

Inclusive Approach to Students With Disabilities in Academic Setting: The Case of the IncEdu Project

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Abstract

The educational programme "Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Setting" for teaching and non-teaching staff was developed under the project Developing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lankan Universities, IncEdu (supported by the EU Cooperation for Innovation and the exchange of good practices - Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education, 2019-2023). The objective of the education was to improve the competencies of teaching and non-teaching staff to teach or interact with students with disabilities, and in this way contribute to the overall goal of the project - to develop a system of support to promote equal opportunities for students with disabilities in Sri Lankan universities. The educational programme was implemented in late 2022 for 48 teaching and 27 non-teaching staff from four universities in Sri Lanka. The evaluation was conducted using an online survey (self-assessment). The evaluation questions were related to the quality of programme implementation and the learning outcomes achieved. The evaluation involved 43 participants from the teaching staff group (89% of all participants) and 25 participants from the non-teaching staff group (92% of all participants) were involved. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Evaluation results showed that learning outcomes were largely achieved, and participants were highly satisfied with the education. The educational programme has great potential to be disseminated in all universities in Sri Lanka, contributing to the development of staff competencies to improve the process of inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education.

Keywords: *Inclusion, Higher Education, Staff Competencies, Students with Disabilities*

1. Introduction and Research Problem

Inclusive education could be defined as a model that proposes an educational model in which all students are able to learn, participate, and are welcomed as valuable members of the university (Morgado et al., 2016). Implementing the principles of inclusive education in higher education can be challenging (Moriña, 2017), but at the same time it is a necessity if we want to create a democratic society in which all people have equal access to all resources, that is, if we want to create a society in that recognise that we do not all have the same starting point and recognise the need to acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances. Social inclusion is important to a person's dignity, security, and opportunity for a better life. Therefore, the extent to which social inclusion is provided in higher education affects the prosperity of the entire country/society. The right to education is a right guaranteed by legal acts in many countries, but many young people with disabilities still have no or very limited access to higher education.

National universities in Sri Lanka enrol only a small number of students with disabilities compared to the total number of students, and their inclusion is limited to social science and humanities courses. The low number of students with disabilities is mainly due to the lack of awareness and capacity of faculty, administrators, and society, in general, to deal with their needs and requirements, as well as organisational barriers (Yatigamma, Dorabawila, & Abhayaratne, 2021). These same barriers are mentioned in a number of studies around the world (e.g., Hadjidakou & Hartas, 2008; Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022;

Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; Mullins & Preyde, 2013;). As one of the responses to this situation, the University of Peradeniya gathered a team of interested professionals and successfully applied for the Erasmus+ project with the support of European partners. The project "The Developing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Sri Lankan Universities" (IncEdu") was approved in 2019 and supported by the EU Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practises - Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education. The project aims to develop a support system to promote equal opportunities for students with disabilities in Sri Lankan universities. Four universities from Sri Lanka (University of Peradeniya, University of Ruhuna, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Technological Campus) and four European universities (University of Zagreb, Croatia; Masaryk University, Czech Republic; Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania; Uppsala University, Sweden) are involved in the project. The project is carried out in seven work packages: (WP1) baseline study on needs assessment for students with disabilities in Sri Lankan universities, (WP2) establishment of a model centre for SWDs in Sri Lankan universities, (WP3) development of staff competencies, (WP4) creation of community awareness, (WP5) quality assurance, (WP6) dissemination and exploitation, and (WP7) management of the project.

With the aim of improving the competencies of teaching and non-teaching staff in Sri Lankan universities, the educational programme "Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Setting" for teaching and non-teaching staff was developed within the framework of work page 3 "Development of Staff Competencies" (led by the University of Zagreb,

Croatia). Many studies in the field of inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education have shown that investment in staff competencies (knowledge, attitudes, skills) is an important factor in promoting the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education (Blinov, et al., 2018; Collins, Azmat & Rentschler, 2019; Lalor, Madaus & Dukes, 2020).

