Accessing tertiary education: expectations and realities for students experiencing disabilities

S. Hettiarachchi, Lasanthi Daskon-Attanayake, Mahishi Ranaweera, Dilini Walisundara

Abstract

Although the right to higher education is ensured within the Education acts of Sri Lanka, in practice, the challenges faced by persons with disabilities within the university system puts into question this assumed prerogative. Anecdotally, the provision of special recording devices has enabled students with particular disabilities such as a visual impairment to better access the curriculum, while others such as students experiencing hearing difficulties or dyslexia may have inadequate support. This study aimed to identify the barriers and facilitators to accessing higher education within two universities: the University of Kelaniya and the University of Sri Jayawardenepura. It sought to gather information via individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The data was analysed qualitatively using the key principles of *Framework Analysis* (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The implications of the findings for policy and practice are briefly discussed.

Introduction

Access to tertiary education has grown throughout the world over the last 50 years. Countries have realized that tertiary education is essential for national growth and availability and access to higher education has improved all across the globe. This has impacted on a staggering enrollment rate of 52 million students between the years 2000 – 2007 (UNESCO, 2009). However, in Sri Lanka, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education is suggested to be lower than other countries of parallel economic standard in contrast to the impressive statistic of 96% in primary education enrollment. There is evidence of inequalities in education participation based on different socio-economic groupings and various forms of disabilities are recognized as one of the core reasons for children avoiding school. Unfortunately, sufficient and reliable data and statistics are not available to accurately ascertain the number of children with disabilities who are excluded or remain on the margins of the education system. In addition, we also currently lack comprehensive research on the experiences of students with disabilities within education to more systematically determine the barriers faced by children with disabilities within education in general and within higher education in particular.

Within this paper, a 'student with disabilities' denotes any student who has been registered with the UGC as a 'student with disabilities', and this may or may not reflect their own view of themselves. The term 'students or persons with disabilities' is used throughout, instead of other terms such as 'differently-abled', as this is the coinage favored by the Disability Rights Movement as articulated within the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2001).

Right to Education – the Law in Sri Lanka

The Fundamental Rights Chapter (Chapter III) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka does not specify a right to education. The Directive Principles of State policy recognizes the duty of the state to eradicate illiteracy completely and to assure universal and equal access to education.The PRPD in its Article 23(1) states that 'no person with a disability shall be discriminated against, on the ground of such disability to any Educational Institution'. Also, Article 13 (l) and (m) sets out provision for education of Persons with Disabilities as a function of the National Council on Disability. The National Policy on Disability sets out strategies to be used to promote and protect the education rights of children living with disabilities. Education is the Third Thematic Area listed in the National Action Plan on Disability (NAPD) which is currently being considered for implementation. The five focus areas

identified of the themeare 1) Policies, Laws, Strategies and Plans 2) Centre based early childhood education 3) Primary and Secondary Education 5) Non-formal education 6) Higher Education.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study that is to be conducted nationally in other universities in Sri Lanka, in order to comprehend the issue of rights to higher education and educational facilities to those with disabilities.

The initial research was conducted in two national Universities; the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the University of Kelaniya. The study was aimed at documenting the personal experiences of these students who are currently engaged in higher education in Sri Lankan national universities. It was hoped that by documenting these experiences, we would be able to better understand the needs and expectations of those in the system and those who hope to be a part of the system in the near future.

The ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya and all measures have been taken to ensure the rights of privacy and privileges of all research participants.

The initial study consisted of 14 participants, a breakdown of the students in terms of gender and academic year of study are given in the table below. It must be acknowledged that the non-examination of socio-economic background of the participants on their views is a limitation of this pilot study, which will be remedied in the main study to follow.

