SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AT HIGHER EDUCATION OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract:
This study is about the support and services provided to the students with disabilities in higher education of Pakistan. One university of Islamabad with a national and international repute was selected as a case study. Twelve focus group discussions were carried out with 100 faculty members. The thematic analysis was done that helped to understand university teachers' perceptions and experiences relating to facilitating students with disability. Major theme identified include understanding the concept of disability, services available to students, faculty members' practices and need for a specified disability center. Recommendations are derived for higher education in Pakistan.

Keywords: disability, policy, employment, higher education

1. Introduction

All humans are entitled to basic rights like fair and equal treatment. Right to dignity, education, and employment are vital and should be enjoyed by all (United Nations [UN], 1948). Unfortunately, the disadvantaged groups are most likely devoid of these rights. People with disabilities constitute such a vulnerable group. The extent to which people with disabilities are functional in the societies depends upon the extent to which the societal structure and support system address the needs of all.

According to UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), *"persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment that may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others"* (UN, 2008, p. 4). CRPD (2008) stated that people with disabilities should be welcomed and facilitated in higher education. This act and other relevant

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policies like International Disability and Development Consortium (2005) and International Labour Organization (1983) have highlighted the rights of people with disabilities and have pushed member countries to play their role to secure these rights.

Therefore, States have devised policies to ensure the equal and equitable treatment of people with disabilities. However, different States have attained different levels of progression.

2. Literature Review

Developments in higher education to facilitate students with disabilities (SwD) started taking place actively in the recent decade. This is mainly due to the realization of the fact that people with special needs and disabilities can make an important contribution to national economies. However, the progress in Pakistan is slow in this area. Lack of research in this area is first and foremost important factor in this.

Research has demonstrated that other countries have increased realization about mainstreaming SwD in higher education. UK's code of practice regarding SwD (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2010) states principles that revolve around removing barriers; improving physical and academic support; and access to services for education and employment. Research on SwD in higher education has increased remarkably both in depth and breadth in the UK. Rickinson (2010) has analyzed a range of studies conducted in the higher education of the UK and concluded that progress in this area varies in different institutions as well as in different areas with different levels of support. Findings indicate that still much is needed to be done but at least there is massive awareness to understand the issues that students in higher education in the UK have been facing.

However, the situation is entirely different when it comes to developing countries like Pakistan. National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (Ministry of Women Development, 2002) aims to help persons with disabilities and talks about mainstreaming people with disabilities in all spheres of life. Notably, it requires practical and concrete measures.

Higher Education Commission (HEC) has drafted a policy with regards to supporting SwD in higher education. HEC policy aims to empower SwD at higher education level by taking various steps i.e. providing a special allowance, removing physical and perceptual barriers, provision of support, guidance/counseling, and spreading awareness. The policy also mentions the provision of information regarding disability-related services, quota in admission, need assessment opportunity, availability of special tutors, flexible yet equitable curriculum and appropriate mode of examination. The implementation requires understanding perceptions and practices of the academic regarding SwD to determine its present level.

Studies indicate that universities around the world are struggling at different levels and ways to support SwD. A study explored both barriers and facilities available for Romanian SwD. In-depth interviews revealed that barriers were greater than facilities for them. They perceived support at a personal level but lack of the

institutional services. Furthermore, they reported a lack of infrastructure support (access and accommodation). Students demanded a specific institutional structure to meet the particular needs related to various disabilities. High cost, lack of resources, lack of qualified faculty members/academic staff, absence of guidance and mentorship were some major issues faced by the university SwD. Romanian universities have started supporting SwD with seriousness. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that initiatives in the higher education of Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium have already started to accommodate and support people with disabilities (Mara, 2014; Vrasmas, 2014).

A Turkish based study revealed that the provision of academic and social needs was not up to the mark. Administrative staff was perceived to be more considerate as compared to the academic staff. The importance of practicing accountability was reported by making special education personnel as a part of the disabled students unit (Kayhan, Sen, & Akcamete, 2015).

In the US, the universal design approach is gaining popularity. A study was carried out in the US about the social model of disability and its implementation in higher education for SwD. Universal design approach focused on the limitations and shortcomings of the campus environment instead of finding limitations with the disabled individual. Disability services provided by these universities led to change instead of putting a demand on SwD to accommodate. It resultantly attracted a greater number of students towards higher education (Mole, 2012).

