Diversity, Equity and Inclusive Mechanisms at Sri Lankan Universities and the Way Forwards for Policy Implications

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Abstract

There are certain mechanisms under the institutional academic and administrative systems, common to all state universities in Sri Lanka that could facilitate to satisfy the requirements of Student with Disabilities. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of those mechanisms in meeting the needs of students with disabilities to investigate the research problem of whether there are effective and established mechanisms in state universities in Sri Lanka to address the need of inclusive education. It focuses on specific areas of teaching and learning, academic administrative structures, staff development, financial allocation and monitoring and evaluation. The overall objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of existing academic and welfare mechanisms in state university education for students with learning disabilities, and to identify the gaps in policy orientations and the practicalities in the available mechanisms. The study was a cross sectional study based on cases study method and the study is also based on explanatory type in its nature using qualitative methods. The study is confined its case location in two state universities: Eastern University of Sri Lanka and University of Ruhuna. In both universities, the study universe is confined to students of arts, humanities, and social sciences. Sri Lankan state universities have centrally directed policy mechanisms for teaching and learning and well-established mechanisms of student welfare systems. Even though the universities have sufficient academic and administrative structural arrangements, functions of those arrangements are ineffective due to various reasons to serve the special needs of students with disabilities. Beyond the reality that certain policy mechanisms are to be newly implemented to sustain technological and financial resources, existing mechanisms can be operated effectively with the available resources to meet the academic and welfare needs of students with disabilities.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Students With Disabilities

1. Introduction and Research Problem

Notion of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) are not new attributes to Sri Lankan cultures. Those aspects are the prime values of cultures practices by the Sri Lankan communities irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, or gender. However, Sri Lankans like other South Asian nations failed to sustain those traditionally attributed values due to the socio-economic changes taken placed specially during last four decades. Thus, diversity, equality and inclusion became as the western concepts, introduced to Sri Lankans through the international conventions and other mechanisms. In this point of view, Sri Lanka recorded a remarkable and historically significant achievements in ensuring legal provisions related with equality and inclusion to its people from the British colonial rule onwards. Universal Franchise of the 1931 Donoughmore constitution and the section 29 (II) of the 1947 Soulbury constitution are the internationally recognizable provisions ensuring DEI under the British rule. Considering DEI policy and legal frameworks in education, Sri Lankan policies and related constitutional laws were largely influenced and shaped by international conventions. Sri Lanka became a state party in the 1989 convention on the rights of child. Sri Lanka rectified the 2006 UN convention on Persons with Disabilities in 2016.

When looking into the post-independent policy developments, Article 12.2 of the 1978 Constitution, which was amended in 2015, promotes education for all citizens and prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, and place of birth, but it does not explicitly articulate non-discrimination in education on the ground of

disability (Government of Sri Lanka, 2015). Nonetheless, Sri Lanka enforced the Protection of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 in 1996, laying the foundation for non-discrimination in education and guaranteeing compulsory and free education for all through the Compulsory Education Ordinance 1997 (Government of Sri Lanka, 1996). In pursuit of greater disability inclusion, the 2003 National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka provides a comprehensive framework for persons with disabilities to be included in all aspects of society. Inclusive education was explicitly defined in the policy, demonstrating the country's commitment to include children with disabilities in general education through learner-centered teaching approaches. (Ministry of Education, 2009).

However, those policies and procedures have not been implemented up to a satisfactory level to meet the needs and aspirations of the Students with Disabilities (SWDs) specially in the state universities in Sri Lanka.

Even though there are notable developments in policy formation and establishments of legal frameworks in ensuring equality and inclusion in primary and secondary education, there has been not any national policies and mechanisms introduced in tertiary educational sector in Sri Lanka. A policy to safeguard the rights of SWDs is yet to be created for the Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) in Sri Lanka. However, there are certain mechanisms under the institutional academic and administrative systems, common to all state universities that could facilitate to satisfy the requirements of SWDs in the universities despite of the absence of a national policy for SWDs for universities. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of those mechanisms in serving SWDs to meet their needs in universities.

2. Research Methodology

The study was a cross sectional study based on a case study method and explanatory type in its nature using qualitative methods. The study is confined its case location in two state universities namely the Eastern University of Sri Lanka and the University of Ruhuna. In both universities, the study universe is confined to students of arts, humanities, and social sciences. Thus, the study focused on the situations of students from Faculty of Arts and Culture at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Ruhuna (FHSS). Purposively selected 16 students, 10 academics and 04 administrative officers were included in the sample. Two types of interviews were employed to gather qualitative information from students and staff: Key Informant Interviews (KII) and in-depth interviews. KIIs were conducted among the staff of both academic and administrative positions mainly dealing with SWDs and those who have long working experience in the university staff positions in both universities.