Table 01: Breakdown of Student Respondents

Academic Year	Male	Female
First year	01	01
Second year	02	06
Third year	01	03

A total of 10 students who are visually impaired were interviewed from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, who were from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and were following the Bachelor of Arts (General) Degree Programme. A majority of the participants were female and in their second year of study. There were four female participants from the University of Kelaniya with either physical or
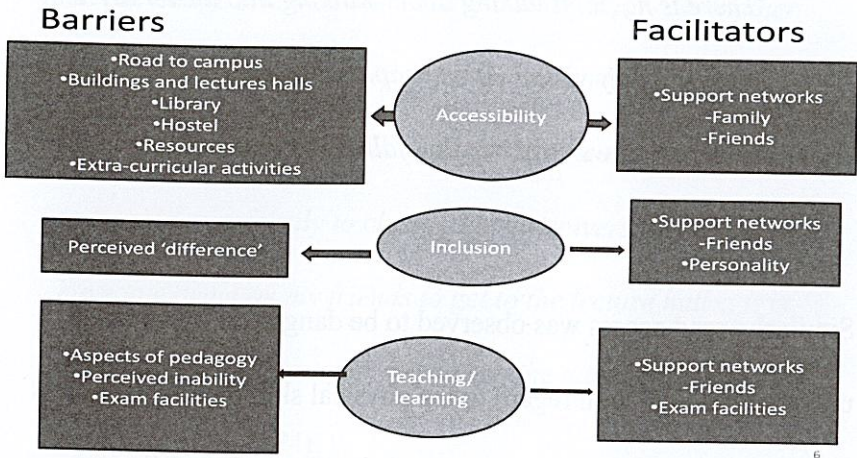
hearing impairment. While three participants were second year students, one was a first year student.

The interviews were based on semi-structured interviews and group discussions. The group discussions were open and did not look at gender or other dynamics that would come into play in a university setting. Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was chosen as it has been successfully used to code participant data within the field of speech therapy, nursing and the social sciences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003.). Promoted by the National Centre for Social Research in the UK, Framework Analysis provides a systematic and hierarchical thematic framework to code and analyze qualitative data. The five stages of familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation will be adhered to, making the analysis systematic (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Results

Three main themes of accessibility, inclusion and teaching/learning and subthemes connected to

these emerged as barriers and facilitators to accessing education at

university level. The themes

and subthemes can be codified as shown in diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Main themes and subthemes

Barriers

- Road to campus
- Buildings and lectures halls
- Library
- Hostel
- Resources
- Extra-curricular activities

Accessibility

Facilitators

- Support networks
  - Family
  - Friends

Perceived 'difference'

Inclusion

- Support networks
  - Friends
- Personality

- Aspects of pedagogy
- Perceived inability
- Exam facilities

Teaching/ learning

- Support networks
  - Friends
- Exam facilities

Barriers

Accessibility

The theme of accessibility resonated within the narratives of all participants interviewed. Within this paper, accessibility denotes the availability of services and convenience or user-friendliness to the students accessing these services, in this case, 'university life'. This included aspects of the physical learning space, resources and leisure. Two of the participants, one from each university, spoke specifically about the road leading to and going through university as inaccessible. Making the point that the condition of the road leading to one campus is

inaccessible to all students, with or without disabilities, Randula recounted:

> 'There is no point talking about walking into university. Not because of my vision. Even people who can see can't manage it. There are cows. You trip and fall. The cars don't always stop'
>
> (P2J)

Similarly, road access was observed to be dangerous in the other university as well with regard to the physical skill required on a less than smooth road. This point was made by Chathuri as follows:

> 'When I saw the hill, I felt afraid...I went to the UGC four times to change my university, with no luck...I wanted to go to Pera...I lost one year staying at home trying to get to Pera'
>
> (P1K)

The participants reported that this lack of access extended to the university buildings, lecture halls, examination halls and the library. All fourteen participants acknowledged challenges faced with accessing the physical space, albeit noting different levels of discomfort and difficult.

Champa, a third year student, captured the challenge of accessing these spaces, which was echoed by the other students as well:

> *'In my village school, I didn't have a wheelchair. My mother carried me to school…I depended on my mother. It is very different to go to the X hall. … I now have a wheelchair. I want to be able to go easily to class… I am a university student but I have to depend on my friends to get to the lecture hall… it is disappointing…Even after seeing me, the administration does not do anything'* (P4K)

A similar complaint on the lack of accommodations made to enable access was noted by Chathuri, who reported that *'even during exams, the elevator is not operational. There is a lock put on it'* (P1K). So, the expectation shared by Chathuri and other students is that the university authorities would make accommodations to facilitate their access to lecture halls and the physical space on campus.

Ganga, a second year student, enumerates this point further, sharing her personal experiences of the previous academic year stating: *'Because my lectures were all upstairs in the second term, I did not go to any. I can't walk. They don't consider 80% attendance for me'* (P2K).

Although the university staff had given her an exemption from the attendance criterion of 80% required to qualify for examinations for each subject, what she was missing out was on face-to-face lecture time and the right to access learning first-hand. However, according to Ganga, no attempt had been made to make alternative arrangements so that she was able to follow the lectures first-hand, offering instead a *'temporary measure'*.