A research investigated inclusive education at university level in Kenya (Kochung, 2011). Limited access to higher education was found in Africa. A number of barriers inside and outside the higher education institutions made it difficult for students to enroll and complete their higher education. A similar study was conducted in UAE (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). Findings showed that the three main areas are of importance, i.e., staff training and student learning regarding special needs; provision of accommodation for SwD; and supportive culture for SwD. The inclusion of SwD at university level had extensive barriers associated with it. An Irish study has shown that physical access was a major concern among SwD in higher education other than a lack of awareness of their needs (Shevlin, Kenny, & Mcneela, 2004). Similarly, numerous studies have identified the vital role of university teachers in developing the resilience of the SwD. Increased experience and special education trainings have been reported to be helpful for teachers (Mu, Hu, & Wang, 2017; Robertson, McFarland, Sciuchetti, & Garcia, 2017).

Academic outcomes of SwD have also been studied. A study found that SwD had poorer grades than those who did not face any disability (Richardson, 2009). Therefore, the institutional support and services are also likely to impact the academic performance of SwD.

Studies that explored employability issues of people with disabilities also indicate that improvement in higher education is required. Lack of education, training and experience puts people with disabilities at a disadvantage in the job-market (Zwicker, Zarisani, & Emery, 2017). A study has shown that SwD usually face various

complicated barriers on the road to education and training (Sukhai & Mohler, 2017). A study explored the opinions and experiences of students and employees with disabilities from different countries i.e. Montenegro, Herzegovina, Serbia, and Bosnia. Findings showed that students and employees having disabilities found job performance to be challenging for them. Moreover, the sample from these countries considered that the role of higher education institutions for transition into job-market is instrumental (Zukic et al., 2016).

The review shows that both national and international level studies have explored disability at higher education level. Qualitative as well as quantitative studies have been carried out. Findings show that SwD face multiple concerns, but accessibility and support are the major concerns. Despite changing trends, research on disability is a challenge primarily because of varied types of disabilities whereby many of them are invisible.

Additionally, qualitative exploration of disability-related services at higher education has been extremely limited in Pakistan. Specifically, the opinion and viewpoint of teachers have not been researched so far. Teachers' role is vital in implementing and translating governmental and institutional policies in classrooms. Hence, purpose of the present study is to explore the perceptions of the university teachers. Exploration of their perceptions/experiences will help in assessing the level of awareness, information, understanding, approaches to support SwD at higher education. This information will provide sound basis for systematic and strategic intervention to promote inclusiveness in higher education.

3. Method

The qualitative research design was used for this study. Focused group discussions were carried out the basis of guidelines (Determann, Korfage, Bekker-Grob, 2016; Kreuger, 2002). However, the number of participants varied in all the FGDs. This was mainly because these FGDs were conducted in different schools of the selected university and nominations were made at the departmental/school level. Initially, the discussion guide was prepared and sent for review to researchers who have PhD degree and research experience in disability-related studies. In the light of their comments, the guideline was finalized. The discussion questions mainly revolved around defining disability, any experiences of working with SwD, disability related facilities and policies, learning environment and support for SwD, possible initiatives for SwD at one large and renowned university of Pakistan. Furthermore, implementation of the Higher Education Commission's disability policy and a preferred model to work for the SwD was also explored.

The head of the departments, senior teachers and coordinators in all departments of the selected university (Islamabad Campus) were contacted with the details for focus group discussions under a funded project by Government of Pakistan. They facilitated and supported by allocating time, space and volunteers for the discussion. In total, 12 FGDs were conducted with 100 faculty members.

Each focus group consisted of about 5 to 14 faculty members having different seniority levels. The nomination of faculty members was a step-wise process. Initially, detailed letters informing the purpose of focus group discussions were sent to the head of departments. After that, the faculty members were nominated by the head of the departments or coordinators. The discussion lasted between 25 to 60 minutes and rigorous notes were taken during all FGDs. Non-coercive participation was encouraged and anonymity of all participants was assured. The participants were informed about the purpose of data collections before convening focus group discussions.

After successful completion of data collection phase, notes of all FGDs were thoroughly reviewed. Thematic analysis was carried out on the basis of Barun and Clarke's (2006) conceptualization of thematic analysis.

4. Results

The thematic analysis helped to determine themes and subthemes from the data. Findings are discussed next.

4.1 Defining Disability

Defining disability in a comprehensive manner was a major point of concern. During the FGDs, participants agreed that in order to establish a better understanding of SwD, a wide-ranging definition of disability should be adopted. Different teachers presented different views. Some focused solely on physical disabilities while others included psychological aspects as well. Inability to adjust, learn and perform important tasks was also discussed as an important aspect of disability. Few responses focused on the abilities rather than disabilities.