In-depth interviews were used to collect partly the case histories of the respondents (students) as well as hands-on experiences of staff engaged in service deliveries and facilitation for SWDs. The primary data were verified and analysed using secondary sources where necessary. During the data verification process, key thematic areas were identified, and the data analysis was done using the thematic analysis method.

3. Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of existing academic and welfare mechanisms in state university education for students with disabilities in Sri Lanka, and to identify the gaps in policy orientations and the practicalities of the available mechanisms.

Accordingly, specific objectives of this study are:

a). to identify what mechanisms and policies that are currently available to facilitate special needs or inclusive education at state universities in Sri Lanka.

b). to investigate the drawbacks and potentialities of the existing academic and administrative arrangements of state universities in assisting teaching, learning and welfare provisions to SWDs.

c). to make recommendations to improve the existing DEI mechanisms and to implement new policy decisions in order to improve inclusive education in Sri Lanka.

4. Scope and Significance of the Study

The present study has investigated an important subject of inclusive education from a dimension of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. It has looked at several thematic areas which are directly relevant to the subject matter such as teaching and learning, academic administrative structures, curricular and evaluation, staff development, financial allocation.

This study can be considered as one of the most significant studies which evaluate existing DEI mechanisms of the Sri Lankan's state universities

from a critical social science perspective. The study has also made significant conclusions which can be considered in future studies and as well as in implementing policy measures for implementing inclusive education mechanisms and systems in higher education sector in Sri Lanka in particularly, and elsewhere in general term.

The primary data collection of the study has been limited to a sample of two faculties in the state university system of Sri Lanka. Therefore, generalization of its findings and conclusion to a larger population has some limitations.

5. Review of the Relevant Literature

Inclusive education has been globally accepted as one of the best methods in special need education or in other words educating people with disabilities. As the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education specify, inclusion in the context of education is based on the idea that all children should learn together, regardless of differences or disability (UNESCO, 1994). Scholars such as Abeywickrama et al., (2013), Alwis (2005), Ellepola (2016), and Nunan et al., (2020) have emphasised that the experience, knowledge, and attitude of teachers and other professionals are beneficial and crucial for the implementation of inclusive education.

Dhanapala (2006) has highlighted that there should be strategies and action plans to encourage and increase diversity and equality for staff and students, regardless of ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation, or gender.

In 2013, the education first policy reaffirmed the inclusion of children with disabilities in education, and, to the extent possible, should be taught in regular classrooms. The Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2018–2025 promotes inclusive education in parallel with strengthening special education. It specifically focuses on strengthening special education, inclusive education, and non-formal education (Abeywickrama et al., 2017).

Sri Lanka has adopted the Disabled Persons (Accessibility) Regulations, No. 1 of 2006 which clearly indicates, "all existing public buildings, public places and places where common services are available, shall within a period of three years from the coming into operation of these regulations, be made accessible to persons with disabilities incompliance with the provisions of these regulations" (The Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 1996).

As Khasnabis et al., (2015) highlighted assistive technologies are deemed as mechanisms to promote individual functioning and independence and to impact on the wellbeing of the persons with disabilities. In the meantime, resource centers are the perfect mechanism to accommodate learning requirements of SWDs with various special needs (Affleck et al., 1988).

6. Discussion, Results and Findings

The results and findings of the study have been discussed under six sub themes identified through both the primary and secondary data validation and analysis process.

6.1. Conducive Infrastructure Facilities

The physical structure of the lecture halls and other facilities of the universities are expected to be easily accessible for different types of SWDs. The study observed that the infrastructure facilities of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka is somewhat conducive for SWDs mainly due to the geographical location of the university. The physical structure of the buildings has accessible facilities to almost all types of disabled persons. New buildings of the university were constructed with accessible ramps, lifts, handrails and grab bars and the lecture halls are also facilitated with accessible seating arrangements. Even in old buildings, it is observable that renovations were made to incorporate accessible facilities for the disabled persons.

However, the study found that the infrastructure facilities of the University of Ruhuna are different to that of the Eastern University. The university of Ruhuna is situated in a hilly terrain and most of the buildings of the faculty of H&SS are not accessible to the physically disabled students. Some especial facilities such as the library, the canteens and lecture halls were not constructed conductively for the SWDs.

