Academic Performance and Well-Being of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: (With Reference to Visually Impaired Undergraduates in Sri Lanka)

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ABSTRACT

All students living in the world should have an equal opportunity to get a proper education. Education is one of the most important factors that determine one's future well-being. Currently, special attention is being paid to the education of students with special needs around the world. As a result, the facilities and new technical knowledge required for people with special needs are expanding. Among students with special needs, visually impaired students face many problems in education. The primary purpose of this research was to identify the problems faced by visually impaired students in higher education. Purposive sampling method was used to select students for the research. Sample consists of 74 visually impaired undergraduates studying at the universities of Sri Jayewardenepura, Colombo, Kelaniya, Jaffna, and Eastern university of Sri Lanka. The problems faced by visually impaired students were analyzed based on the information obtained through interviews, structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews (with 05 selected students). The main issue pointed out by all the students (100%) was the lack of books for them to use related for their study programs. This is the main reason for confining visually impaired students to a limited number of subject areas in university education. Also, past papers are not available in Braille or any accessible medium for them to refer prior to the examinations. Introducing new subjects or degree program that fit for their necessities and occupation opportunities, preparation of audio books to cover more subject areas and providing a training for students to use computers for examinations are the possible solutions for the academic well-being of visually impaired students. It is important to emphasize that providing equal opportunities alone is not sufficient; it is essential to offer required opportunities that meet their specific needs.

Keywords: special needs, university education, visually impaired students, academic wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

Global Background of Students with Special Needs

In today's global economy, academic success in higher education is important. Every society focuses on higher education and the opportunity for meaningful employment and financial stability for students with

disabilities or special needs (Levine and Nourse, 1998; Madaus, 2006; Wagner, et al., 2005; Zafft, et al., 2004). The reason for this is that students with disabilities or special needs have been recognized not only locally, but globally as well, with a gradual increase in opportunities for students with disabilities or special needs to be employed in colleges, universities, other higher education institutions and other institutions (Adams and Proctor, 2010; Hall and Belch, 2000; Sanford et al., 2011; Sheridan and Ammirati, 1991; Stodden and Conway, 2003). According to Hurst and Smerdon (2000), in the United States alone, 63% of all graduates with disabilities are enrolled in post-secondary education. In practice, students with disabilities or special needs benefit from higher education institutions but face greater barriers than students without disabilities (Wagner et al., 2005). Globally, about half of students with disabilities who enroll in a graduate program drop out before completing the course (American Youth Policy Forum and Center for Education Policy, 2002). Because of this, it can be pointed out that it is important to study the academic welfare of students with special needs.

Almost every person living in the world can suffer from various disorders at different times of their life. Therefore, it is an important topic for everyone to pay attention to the well-being of people with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization's 2013 reports, over 1000 million people with special needs live worldwide. Of those, between 110 and 190 million show a significant level of disability (WHO, 2013). The United Nations has declared December 3rd every year as the Day of Persons with Disabilities to raise awareness about them as well as to promote their dignity, rights and well-being. No society condones treating a person differently based on disability. People with disabilities have equal freedom to study, to work, to be active with their families and in society.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presented by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 hope to achieve a better sustainable future for all by the year 2030. Under this, 17 goals (17 SDGs) are expected to be achieved and one of them is to provide better education for all. Providing equal opportunities for quality primary education for all and providing equal opportunities for industrial, professional and higher education opportunities are two of the goals mentioned under SDG. The concept of education for all has been emphasized. When talking about the well-being of people with special needs, one of the primary areas need to be focused is education.

In traditional society, the term disability was used in a derisive sense, but nowadays disability is used in a more profound sense and the use of the phrase 'with special needs' as an alternative is in some way an encouragement to them (Gore et al., 2014; Koshal, et al., 2004). There is no tendency to exclude, marginalize, insult and disempower them according to their special physical abilities despite having various disabilities (Koshal, et al., 2004). Thus, the current term 'special needs' has been accepted as the most appropriate term to describe people with disabilities around the world (Leshota and Sefotho, 2020). Academic performance of students is one of the main features of education (Rono, et al., 2014) and one of the important goals (Narad and Abdullah, 2016), which can be defined as the knowledge acquired by the student, which is assessed by marks (Kumar, et al., 2021). Academic performance can be defined more broadly as educational goals set by a teacher and/or students and teachers to achieve within a specified period of time.

There are various types of disabilities that can be seen in a person. Mobility impairments, blindness, low vision, hearing impairments and neurological diseases are the most common disabilities in society. About 8.7% of the Sri Lankan population shows some form of disability by the age of 5 Although most of them have received primary education, less than 1% qualifies for higher education. As the World Health Organization (2013) points out, children with disabilities tend to start school more slowly than their peers. Also, they do not stay in school for a long time. This condition is more common in low-income countries.