The notion of dependency as a child on parents to physically navigate space was recounted by many of the students. Similarly, there was an expectation as adults and as university students that this level of dependency would decrease giving rise to more independence and freedom. The students talked about the lack of accessibility to lecture halls in terms of a physical barrier, outside of their control. Akila (P14), a third year student expressed very strong views, stating that *'we are not considered as normal students. There are absolutely no changes to any building, old or new, to help us access the lecture hall. Sometimes the lecture is on the top floor. I have to wait for my friends to come to help me up the stairs. I don't want to be dependent on anyone. I am not happy with this situation.'* He went on to explain that his experience may be 'better' compared to some others as *'I have heard of a student called Charuni some years ago. She had been a bright student, a wheelchair user. Every day, she had to stay at the bottom of the stairs*

till her friends came to carry her to class. She was on the staff and then left…it's a shame'.

The students expressed a range of emotions from seeming anger, in the case of Akila, disappointment, in the case of Champa and resignation, in the case of Kithmi below. Akila went on to explain that his is a 'radical' viewpoint, not shared by many of the other students with disabilities, who, according to him are not interested in fighting for their rights. He ended the interview saying 'no point talking, miss' (wadak ne, mis), and perhaps showing signs of resignation himself. Akila's point of resignation and acceptance of an overall lack of accessibility was captured within an often used phrase by the participants of 'no problem' (prashnayak ne). Kithmi, a second year student had this to say:

'At the beginning, I was unhappy with how difficult it was for me to access everything. I was expecting university to be much better than school, but there were still many obstacles to face as the lecture halls were far away with no ramps. I am now in my second year. I can see that it is not just us, even the normal students have problems. I think we must accept all this as part of university life.'

When lecture halls and tutorial spaces were physically accessible, there were, nevertheless, some issues with the access and audibility of the lecture. This was mentioned as a particular concern by those students who needed to audio record the lecture as *'The recorder is unclear because the sound system is poor'* (P3K). Again, although students with some level of hearing loss were very few within the university system, the two students with a mild hearing loss noted difficulties with *'keeping up'* with the lectures and their disappointment with the lack support received.

Commenting specifically on accessing the library, the participants pointed out that the passage to enter the library, the location of the bookshelves, the lack of help to reach books and the format of the books themselves greatly limited their ability to gain information and to be independent learners. Chathuri, a second year student with spina bifida detailed her experiences as:

> *'I don't like going to the library as some spaces are still not accessible. I can't climb stairs. ...It is difficult to find books in the library. You have to go round and there are no chairs near the racks. My spine hurts'* (P1K)

What was clear within Chathuri's words was her growing frustration at the level of dependence on others or the culture of dependency created within the university system due particularly to the physical barriers to accessing information.

A similar view was expressed cogently by Wasana who said that: *It is difficult because of the stairs. It is difficult to find books. I can't stand up from the wheelchair. I can't see the books on the top shelves'* (P3K)

The poor accessibility of hostels and other personal living spaces at university were also highlighted by those using such facilities. Wasana, who uses an electric wheelchair, is still dependent on others to help her enter the hostel as *'The outside of the hostel is not smooth. I am afraid to use my electric wheelchair'* (P3K).

There was limited access to extracurricular activities, particularly to sport. Mayura (P9J) requested for more opportunities as *'Sports activities are not available but should be made available to us'* (P9J). Akin to his, Harsha (P4J) explained that the reason he does not access sports is because *'I (he) can't do sports. There are no facilities'* (P4J). However, there were also a few participants who were not accessing the sports facilities available to them for more personal reasons and as the fear of becoming unwell as in the case of Champa (P4K), who said that

'I don't access sport ... I am afraid that I'll get ill' (P4K). However, there were also a few participants who were not accessing the sports facilities available to them for more personal reasons and as the fear of becoming unwell as *'I don't do any extracurricular activities. Not because of my disability. I don't have time because I go home every day'* (P3K).

The students also reflected on how the lack of physical access to university spaces deterred them from fully engaging in leisure activities and university life. Expressing this view, Charaka, a second year student said, *'I like to go to the gym, but it is far, the road is circular. The top floor of the gym is particularly difficult to access. So, I don't go to the canteens either.'* The lack of easy access to buildings and leisure activities appeared to exclude the students with disabilities, within an inclusive learning environment.