It was found that in both universities, very few classrooms are equipped with assistive facilities to support learning activities of SWDs in the universities. Although assistive technologies facilitate and promote individual functioning and independence of SWDs, there is obviously a deficit in assistive technologies in lecture halls and labs to enable SWDs actively engage in learning activities. It is indeed the reality that state universities in

Sri Lanka have neither pullout lecture halls and labs to deliver special care to SWDs in teaching nor full inclusion lecture halls or laboratories where SWDs can have assistive technologies to equally engage in leaning activities like other students. Except a very few cases, where some technologies has been in placed with outside funding (eg. EU funded IncEdu project) most of the state universities are unable to technologically modify the lecture halls with modern assistive technologies. Therefore, it is understandable that SWDs in lecture halls and other common places without assistive technologies struggle for their individual functioning and independent learning.

6.2. Learning Support Systems

Under the learning support systems for SWDs in state universities, the study first concentrates on peer tutoring support services for SWDs in the undergraduate programmes. It mainly scrutinised whether the handbooks of degree programmes in the state universities selected for the study include specific evaluation methods for SWDs. Based on Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF), both universities adopted several new modes of Continues Assessment Tests (CAT) based on principles of Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Mindset paradigm (KSAM). Both universities have moderately shifted from traditional mode of interim assessment methods, tutorial submissions. However, it was found that much less concern has been given to the consistency of the modes with special needs of SWDs. It was identified that there is a lack of mechanisms used to identify the suitable methods of the evaluation for different types of SWDs and their different

abilities to comply with those methods. Secondly, the study considers the learning accommodations available for the SWDs in the universities. Both universities recently established Disability Resource Centres (DRC). Despite the deficiency of other accessible academic arrangements, DRCs equipped with modern accessible technologies could facilitate learning activities of SWDs in the universities. In addition to the academic facilitation, DRCs are the establishments to contribute to policy decisions and administrative implementations related with welfare of SWDs to promote their inclusive and equal engagement in learning. Nonetheless, DRCs have not developed integrated coordination parallel with lecture hall activities. However, both student and academic representatives of the sample mentioned that the DRCs have not been adequately integrated to the normal teaching- learning and evaluation systems of both universities, except that some students of the both sample universities mentioned that they use DRCs for their general academic activities since they were provided computer and seating facilities at the DRCs.

6.3. Curriculum Design

SWDs in the study reflected their opinion that not all course structures of the undergraduate degree programmes offered by their faculties are suitable for them. However, students at the University of Ruhuna entertain their own liberty to select suitable courses based on their preferences since the faculty of H&SS has introduced a new curricular and degree programmes which allow students to enroll for four-year honours degree programmes as per the will of the students. It is evident that the flexible course structure enables

SWDs to select courses suitable to their abilities. Even though a wide range of subjects across different fields were offered by the Faculty of Arts, Eastern University, considering the number of students, the faculty had limited the choice of students in selecting subjects. Introducing "basket system" in the course selection which allows students to select certain subjects that are grouped into a category, the faculty had restricted students' freedom in selecting subjects which they prefer. SWDs perceive this system incompatible with their interests that selecting courses suitable to their abilities and specific needs.

The SLQF has indicated that course structure of every degree programme at the undergraduate level should have fallback options. The system benefits students who are unable to pass examinations throughout the entire academic year to gain a certification for their engagement during their study programme. It explicitly benefits SWDs who have more difficulties in succeeding examinations due to the lack of accessible facilities, assistive technologies, and specific modes of evaluations. It was observed that both universities have introduced fallback options in the undergraduate course structure. However, during the interviews of the sample students, most of them were not very clear whether to get the fallback options. Only 03 out of 16 students interviewed mentioned that they would interest to obtain the fallback options and complete the education as soon as they can.

A major drawback observed in the curriculum design and course structure is that universities have no credit transfer system. The credit transfer system enables students to follow some semesters in one university and follow further semesters in another university. When enquired about this aspect

from the students who interviewed, majority of them of the views that they prefer universities close to them but have not been given that opportunity due to the current system followed by the University Grant Commission to select students to the universities. The system is preferable for SWDs to follow courses in a degree programme in a university and transfer it to the same nature of the degree in another university. It enables them to continue studies in their accessible universities. However, despite many changes in the course designs, the system has not been implemented in any state universities yet.

6.4. Academic-Administrative Structure

Considering the policy decisions and implementations, universities as semi-governmental institutions are independent to establish centres or sub-administrative bodies and to form By-Laws and operational procedures. Universities can establish policies to ensure equality, inclusion, and diversity. There are several policies related to diversity of other types, but very few universities have formed a policy for SWDs. Notably these two universities Eastern University of Sri Lanka and the University of Ruhuna have recently established SWD policy for their universities because of their partnership in EU funded IncEdu project. The policy is instrumental to enforce further academic and welfare administrative facilitation to SWDs in these universities.