Students entered to the university under the category of special needs as undergraduates also exhibit the above-mentioned disabilities. Among them, visually impaired undergraduates face more difficulties than

other special needs categories (Jayasinghe, Kanthilatha & Karunarathan,2023). The main purpose of this research was to study the problems faced by visually impaired students in higher education. Specific objectives include identifying the library facilities available for visually impaired students, identifying the problems faced in assessments and examinations and suggesting measures that can be taken for the betterment of visually impaired students' education.

Academic Performance

In last two decades, a large number of studies (Koshal, et. al., 2004) have made various findings on higher education and students' academic performance. Research and findings related to the academic performance of students with special needs are varied (Jorgensen et. al., 2005). Witte et al. (1998) found that students with disabilities at Miami University, a liberal arts institution in Ohio, graduated with significantly higher-grade point averages than a comparison group of non-disabled students. And they also found that students with disabilities typically take one semester longer to graduate. However, in a similar study, Sparks, et al. (2004) found among 68 college students with disabilities were academically competitive with their peers and graduated with similar outcomes compared to typical graduate students. On the other hand, Sachs and Schreuer (2011) studied 170 students with disabilities and 156 normal students across Israel and compared academic performance based on their grade point averages. Their results showed that students with disabilities had similar college experiences, from social and athletic experiences to academic experiences. Furthermore, grade point average comparisons showed that the academic achievement of students with disabilities was similar to that of students without disabilities.

Wasielewski (2016) points out that research results may be similar in findings regarding the academic performance of students with and without disabilities, but the flexibility of programs for students with disabilities may differ. For example, Jorgensen et al. (2005) compared the grade point averages of more than 40,000 students with and without disabilities and found that there was no statistically significant difference in grade point averages. However, students with disabilities have relatively little academic effort and are given more opportunity to make relevant choices in study plan and courses, taking longer to complete their studies (Jorgensen et al., 2005; Lichtenberger, 2010). The results of these studies show that students with disabilities show significant academic performance gains.

Self-advocacy skills are also another important factor affecting academic performance. This means that students are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop their own academic plans, i.e. being able to speak for themselves (Milsom and Hartley, 2005). Lehmann (2000) others point out that students with disabilities have used self-advocacy skills to improve academic performance along with self-awareness and improved self-esteem. These skills, such as self-awareness and self-advocacy, contribute to personal and academic success in higher education. In particular, students with disabilities who have awareness and acceptance of their disability are more likely to be accepted by others and feel more comfortable with their disability (Smith and Nelson, 1993). Furthermore, students with an awareness of their academic strengths and weaknesses have an opportunity to identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop academic plans (Skinner and Lindstrom, 2003; Sachs and Schreur, 2011).

Academic Well-Being

Well-being has become a popular concept for researchers today. Many factors can affect a person's well-being. One of them is fulfilling needs. Here we focus on academic well-being. It means that there is a free and demanding environment for students to achieve high academic performance. For teenagers, there must be an environment where well-being can be achieved. It serves as a reference for their academic achievement (Miller, et al., 2013). As we know, academic achievement is important for teenagers. Adolescents' well-being predicts similarities in their academic attitudes, which in turn lead to academic success (Gore, et al., 2014). Abdo and Ruiz (2012) interpret that feelings of happiness and well-being help

adolescents achieve better academic achievement. Therefore, when talking about students with disabilities, attention should also be paid to their well-being. Identifying their perception of their academic environment in relation to academic well-being is important in formulating future policies related to them.

METHODOLOGY

This study selected visually impaired undergraduates enrolled in the universities of Sri Jayewardenepura, Colombo, Kelaniya, Jaffna, and Eastern University in Sri Lanka. Purposive sampling method was applied to select the sample and sample consisted of 74 individuals. Data was gathered through the interviews, structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with 25 students and 05 case studies were done and rest of the data was gathered using structured questionnaires. Gathered data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the study of the learning environment for students with special needs, it was found that visually impaired students have enrolled to the degree programs at the humanities and social sciences in all five universities. Moreover, these students were mostly limited to few subject areas, such as Sinhala, Mass Communication, and Buddhist Civilization. It was identified that 99% of students have selected above subjects. The main reason for the selection depends on the non-availability of reference books and reading materials in accessible formats for visually impaired students. Even if they desire to study other subjects, they have to limit only few subjects due to lack of accessible learning methods for other subject areas. The study suggests that it would be helpful to introduce new subject areas that cater to visually impaired students' needs. It should be emphasized that creating access to more competitive subject areas that suit visually impaired students is vital for their education (Jorgensen, et al., 2005; Lichtenberger, 2010).