Inclusion

The theme of 'inclusion' refers to the addition of all students in aspects of university life. In particular, it carries connotations of a lack of exclusion or marginalization based on ability or disability. A few of the participants felt that they were missing out on some aspects of university life due to perceived 'difference' by the other students. Two of the participants noted ragging, as a university phenomenon from

which they were excluded due to their disability. Ganga described this as:

> *'When going with friends, I got stopped to be ragged. But they did not rag me. I went to the Social. There were also times when I liked the rag. But I was not ragged because of my disability'*
>
> (P2K)

Adding to this, Champa narrated her experience as follows:

'I got ragged a little. I told them I have a disability. They put a 'card', calling me 'Princess'. I felt a little sad that I did not get ragged enough when the others share interesting stories about it' (P4K) Both Champa and Ganga viewed ragging as a 'normalizing' experience from which they were excluded. Champa explained how she wanted to be 'included' in everything – the 'good' and 'bad' experiences on campus, so that she does not feel 'left out'

Teaching and learning

The theme of 'teaching and learning' connects to pedagogy with reference to access to information to all students. With regard to pedagogical issues, the participants sighted the speed of delivery of lectures, the multimedia used and the lack of overall accommodations made by the lecturers to aid learning as a cause for concern. The students reported that they struggled to follow lectures due to the pace of delivery and due to the ambient noise levels and acoustics of the lecture hall.

Reporting on levels of support, valuing printed notes   Gangasaid, *'It is good to get printouts. I don't have good reading speed...The teachers don't know about our speed...it is very difficult to follow the lecture sometimes'* (P2K).

Some participants recounted how a few of the lecturers who were aware of their needs did make an effort to explain 'slowly and clearly' (P5J). However, many participants had resigned themselves to the reality that not all lecturers would make this effort and that this is an unrealistic expectation. Illustrating this point, Kasun who experiences visual impairment remarked, *'... (They) use multimedia...but I can't see...some teachers explain well. But we can't expect that from*

everyone' (P4J). I encouraged Kasun to explain himself further. Was he suggesting that as a student with disabilities, he does not have the same right to access information in the class in a way that was geared to his strengths and considered his needs? Kasun explained that Sri Lanka is a *'poor country with little resources and awareness about disabilities'* and that it was not realistic to expect a high level of support.

This acceptance and resignation was often coupled with the realization that some lecturers *'perceived a level of inability'* (P5J) among students with disabilities. Making this point, Harsha related his own experiences of not being included in class discussions due to a *'perceived inability'*. He noted: *'In some instances, we don't get asked questions as (they) think that we can't answer'* (P5J). When persuaded to explain how this experience left him feeling, Harsha said that he felt disappointed at *'not being included as a normal student'*.With regard to examination facilities, the participants from the two universities had differing experiences. They were all provided with extra time during examinations but at one university, the students were dissatisfied with the level of support provided as per the comment by Champa, a wheelchair user:

'I get extra time. The exam booklet is big. I keep it on the tray of my wheelchair. But there is not enough room for the booklet. They don't give you an assistant' (P4K)

In contrast, participants from the other university remarked on the positive changes observed in the effort to make recording devices at examinations more accessible, specifically for students experiencing visual impairment as, *'There is good support on campus at exams. First Braille and now we can type our answers'* (P4J).

Facilitators

Support network (family and friends)

The support from family, particularly from mothers was thought of as a lifeline – the main factor helping the participants to have come thus far and the main source of strength and support to complete their university education. Exemplifying this support and sense of parental sacrifice, Wasana explained, *'I brought my wheelchair. My mother stays here with me but there is no extra bed. With my mother, there are 5 people in the room'* (P3K).

Coupled with the sacrifice made by parents to support these students, the participants all acknowledged the tremendous support provided by their close network of friends to help navigate the system. Ganga (P2K) illustrated this point saying Ganga (P2K) illustrated this point saying, *'My mother helps me with everything. My friends are also dedicated to helping me. They don't show any difference. They all help me to navigate the university system'*. Chathuri adds to this discussion saying,

'We get notes from our friends. But if you get notes from two they are two different versions. To us, handouts are more important' (P1K). So, while she and most other students with disabilities are dependent on their friends for notes, they are uncertain about the veracity of these notes.

Discussion & conclusion

In summary, the findings of this study uncovered three main themes of accessibility, inclusion and teaching/learning, with related subthemes. These findings need to be considered with caution as they are based on a small number of participants from a pilot study, representing two universities. In addition, the majority of students included reported visual impairment, and so, the experiences of students with other disabilities such as those experiencing psycho-social difficulties were not captured. While the data collection method did generate relevant useful information, there are important areas uncovered that require further investigation such as the particular experiences of female students with disabilities. This was, however, the pilot phase of the study and appropriate changes to the interview guide and focus group format will be made prior to the main study.