One teacher stated, "Anything which hinders someone from doing work or chores is a disability." Physical disability was pointed out as a teacher said, *"inability to do physical actions is called disability,"* whereas another faculty member broadened the scope of this term by stating, *"When an individual is facing challenge or difficulty in doing the physical and mental work, it is termed as disability."* One teacher simplified the term as, "disability is something that affects learning and adjustment and simply when one cannot do important things or tasks." An interesting opinion was shared by a faculty member, *"Disability is a very relative term and every other strange individual might look like disable to us".* The concept of disability was extensively discussed in the group discussions to the point that participants discussed categories that lie in physical, psychological and learning disabilities. Some of the faculty members were also found cautious of the fact that we should ideally focus upon strengths rather than limitations of students with disabilities. As one of them stated, *"We should talk about ability rather than disability"* which showed a positive mind set of the faculty members on this as well.

Probing facilitated discussion amongst the participants regarding psychological aspects other than physical disabilities. Apart from the obvious physical disabilities, disabilities promptly mentioned by various participants were depression, bipolar disorder, autism, arthritis, color blindness and stammering. One faculty member stated

that disability can also be divided as short-term or long-term in nature. He stated, *"temporary disabilities (are those) which can be overcome with treatment and counseling."*

Some respondents refrained from sharing their personal ideas about disabilities, rather they highlighted that the established and accepted definitions may be applied as it is. They stated that internationally accepted definitions, definition by Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan in its disability policy (draft) or definition by World Health Organization may be used, and new definitions should not be created. As one respondent stated, *"It is appropriate to define disability according to HEC policy, otherwise each individual has his/her own experience and they might define disability in their own way,"* whereas another teacher said, *"We should work with the international definition of disability."*

Overall, the responses of participants mostly revolved around physical disabilities/impairments but this was a surface response. After probing, they emphasized that psychological aspects and non-physical disabilities require due attention.

4.2 Disability Related Support and Services

During the FGDs, availability of disability-related support and services was discussed in a great depth. Most of the participants thought that available services are inadequate SwD. Following subthemes emerged after analysis.

4.2.1 Infrastructure and Facilities

It was found that majority of the participants considered infrastructure at the university level lacked the required facilities for SwD. A number of necessary structures were found missing in the existing campus. Faculty members named a number of facilities that should be available to SwD in all departments e.g. ramps, elevators, lifts, wheelchair access to various locations within buildings and between buildings, special washrooms etc. A teacher elaborated, *"Ramps (as there are ramps in 2 or 3 buildings) are not according to the international standards. There is a need to put an elevator in each department; buttons should be horizontal and vertical. Braille is required along with blind tiles. Also there is a need to develop slope with 1-degree ramps and wheel chairs required"*. Another added, *"The existing ramps are not up to the international standards."*

Many respondents mentioned that SwD may be offered audio-visual aids and lectures, along with content in soft form.

Some respondents pointed out the uncomfortable furniture in classrooms as a teacher stated, *"Even it is not appropriate for left-handed students,"* while another faculty member stated, *"some departments possess the right furniture like Business School."* One participant also indicated the lack of appropriate signboards and directions which makes it uncomfortable to navigate the campus. Majority of the faculty members perceived that the facilities need immense improvement.

4.2.2 Learning Environment

The participants largely reported that the learning environment for SwD require improvement. SwD need full support as a teacher shared, *"classroom atmosphere is not comfortable for SwD."* One respondent stated, *"the main challenge faced by such students is lack of independence"* and this signals the importance of complete mainstreaming.

Inability to approach classrooms, labs and libraries, difficulty in getting access to online books, limitations due to unfriendly workstations, inappropriate or complete lack of sound system in classrooms, and absence of inclusive teaching methodology were reported. There is usually no relaxation or provision in the time table. *"Frequent meetings with research supervisors are also difficult for SwD,"* as a participant reported.

4.2.3 Institutional Policies

The policies in practice were extensively discussed during FGDs. Some participants found that the policies at the university are too strict. They suggested a little relaxation to promote education for SwD.

The respondents agreed that the existing admission test is unfavorable for SwD because disability friendly versions are not available. So many SwD cannot fulfill the initial requirement. The subjects and degree programs where SwD can easily fit in and fulfill all the degree requirements might be properly indicated by the university. A specific quota for SwD was also suggested by a large number of participants whereas a few of them asserted that there should no quota system because of the competitive academic environment. One of the groups also suggested that universities should identify particular programs in which students with special needs can be inducted. Extra time provision or a writer may be available for those having vision-related problems or those who have difficulties in writing. Students who develop temporary or permanent disability should also be facilitated.

