of the parent's occupation was farming and 22% reported being unemployed. Furthermore, the parents disclosed that neither the government nor universities supported them except for the Mahapola Scholarship and bursaries provided to all eligible university students. Their immediate family (83%) was found to be the major supporting source for their disabled children. Parents' opinion on services provided by Universities/Institutes shed light on the importance and the dire need of making access to storied buildings, and provision of toilets suitably designed for SWDs to use. However, negative and uncertain responses

outnumbered the positive responses received for securing a job after graduation. The majority of parents thought that the university experience would have a positive impact on their child's future.

Among the suggestions for improvement of SWDs' studies at universities, providing more opportunities to improve Information Communication Technology (ICT) and English skills, offering financial assistance, guidance to follow postgraduate degrees, and upgrading existing services and facilities in accordance with local and international treaties and conventions were notable.

According to the responses received for the attributes, peers of all universities were highly supportive of the academic rights of SWDs. 97% showed a high willingness to extend their support to mobilise them physically and 90 % enjoyed interacting with them in their studies. From the sample, 81% and 85% of peers of University Peradeniya (UoP) and SLTC, respectively did not know about the existence of SWDs in their classes. However, peers of Ruhuna (46%) and Eastern Universities (44%) were more familiar than UoP and SLTC. The majority of the UoP peers did not feel comfortable sharing rooms with SWDs.

Only 30% of the peers were aware of the existence of an SNRC in their respective universities. Prior to entering the university, 67% of them had some form of contact with SWDs. Overall, 61% of the peers in the sampled group have had some encounters with SWDs in their universities. The highest observed type of disability among the SWDs in class according to the peers was Blind/Visually impaired (43%). Of the overall sample of

peers, 69% felt that they were comfortable in learning with SWDs in class. Of the sample, 84% of the peers were willing to obtain training on facilities to be provided for SWDs. The majority of the peers were unaware of whether the lecturers used special teaching techniques to teach with SWDs.

The majority of the sampled peers stated that they felt comfortable sharing their rooms with SWDs. Most of the peers expected to develop friendships, talk with the SWDs, and help them whenever possible. The majority of the peers were of the opinion that educational facilities for SWDs have to be improved, and lecturers should pay more attention to SWDs' needs and honor the importance of equal rights for free education. Peers felt that they are not disabled, but they are differently abled and multi-talented persons.

Concerning the higher Education for SWDs, the attitudes of different stakeholders may vary, and it has been changed from time to time. For instance, if the relevant stakeholders can pay attention to the development of support systems and learning technologies, that will open more learning opportunities for SWDs. This can be noted as a positive change in stakeholders' attitudes towards the SWDs. This change has created a favorable learning environment in elementary and high schools, which enabled more SWDs to successfully complete school examinations and enter higher education. Gradually, this influence resulted in a growing demand for higher education by SWDs. In response, all higher education institutions began to develop support systems and learning technologies, which helped individuals with disabilities.

Invariably, the Blind/Visually impaired (51%) sector was the most catered sector of all universities by university authorities. Staff agreeing to undergo continuous special education training programmes (68%) was an encouraging sign as it would improve understanding of the requirements of SWDs, the nature of disabilities, and different approaches to cater to SWDs. Except for the University of Peradeniya, other universities have not conducted research seminars and workshops. However, the survey revealed that none has published research related to SWDs in the universities. UoP was the only institute that had collaborated with both local and international organizations. SLTC conducted recreational events for SWDs.

7. Conclusions

The main challenges faced by the SWDs that limit their opportunities in higher education are limited access to physical infrastructure, inadequate support services, insufficient availability of assistive technologies, lack of awareness and understanding among stakeholders, and financial constraints. These challenges significantly impact the academic progress, social integration, self-esteem, and overall well-being of SWDs. The absence of reasonable accommodations and inclusive policies also creates barriers that hinder their participation and limit their educational opportunities.

Accessibility-related obstacles faced by the SWDs at admission to universities are a direct outcome of the teaching-learning facilities at the school level. The facilities required for offering science stream subjects at

school prevent students from sitting for the GCE (A/L) examination in science streams. The small number of SWDs who are admitted to the universities through “special intake” are admitted only to the disciplines of social sciences and humanities at universities and are allowed to offer only a few selected disciplines such as languages, and history. That has a negative impact on the job market opportunities for the SWDs after graduation and on their lives in the long run.

Within the universities, physical infrastructure, teaching methods, facilities for learning of SWDs, and evaluation methods are not conducive for them to successfully complete their studies. Further, awareness of their existence, needs, requirements and rights is not at a satisfactory level, and there is a need for considerable improvement in the attitudes of both peers and staff towards them.

A substantial proportion of the SWDs including those with visual, hearing, and physical impairments come from low-income families. Therefore, these families are not in a position to support these students with any equipment or assistive technology that are not provided by the universities and that will be useful in their studies.

It is recommended to improve the education and facilities for SWDs to undertake their studies at universities, raise awareness of the existence and needs of SWDs among all stakeholders, increase available facilities for SWDs, conduct continuous professional training programmes on special education for staff and peers, and establish suitable accommodation and

teaching and assessment mechanisms as agreed by academics and pointed out by peers and parents as well.

The most important aspect of activating and sustaining inclusive education in the higher education system is increasing awareness of the existing national as well as institutional policies, the specific needs of SWDs, and available assistive technologies. There should be a mechanism that identifies the level and method of disseminating this awareness among teaching and non-teaching staff. In order to fulfill this, the authorities from top to bottom should be sensitised to the requirements of the SWDs at every level. If all these initiatives are put into action, it can positively contribute to reaching the expected levels of sustainable development goals.

8. References

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