In addition to the development of the educational programme, extensive training of 12 colleagues (from each Sri Lankan partner university) was conducted to train them as educators, i.e., they were trained to conduct educational programmes for teaching and non-teaching staff at their universities in the future. In this way, the sustainability of the educational programme will be ensured.

The educational programme "Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Setting" is an interactive training conducted in 20 hours for teaching staff and 10 hours for non-teaching staff. The programme included lectures followed by exercises and discussions. Also, participants were encouraged to look for creative solutions to effectively overcome various barriers to the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. Higher engagement leads to greater learning gains and better retention of the material by the participants (Al-Natour et al., 2022; Kondratenko et al., 2016). In this way, active participation was ensured and good conditions for learning were created.

Table 1 lists the learning outcomes and topics for teaching and non-teaching staff.

Table 1: Educational programme “Inclusive Approach to Students With Disabilities in Academic Setting” - Learning Outcomes and Topics

	Topics	Learning outcomes
Teaching staff	Modern approach to persons with disabilities	Demonstrate a modern approach to individuals with disabilities Interpret the term person with a disability
	Students with disabilities and their needs in higher education system	Identify the needs of students with disabilities in the higher education system
	Teaching students with disabilities	Select appropriate teaching methods for students with disabilities Propose adjustments in teaching that do not interfere with established learning outcomes
	Universal design	Argue the importance of universal design in higher education Explain the principles and guidelines of universal design in higher education Describe the process of applying universal design in the context of higher education
	Advocacy	Identify what advocacy is and how it works Make an advocacy plan
	Diversity and inclusion in higher education	Discuss the diversity of the student population at university education
	Strategies for overcoming resistance to change	Explain strategies for overcoming social barriers for inclusive higher education Discuss some reasons for resistance to change Explain strategies for overcoming resistance to change

	Equity and inclusion in higher education	Argue the importance of empowering and engaging young people in developing an inclusive society
	International mobility in the context of youth participation	Discuss the possibilities of implementing some of the EU recommendations into the Sri Lankan higher education system
Non-teaching staff	Modern approach to persons with disabilities	Demonstrate a modern approach to individuals with disabilities
	Students with disabilities and their needs in higher education system	Interpret the term person with a disability
	Universal design	Argue the importance of universal design in higher education Explain the principles and guidelines of universal design in higher education Describe the process of applying universal design in the context of higher education
	Diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education	Discuss the diversity of the student population at university education Explain strategies for overcoming social barriers of inclusive higher education
	International mobility in the context of youth participation	Argue the importance of empowering and engaging young people in developing an inclusive society Discuss the possibilities of enhancing the internationalization process on the national/ institutional level

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Instrument

The evaluation was conducted using an online survey (self-assessment). The evaluation questions were related to the learning outcomes achieved, the participants' satisfaction with the programme implementation (the usefulness of the topics presented, the level of preparation of the instructors, the time management by educators, the level of interaction, their participation) and the overall satisfaction with the education. Achievement of learning outcomes was rated on a scale from "to a small extent" (1) to "to a very large extent" (4). The usefulness of the topic presented/discussed was rated on a scale from "not useful at all" (1) to "very useful" (5). Participant satisfaction in other aspects of programme implementation was rated on a scale from "definitely not" (1) to "definitely yes" (5). In addition, participants were asked at the beginning of the education about their expectations of education, and at the end of the education, the participants reflected on the extent to which their expectations had been met.

2.2. Participants

The Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Setting" educational programme included 48 participants from the teaching staff group (in three groups) and 27 participants from the non-teaching staff group (two groups) from all four partner universities in Sri Lanka (University of Peradeniya, University of Ruhuna, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Technological Campus). The online survey included 43

participants from the teaching staff group (89% of all participants) and 25 participants from the non-teaching staff group (92% of all participants).