Faculty members stated that the university policies should provide flexibility to teachers to facilitate SwD. A respondent shared that, *"A student in my class had an accident that damaged his hand. I could see that student in pain and he was facing trouble in writing during the exam. The student requested me for extra time and I wanted to facilitate but I could not as I was unable to find any relevant provision in the policies; and if I allowed extra time, other students might perceive me for giving undue favors to other students."*

The policy should provide SwD the provision to declare/ hide their disability without violating their self-esteem. This was highlighted mainly because students hesitate to declare their disability as they fear discrimination due to lack of supportive policies.

Amidst all the suggestions of making amendments to the policies, some teachers stated that there is a need to establish whether the university is open for SwD or not. If the university is not welcoming for SwD, then any policy changes will be useless. If the university is open to SwD, then disability-friendly policy should be devised and implemented. A form should be filled at the time of admission to assess their disability in the very beginning. Some respondents said that the university operates on merit and provisions should be made for only those SwD who fulfill the merit criteria. One of the

FGD members aptly said, *"There may be flexibility in assessment criteria but quality must not be compromised."*

4.2.4 Support

It was found that teachers at the university support such students to the extent they can within their professional jurisdiction. They facilitate SwD by focusing on their needs within the advisory support sessions. However, the participants reported the lack of large systems by saying, *"The atmosphere at the university is not comfortable for those with disabilities."* When discussing support for SwD, a teacher mentioned, *"There is a need to bring a change in the whole culture"*. Provision of support is necessary to establish a facilitative environment. One participant said that there can be a society with volunteer students to help SwD so that once a student has entered the university. Volunteer students should help SwD with mobility and access, in the provision of learning materials, in writing of assignments and in exams. Furthermore, they can ensure the participation of SwD in all the activities.

4.2.5 Psychological Help and Counseling

Participants shared that psychological support services are available at the university but students sometimes avoid visiting the center for counseling. A teacher reported, *"If we advise them to visit the center, they feel singled out or stigmatized"*. But, teachers specifically stated that psychological help must be provided to SwD on one to one basis, particularly during the initial phases after enrolment in the university, as they face numerous concerns and might find it hard to adjust to a new place.

It was also reported that due to cultural norms, both male and female counselors should be available as some students might not be comfortable with the opposite gender. Another interesting observation was shared by a teacher that *"specifically trained counselors should be available for providing services to SwD. Teachers can also play a role of counselors because they are easily approachable by SwD."*

4.3 Teachers' Experiences with Disabilities

Participants shared their experiences of supporting SwD and having inadequate relevant training opportunities. Next given are the subthemes

4.3.1 Personal Encounters and Experiences with SwD

Some of the respondents had the first-hand experience with SwD. In a number of incidences reported by the FGD members, it was revealed that teachers were willing to facilitate such students in personal capacities and they have been doing so. But it was not always possible because of strict rules. Incidences of students with excessive loss of vision, poor motor coordination, loss of mobility, dyslexia, depression, and arthritis were shared by the respondents. In all the mentioned cases, respondents mostly felt that greater help and facilitation could have been offered with the institutional support.

4.3.2 Teachers' Trainings for Managing Disable Students

Trainings to develop teachers' capacities to facilitate SwD were reported to be almost non-existent. None of the respondents reported to have received a training specific to SwD. A respondent shared that lack of such training has also led her to experience difficulties in supporting a student. The orientation for teachers which is mandatory after selection as a faculty member should incorporate this component as well. Guest speakers and workshops can also be organized to help faculty to support SwD. Trainings should also focus on pedagogical strategies and how to design assignments, projects, presentations, and designing activities for SwD.

Some participants shared that teachers can be empowered so that they can facilitate students within their own capacities and judgment. One participant stated that teachers from different departments may team up to create a multidisciplinary group to support SwD, whereas one respondent suggested that specially trained teachers may be recruited to support SwD. The participants largely agreed on the capacity building and strategic approach to facilitating SwD.

4.4 Disability Center

The question about having a need for separate disability center led information on three possible models of intervention.

Some respondents thought that a separate center will lead to the stigmatization of such students. So, SwD may avoid visiting the center. Some respondents stated that given the huge distances between various buildings, establishing a center may not be feasible for the SwD. Respondents also shared fears as they said that establishment of separate center might only result in wastage of resources. Many of them had lack of information of technological support that the centralized centers may provide to facilitate students and faculty.

Half of the FGD participants had a consensus on the importance of center that can be a central place to provide all services. Any audio-visual aids, special instruments, work-space, experts, counseling service can be available at one specific location. The center can also keep a record of the condition and progress of SwD.