There are administrative units commonly established in all state universities under the ordinance of University Grants Commission in Sri Lanka to look after the student welfare requirements. There is a generally approved

structures of student welfare system in all state universities; notably, Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Office for Student Support Service and Student Welfare, Office of the Senior Student Counsellor and Student Affairs Department generally known as student welfare offices. All these academic administrative bodies are responsible for catering to the welfare needs of students including SWDs. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of delivering welfare services in coordination with catering to the special needs of SWDs is in question. Except for a few disciplinary inquiry processes, each unit engages separately in attending welfare issues of students. There are no formal coordinating arrangements among these units to respond to the welfare affairs of the students. It does not mean that each unit is ineffective to attend welfare issues of students without coordination among them, but it is evident from the data collect from both students and staff that there are issues taken up by one of these units left incomplete due to lack of coordination.

There are approved bodies of student representations and committees for various purposes under this student welfare system. Student unions are independent entities which play pivotal role in addressing issues of students, particularly welfare issues. There are committees established to respond to the needs and issues of students in general. However, it was observed that no committee has been formed for SWDs as an approved entity within the student welfare system in these universities. It leads to the perception that SWDs have no room to address their specific needs and let alone SWDs with the sense of being marginalised.

6.5. Staff Development

Almost all state universities established their own Staff Development Center (SDC) for the purpose of training academic, administrative and non-academic staff to enhance their qualities as to efficiently serve the system. It is an innovative avenue to offer training programmes and short courses on DEI.

SDCs in universities specifically conduct induction courses on teaching methodology; a compulsory course to train newly recruited academics in teaching methods, namely the Certificate Course on Professional Development in Higher Education (CCPDHE). All permanent academics in all state universities must complete this course as it is mandatory for them to get confirmed in their position. The study found that though the course is specifically aimed to train academic staff in teaching methods for university students, the course curriculum poorly incorporates concerns about SWDs. In both universities, the induction course on CCPDHE does not consist of course contents to train candidates on specific methods in teaching SWDs and to disseminate knowledge about the special needs of SWDs. When inquired about this from the sample respondents of the staff, they mentioned that only the available course modules are being thought of in the SDC courses. It is also identified that there is no general curriculum developed in common for all universities for the course. Although there is a suggested manual with course modules, each university designed their own curriculum for the CCPDHE course. Considering the drawback, a policy guideline is thus necessitated to streamline the course contents to incorporate teaching methods for SWDs.

6.6. Financial Allocation

There are certain financial provisions being extended to the universities by the Ministry of Higher Education through the UGC. Universities are given financial allocations based on the number of students in a single intake. Diversity doesn't matter here, but only the numbers are considered. Even though universities receive financial allocations based on students' number, no financial allocations are made for SWDs from the UGC; SWDs are enumerated as normal intakes in financial allocations and no special financial provisions for welfare of the SWDs are set to be allocated yet. Even though, some faculties such as the FHSS of Ruhuna enroll SWDs under the disabled students' category, there is no special financial allocation from the government to accommodate those students. Therefore, it is quite difficult for state universities to provide special facilities for SWDs. This non allocation of financial resources was identified as one of the main barriers when addressing specific teaching- learning needs of SWDs.

7. Conclusions

Sri Lankan state universities have centrally directed policy mechanisms for teaching and learning and well-established mechanisms of student welfare systems. Even though the universities have sufficient academic and administrative structural arrangements, functions of those arrangements are ineffective due to various reasons to serve the special needs of SWDs. Beyond the reality that certain policy mechanisms are to be newly implemented to sustain technological and financial resources, existing

mechanisms can be operated effectively with the available resources to meet the academic and welfare needs of SWDs.

It is the responsibility of all university stakeholders to foster a culture that offers an adaptable and equitable environment. Additionally, it is professional, cordial, and polite while abstaining from harassment and prejudice. The university needs to foster an accepting environment for DEI. They cherish and respect the power that comes from difference, and they take delight in it.

It is essential that DRCs should integrate its activities with normal teaching and learning activities of the universities to cater to special requirements of SWDs who face the difficulties. The DRCs should also work in connection with examination centers to enable SWDs to access supportive technologies to respond to the evaluations. Otherwise, the difficulties remain intact.

The study concluded that although some policies are available, they have not been implemented or practiced to the level of requirements. To facilitate such processes and mechanisms, there should be clearly defined policies and procedures directed to the universities from the national level. Policy decisions are required to facilitate additional financial allocations to the universities to accommodate the needs of SWDs.

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