2.3. Methods of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

3. Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the "Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Setting" educational programme. Specific goals are: (1) to determine the quality of programme implementation, (2) to determine the learning outcomes achieved, (2) to make some recommendations for future implementation of the programme based on the evaluation results to ensure sustainability.

4. Results and Findings

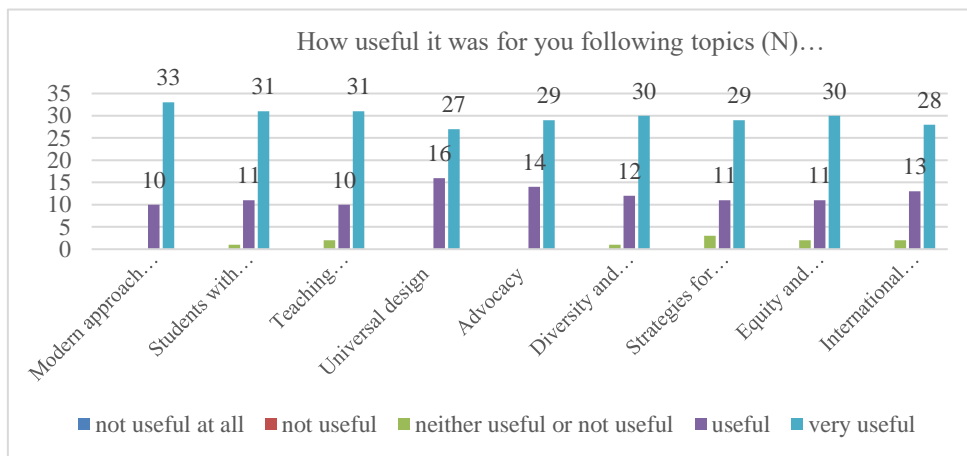
Results

4.1. Teaching Staff

Most participants rated most topics as "useful" or "very useful" (40 participants/93%) (Figure 1). The topics rated as most useful were "Modern approach to persons with disabilities", "Advocacy" and "Universal Design". Not a single topic was rated as "not useful at all" or "not useful". Two participants (4,7%) rated "Teaching students with disabilities", "Equity and inclusion in higher education" and "International mobility in the context of youth participation" in the "neither useful nor not useful" category. In the same category, three participants (6,9%) rated the topic "Strategies for

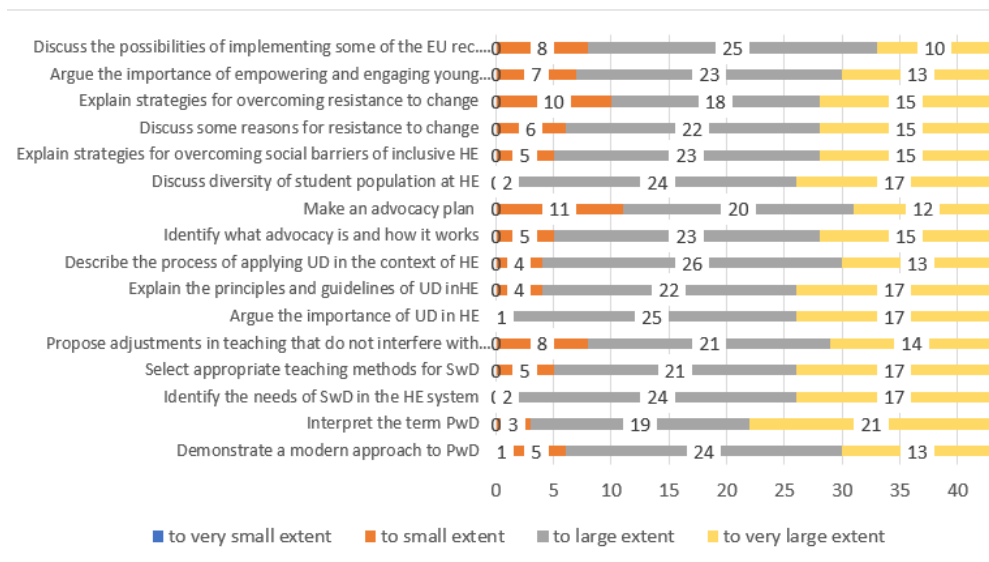
overcoming resistance to change" and one participant rated the topic "Students with disabilities and their needs in the higher education system".