Accessibility, specifically, the lack of it, with regard to the physical space, learning and information and to all aspects of 'campus life'

emerged as the key finding. From the students' perspective, the overall acceptance of the status quo as 'prashnayak ne' on the one hand and the growing organization into an 'association' with a 'voice' to make demands on the other hand is at odds with each other. The shift in thinking required (at a student and institutional-policy level) needs to be commensurate with the global ideologies on inclusive education and the rights-based model of disability promoted by the Disability Movement worldwide (Shakespeare, 2009; World Health Organisation, 2011). This tension and inconsistency in student ideologies and thinking connected to notions of rights and a sense of resignation, are reflected at the level of policy and practice or between expectations vs. realities.

One point worthy of further reflection is how the university system, given its limited accessibility with regard to all aspects of 'campus life', created a culture of dependence. The expectation of the students having spent their childhood in 'dependency' was to be independent as a university student, as an adult. The lack of accessibility reinforces the stereotypes of persons with disabilities as 'helpless' and dependent, with students with disabilities themselves 'accepting' this need for dependency as inevitable. However, this continued reinforcement of dependency is at odds with the current paradigm shift worldwide from segregated education to inclusive education for all as a right and not a privilege (WHO, 2011; UN, 2001; UNESCO, 2009). The provision of

access to all aspects of 'campus life' or the failure to do so is a human-rights issue within the current discourse of the Disability Movement (WHO, 2011; UN, 2001; UNESCO, 2009). It is anticipated that the operationalization of the proposed National Action Plan on Disability (NAPD) would go some way to remedy this current situation.

While there is an acknowledgement of the right to inclusion and an expectation of inclusive education, together with the principles of human rights, equality and equity, this remains juxtaposed with the 'realities' of feasibility, a lack of resources, limited awareness and an overall lack of commitment to safeguard the rights of students with disabilities at an institutional level.. These discrepancies or barriers to inclusion are similar to those identified within research in the Indian subcontinent and in other resource poor countries (Cornelius and Balakrishnan, 2012; Eleweke and Rodda, 2002; Furuta, 2009; Modern et al., 2010). Our findings strongly back the need to look at the positive factors of policy and training, to support better access for students with disabilities within tertiary education.

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ஆய்வு தலைப்பு: 3ம் நிலை அல்லது உயர் கல்வி கற்றல்: அங்கவீன மாணவர்களின் உரிமைகள் மற்றும் அதன் யதார்த்த தன்மை

Topic guide for the semi-structured interview and focus group discussion (Version 1, 30th October 2013)

பகுதி ஒழுங்கு படுத்தப்பட்ட நேர்காணல் மற்றும் மையக்குழு கலந்துரையாடல் இன் வழிகாட்டல்

1. Demographic details

பிண்ணணி விவரங்கள்

2. School experiences prior to entering university/higher education institute

பல்கலைகழக/ உயர்கல்வி அனுமதியிற்கு முன்னால் பாடசாலையில் காணப்பட்ட அனுபவங்கள்

3. Thoughts on the prospect of entering university/higher education institute

பல்கலைகழக/ உயர்கல்வி அனுமதி பற்றி உங்களிற்கு காணப்பட்ட அனுபவங்கள

4. Process and procedures involved in applying for university/higher educational institute

பல்கலைகழக/ உயர்கல்வி அனுமதியிற்காக விண்ணப்பிக்கும் செயல்முறைகள் மற்றும் வழிமுறைகள்

5. Thoughts on first entering the university/higher education institute

முதலாவதாக பல்கலைக்கழக/ உயர்கல்வி நிலையத்தினுல் நுழையும் போது காணப்பட்ட எண்ணங்கள்.

6. Access to the physical space (e.g. lecture halls, library, hostel facilities)

விரிவுரை அறைகள், நூலகம், விடுதி யை அடைவதற்கான கட்டமைப்பு வசதிகள்

7. Access to resources to aid learning (e.g. library books, recording devices, special computer software)

கற்றலிற்கான வளங்களை பாவித்தல் (உ.ம்: நூலகம், விசேட கணணி மென்பொருள்)

8. Access to extracurricular activities at university/institute of higher education (e.g. clubs, sport, leisure activities)

பல்கலைக்கழக/ உயர்கல்வி நிலையங்களில் காணப்படும் மேலதிக செயற்பாடுகளில் பங்குபற்றல் (உ.ம் : விளையாட்டு, பொழுதுபோக்கு நடவடிக்கைகள், கிளப்)

9. Appropriateness and access of teaching methods

சரியான கற்றல் முறைகளை அணுகுதல்.

10. Support at examinations (e.g. special computer software, additional time, a scribe)

தேர்தல் நேரங்களில் மேலதிக உதவி (விசேட கணணி மென்பொருள்,

மேலதிக நேரம், பதில் எழுத்தாளர்)