Challenges Faced by University Students with Special Needs within the Higher Education System

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Promoting and protecting rights of people with disability leads to social equity. The purpose of this study was to examine problems faced by students with special needs at higher educational institutes in Sri Lanka. A qualitative, descriptive study has been conducted at the University of Peradeniya from May to December, 2014. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select 26 respondents. A pre-tested interviewer-administered questionnaire and focus group discussions were used for data collection. The major concerns of the students were analyzed thematically, using descriptive statistics. The mean age of the sample was 22 years and the majority was Sinhalese females. Most of them were from rural areas and hailed from poor socio-economic backgrounds. There were 15 students with mild disabilities while 11 students had severe impairments. A majority of the respondents were from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. The research findings demonstrate that a lack of Braille reading material, lack of new and accessible technologies, problems of accessibility, inadequate financial and peer group support, inappropriate teaching methods, and a lack of mentors were the key challenges identified by these students within the mainstream university education system. Exclusion from social activities and a lack of community engagement due to impairments have caused considerable social suffering and led to a feeling of being different from other students. Nevertheless, nobody has experienced social stigma due to their disability. Sensitization of relevant bodies on the rights of these students is desirable while empowering the students with self-advocacy skills to advocate for the unmet needs is necessary. There is a need to design sustainable, inclusive educational models and disability-friendly environments to achieve a paradigm shift in the system of higher education in Sri Lanka to include students with disabilities in representative proportions.

Keywords: Accessibility, Braille, Disability, Equity, University student