Figure 1: Usefulness of the Presented/Discussed Topics - Teaching Staff



In terms of learning outcomes, most participants (32 participants, 74,4%) indicated that the learning outcomes were met "to a large extent" or "to a very large extent" (Figure 2). The learning outcome "Argue the importance of universal design in higher education" had the highest score, followed by "Identify the needs of students with disabilities in the higher education system" and "Discuss the diversity of the student population at university education". The lowest score was for the learning outcome "Make an advocacy plan". Achieving this learning outcome requires some advanced skills and practice, and it is not surprising that this learning outcome was rated the lowest (11 participants (25, 6%) rated that these learning outcomes were met "to a small extent" and 32 of them rated (74,4%) that the learning outcomes were met "to a large extent" or "to a very large extent").

Figure 2: Achievement of Learning Outcomes - Teaching Staff



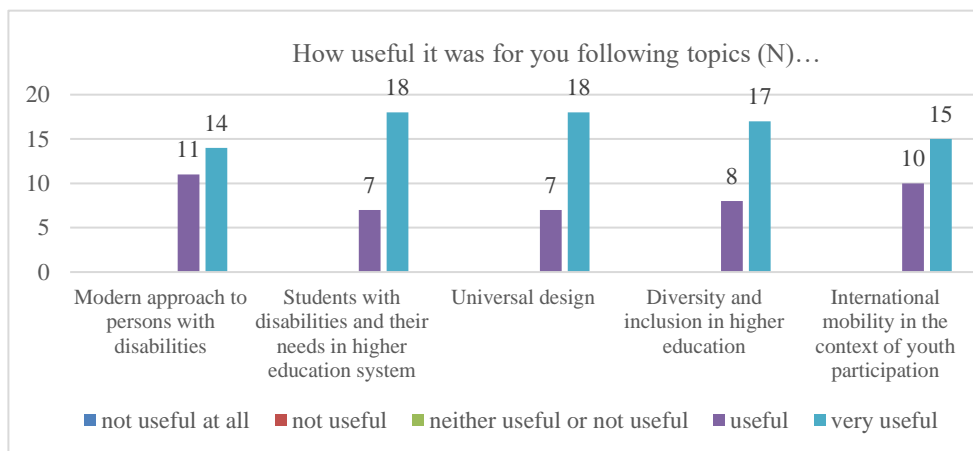
The mean score for participants' satisfaction with their participation was 4.63, for the level of interaction among participants was 4.58, for time management by educators 4.51, and for the level of instructor preparation was 4.49. Satisfaction with the education overall had a mean score of 4.47.

On the first day of the education, participants were asked about their expectations for the education. Participants' expectations were related to acquiring new knowledge, raising awareness of issues facing students with disabilities in higher education, improving the quality of teaching, the support system for students with disabilities, creating a safe and encouraging learning environment, and learning about "best practises" in other countries. Participants' expectations were discussed at the end of the education, and according to participants' feedback, most expectations were met.

4.2. Non-Teaching Staff

Regarding the usefulness of the topics covered in the training, all participants rated all topics as "useful" or "very useful" (Figure 3).