A few respondents emphasized a combination of both centralized and decentralized models. A center with specific aids, support structures, professionals along with focal persons in each department can cut down extraordinary resources and this was thought to be extremely effective.

It was shared by some of the participants that the university shall work with the community as well because few SwD reach at tertiary level. Successful models and successful disability centers at national and international levels might be analyzed to chalk out their good practices so that they can be applied in the university.

5. Discussion

The study found that teachers defined disability in different ways. Their responses showed that it is easy to conceptualize physical disabilities and there are perplexities associated to identifying and supporting students with psychological disabilities.

The findings are in accordance with the UN policy (2008) which mentions physical, sensory, mental and intellectual impairments. But extensive focus on physical disabilities is due to socio-cultural factors and systems available. Government schools for hearing, speech, and visually impaired students have created some awareness for physical disabilities. But psychological, sensory or mental disabilities are hard to observe and hence many are unable to seek support and services. Therefore, awareness regarding non-apparent disabilities is limited in the Pakistani society. Hence, many respondents' first reaction the definition of disability was limited to physical disability only. But in-depth probing questions helped them to mention examples other than physical disabilities.

The study found that support for SwD can be improved in multiple ways. SwD should be welcomed with disability-friendly infrastructure like ramps, lifts, specific toilets, easy entry and exit points. Additionally, support can be enriched by offering audio-visual aids, extra time for exams and assignments, flexible assessments, volunteer students as writers and on-campus guides, learning materials in soft form, practicing inclusive teaching styles etc. to promote an independent life for SwD at the campus. Psychological counseling and help should also be extended. Supportive policies leading to practical measures are ultimately very necessary. Complete mainstreaming is a solution which can be attained phase-wise approach by working on physical aspects during the first three years leading to the interventions and support for students with psychological and learning disabilities

These findings are in accordance with previous studies. Previous studies have reported that support is less as compared to the barriers at higher education level for SwD (Vrasmas, 2014; Kochung, 2011; Gaad & Almotairi, 2013; Shevlin, Kenny, & Mcneela, 2004). Additionally, learning environment is reported as negative and discouraging. Mara (2014) showed that guidance and inclusive teaching practices lack for SwD and should be introduced for their wellbeing. Mole (2012) promoted the universal design approach to provide on-campus facilities for accommodating SwD instead of stigmatizing them.

It was apparent that teachers had a number of experiences with students having disabilities. They accommodated them in their personal capacities. However, they were not always successful because sometimes institutional policies appeared to hinder their efforts. This study supports previous ones that found students get help and assistance at personal level but institutional help is not up to the mark (Vrasmas, 2014). It was also indicated by Mara (2014), Kayhan, Sen, and Akcamete, (2015), Gaad and Almotairi (2013), Shevlin, Kenny, and Mcneela (2004) that awareness and teacher trainings for dealing with SwD need to be improved. Study by Robertson, McFarland, Sciuchetti, and Garcia (2017) support that training and experience can play a vital role in improving teachers' approach towards SwD.

Regarding the establishment of disability center, three options came to the surface. They were (a) a separate center can be created to avoid stigmatization and marginalization which might spring from establishing a separate center, (b) a merged approach having connections between a separate center and departmental focal persons

can also be introduced, and (c) a completely decentralized approach. In the context of Pakistan, the acceptance of SwD is in its initial stages. Taboo and stigma are attached to disabilities (Hammad & Singal, 2015) and therefore an establishment of a separate center might receive a resistance in various the Pakistani universities. However, a fully functioning center to a place where students do not feel stigmatize to reach, with the best of technology, support, resources and connections with the community can serve as a model. This can help to overcome the defensive attitudes towards a centralized approach and can lead to acceptance of disabilities rather than hiding such issues altogether by compromised strategies.

6. Conclusion

The inclusion of SwD at higher education level needs to be encouraged in the light of national and international policies. A comprehensive institutional policy and implementation are important in a strategic way so that SwD is not stigmatized. Universities in Pakistan should devise strategies to facilitate SwD and university-based strategies should be compared for effectiveness. However, first and foremost, similar studies can play an instrumental role in advocacy and for a robust demand to implement disability policy of the Higher Education Commission.

7. Recommendations

Awareness should be created among faculty members, administration and students at the higher education about the holistic concept of disability and to promote inclusiveness. Such campaigns can help to overcome social barriers and will develop social responsibility to support such students. It is only then that centralized approach can be effective where students with disabilities can approach experts to seek support without a fear of stigmatization or marginalization. A multi-tier support strategy embedded in the institutional policy can be supportive. However, this does not limit the importance of disability center because specialized technical, strategic and technological support can be possible when experts facilitate both the faculty members and students with disabilities.

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