The study also found that the majority (78%) of visually impaired students have an ability to use a computer, but they do not get an opportunity to enroll computer degree programs or select ICT as a subject in the universities. Although they would like to enhance their computer skills, lack of opportunities is a problem. Because ICT programs have a high demand in universities and only who get higher marks have the opportunity. Further, some visually impaired students 56%want to study languages, but they could not get the opportunity. Therefore, the study suggests that introducing special courses that suit for visually impaired students' requirements would be helpful to enhance their educational qualifications.

Considering whether the students have enrolled to a special degree / honors degree program or a general degree program, reveal that majority of them (69 students) were following the general degrees and only 5 students are following Honors degrees (Figure 1).

Figure1: Main Degree Programmes that visually impaired students have enrolled
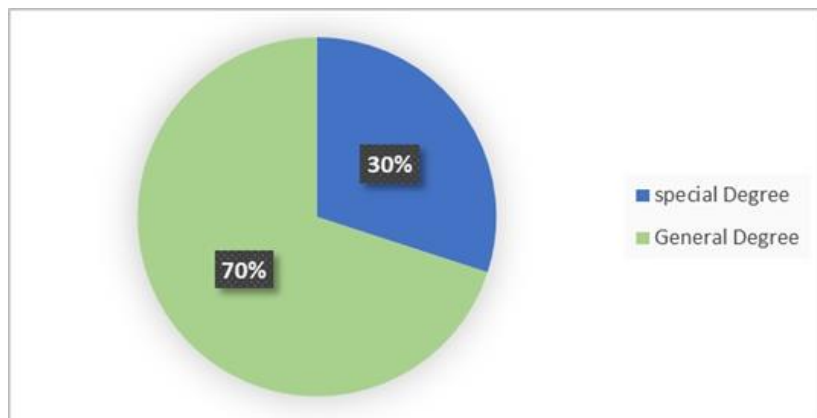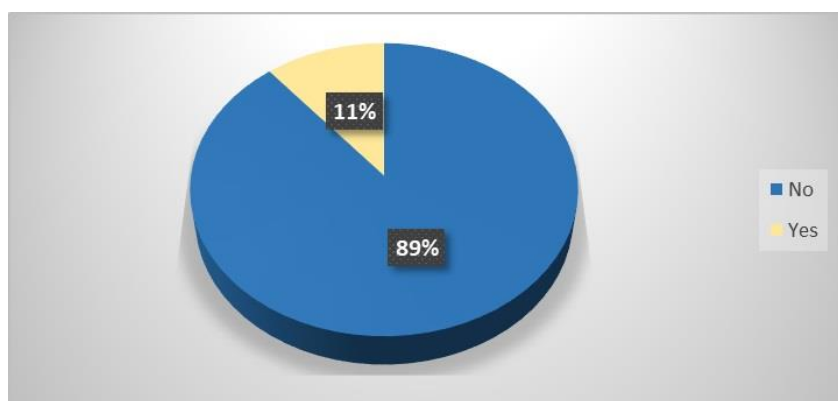
Source: Survey 2022

It was noticed that the students who in some cases, although they are eligible for a special/ honors degree, they do not get the opportunity in some degree programs because some course units are challenging them to grasp especially the practical components. This study proposes that providing alternatives would be helpful to get the equal opportunities for visually impaired students in subject selections. The study reveals that visually impaired students naturally excel in the field of music. They do not get the proper guidance to develop those skills. It was mentioned that if university can provide specially trained instructor on music, they can have an opportunity to enhance their innate abilities. According to Sachs and Schreur (2011), introducing courses that suit the needs of students with disabilities is crucial to attracting more of them to education. Furthermore, educational institutions should introduce special recruitment and assessment methods that give more opportunities for educational performance to special need students (Stodden and Conway, 2003). The University Grants Commission (UGC) in Sri Lanka provides opportunities for students with special needs to enroll university education under general admission as well as more opportunities were granted under special intake too. Students expressed their gratitude to the UGC and university administrations for considering them under special intake category and provide opportunity to enroll to the university education.

Visually impaired students require additional support for administrative tasks in the university, which is usually provided by someone else. The study suggests that if the university administration can allocate an officer with special training to assist visually impaired students, especially in the student welfare and student affair divisions, would be helpful to do their administrative works by themselves. Normally they get the help of their friend to do administrative work. The students appreciated the current services provided by establishing separate place in the University for Them to gather and recruit temporary or permanent instructor who works as the mentor to get the advice during their university life.