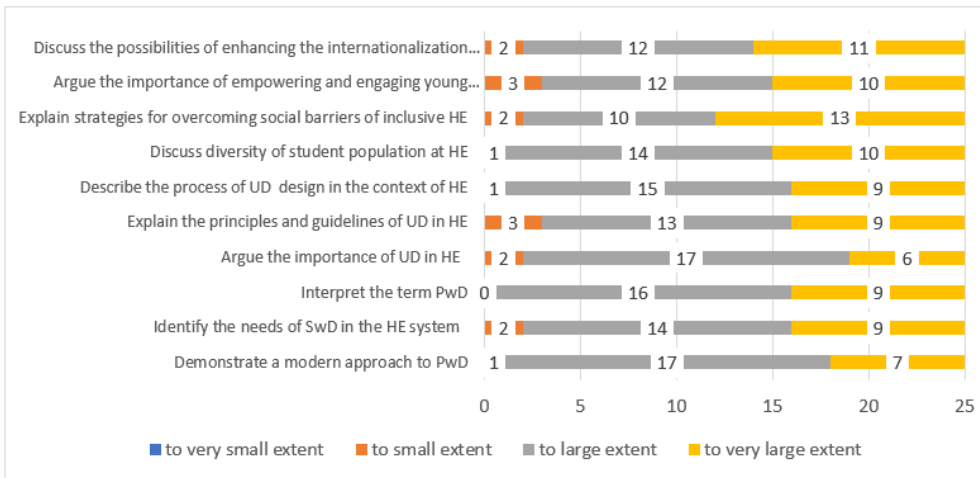
Figure 3: Usefulness of the Topics Presented/Discussed - Non-Teaching Staff



Most participants (22 participants, 88%) rated that all learning outcomes were met "to a large extent" or "to a very large extent" (Figure 4). The learning outcome "Interpret the term "person with disabilities"" had the highest score, followed by "Demonstrate a modern approach to people with disabilities", "Discuss the diversity of the student population at university education" and "Describe the process of applying universal design in the context of higher education". The lowest scoring learning outcomes were "Explain the principles and guidelines of universal design in higher education" and "Argue the importance of empowering and engaging young people in the development of an inclusive society" (three (12%) participants rated that these learning outcomes were met "to a small extent" and 22 of

them (88%) rated that the learning outcomes were met "to a large extent" or "to a very large extent").

Figure 4: Achievement of Learning Outcomes – Non-Teaching Staff



The mean score for participants' satisfaction with their participation was 4.32, for the level of interaction among participants was 4.36, for the time management by educators 4.36, and for the level of instructor preparation was 4.40. Satisfaction with the education overall had a mean score of 4.40.

Participants' expectations related to gaining new knowledge, learning how to support students with disabilities, understanding what (administrative) services can be developed to provide maximum support to students with disabilities, and what challenges need to be addressed. Participants' expectations were discussed at the end of the education, and the feedback was positive.

5. Conclusions

The evaluation results show that both groups of participants gave high scores to the overall satisfaction with the education as well as the usefulness of the topics covered in the education. Regarding the learning outcomes achieved, most participants indicated that they were achieved to a great or very great extent. Some of the learning outcomes that were achieved to a somewhat lesser extent, such as "Make an advocacy plan" (teaching staff), require engaging in advocacy activities and gaining experience in this way to develop the skills to create a successful advocacy plan. Therefore, it is not unexpected that this learning outcome was rated as the least achieved. The lower assessment of the learning outcome "Explain the principles and guidelines of universal design in higher education" by non-teaching staff can be explained by the fact that relatively little time was devoted to this extensive topic in education, while achieving the learning outcome "Argue the importance of empowering and engaging young people in the development of an inclusive society" requires a broader knowledge than that acquired in education.

The educational programme "Inclusive Approach to Students with Disabilities in Academic Setting" for teaching and non-teaching staff has big potential and good results. The quality of the educational programme can be further improved by allocating more time (hours) for exercises and group discussions to improve knowledge, but also positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and skill development. Investing in the competencies of teaching and non-teaching staff related to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education will contribute to a more

inclusive environment in Sri Lanka's universities and thus will contribute to the achievement of the project's objective - the development of a support system to promote equal opportunities for students with disabilities in Sri Lanka's universities.

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