The most important place in a university is the library. Everyone should have the opportunity to use the library to acquire knowledge. Many resources are available at the library for the students. Regarding the use of the library by students with special needs, it was found that most of the students do not use the library. Accordingly, about 89% of visually impaired students haven't used the library (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Library usage of special need students

Source: Survey 2022

Main reason that the students were mentioned is the less availability of reading materials in accessible formats for them to use. Limited number of resources may result in minimal use of the library by these students. It is important to provide assistive technologies and a special help desk to inquire about the necessary information. Furthermore, the students mentioned that the lack of reading materials is the challenging issue they are facing during university education. There are some audio books available, but

most of them are novels and short stories and academic books required by them are very limited.

The above disclosure confirms that library service is an important requirement for students' academic performance, and it is further revealed that students with special needs use different methods to get information. Among those methods, special preference went to the DAISY technology that used to prepare audio books (Figure 03).

Figure 03: Different modes of collecting information
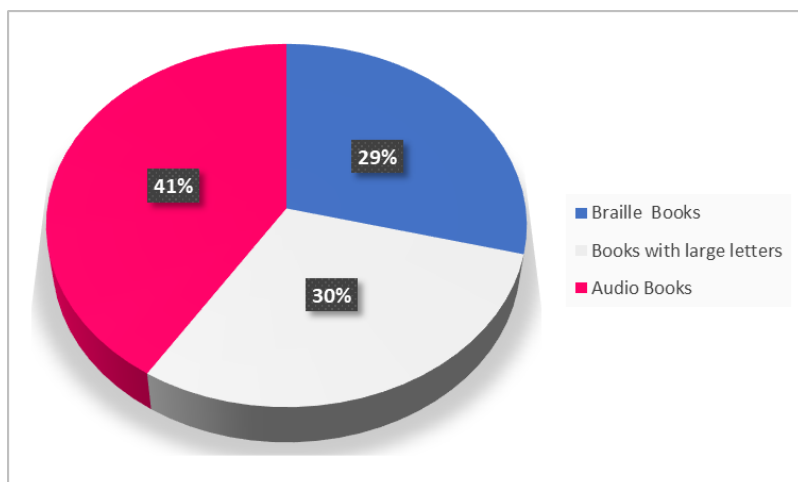
Source: Survey 2022

Students appreciated the audio book online library maintained by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura and requested to increase the academic book collection covering all disciplines required for them (Jayasinghe, Kanthilatha & Karunarathan,2023). They mentioned that there are around 1000 audio books in different subject areas that can be used for their higher education already. Visually impaired students in other universities pay their gratitude for the extending of the service to the online library to access audio books for other universities and all visually impaired community in free of charge.

Students pointed out that the not availability of exam papers in braille. This issue can be addressed by providing computer training to visually impaired students to answer the exam papers using a computer. It was also mentioned (82%) that it is hard to concentrate due to the noise coming out when using braille machine in exams. Sometime the question format of exam papers are difficult for visually impaired students to grasp easily. They (92%) also concern about the diagrams, tables, graphs, and long paragraphs provided in test papers. It is encouraging to hear that the visually impaired students at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura have been transforming into using computers for the examinations. It needs to be extended to transform students to the digital world.

The findings of the study highlight the importance of paying attention to the academic well-being of visually impaired students. Attention should be given to the difficulties they are coping with higher education. According to them, there are more difficulties in primary and secondary education too. It is crucial to ensure that they receive a proper education, equipping them for success in their future endeavors and enabling them to lead a fulfilling life in the society.

Addressing the challenges faced by visually impaired students should extend beyond education. Ensuring the physical environment and infrastructure of universities and educational institutions are accessible to them is equally vital. By addressing these challenges, it can ensure that visually impaired students' equal opportunities to succeed in their academic pursuits and make meaningful contribution to the society.

CONCLUSION

The study highlighted the importance of providing equal and required opportunities for visually impaired students in higher education and identified the challenges they face during the study period. The lack of facilities and resources for visually impaired students in libraries and exam halls were identified as major obstacles to their academic performance. Providing audio books and computer-based solutions for examinations were suggested as possible solutions to improve the academic well-being of visually impaired students. The study emphasized that the sensible attention needs to pay for the curriculum and subject selection. Upgrading facilities for visually impaired students were recommended to enhance their academic performance. Overall, the study aimed to shed light on the challenges faced by visually impaired students and to suggest recommendations to improve their academic well-being in higher education. Accordingly, the higher education institutions need to pay attention to address the problems faced by visually impaired students. It is important to provide them with educational support as well as infrastructure development. It is equally important to encourage students about new technologies via training programs and emphasize its significance in job opportunities. These initiatives enable visually impaired students to engage in educational activities on equal footing with their peers. It is important to emphasize that not enough for providing only equal opportunities but need to provide required opportunities to meet their specific needs.

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