



RESILIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ANALYSING ACADEMIC CONSTRAINTS AND COPING MECHANISMS AMONG VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITIES OF HIGHER LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the barriers visually impaired students face in higher education in Sri Lanka and their strategies for overcoming challenges. The research problem centres on inadequate support within academic environments, including insufficient teacher attention, inaccessible class notes, non-inclusive teaching methods, barrier-free infrastructure, and excessive time required for assignments, economic hardships, poor English proficiency, and insufficient assistive technology. This study employs an ontological perspective that helps understand multiple realities shared by individuals with visual impairments. This perspective recognizes that each student's experience is unique and subjective, majorly influenced by personal, social, and cultural contexts. Additionally, the study adopts an epistemological approach that emphasizes knowledge as co-created through interaction. This means that understanding and insights are developed collaboratively between the researcher and the participants, highlighting the importance of dialogue and engagement in the research process. Using a qualitative methodology, purposive sampling was employed to select 20 participants from universities known for educational accessibility, ensuring a gender-balanced and socially stratified sample. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes. Findings highlight the necessity for comprehensive educator training, individualized student interventions, accessible materials, improved understanding of disabilities, and enhanced infrastructure to further an inclusive learning environment. Additionally, the study reveals that self-directed visually impaired students exhibit improved coping mechanisms through clear educational objectives, peer networks, social skills, and support groups.

KEYWORDS: Students with Disabilities, Academic Barriers, Coping Strategies, Self-Empowerment

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01. Introduction

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), established by the United Nations in 2006, aims to ensure that individuals with disabilities enjoy the same fundamental human rights and freedoms as others, focusing on their protection and enhancement. In a global context, inclusive education aligns with fundamental CRPD principles and strives to eliminate educational biases related to disability and promote non-discrimination, equality, and equal societal participation for individuals with disabilities. It also promotes their independence, facilitates access to learning, and supports equitable accommodations, ultimately contributing to comprehensive development (CRPD, 2006; Disability Handbook, 2021).

The World Health Organization estimated that 15% of the world population has one or the other form of disability (WHO, 2011). In Sri Lanka, the reported rate of disability is 8.7% or about 1.2 million, indicating under-reporting due to cultural stigma related to disability. Factors such as war-related disorders, natural disasters, and an aging population may increase the actual rate even further (Gunawardena, 2010).

Sri Lanka has been able to provide education to all children since 1948 through the Free Education Charter and strives to provide equal educational opportunities at all levels regardless of their background (Sedere, 2016; UNICEF, 2021). In such a context, the inclusive education system is implemented in Sri Lanka from preschool to higher education with legal and policy provisions to provide equal opportunities to all children (Suraweera et al., 2022). In addition, the integration of children and youth with special needs into mainstream classrooms at the school and university level can also be mentioned here (UGC et al., 2021; Wijesinghe, 2019; Suraweera et al., 2022). According to the annual report published by the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, 113 students have been admitted for the academic year 2019-2020. Twenty of them are visually impaired students. All of them are enrolled in liberal arts courses (UGC,2021).

The United Nations Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), Article 24, Article 2 (d), specifically stipulates that persons with disabilities shall receive the necessary support in the general education system for effective education and highlights Article 2 (e). Aligned with the goal of full inclusion, the Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further emphasizes the importance of providing appropriate support in environments that foster academic and social development. International and national standards stipulate that special accommodations must be made to ensure equitable access to education for persons with disabilities (CRPD, 2006; Dorabawila, S et al., 2021). Appropriate educational support strategies for learners with visual impairments to improve their access, participation, and success in higher learning institutions. (J. Habulezi, T. N. Phasha, 2012).

Several sources and policies emphasize the importance of an inclusive education approach (Sedere, 2016; National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka, 2003; CRPD, 2006; UNICEF, 2021; UGC, 2021; Disability Handbook, 2021).

Universities established under the authority of the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka cover the necessary facilities for students with disabilities to facilitate their student life from the moment they enter the university. All the following universities are recognized institutions under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 with university charter. Many 17 national universities have established fully equipped centers to cater to students with disabilities' needs (UGC, 2021; Dorabawila S et al., 2021; Disability Handbook, 2021).

Considering the global and local contexts, higher education for students with disabilities is challenging. In order to succeed in higher education and achieve social mobility, students with different types of disabilities should be recognized, given their peculiarities, and inclusive education should be provided (Adlaka, 2013; Liyanage, 2017; Herath, 2014).

Universities in Sri Lanka have taken many progressive steps to accommodate the unique needs of students with disabilities in higher education. The Centres for students with disabilities try to provide assistive services to meet the needs of students (Wickramasinghe & Tharaka, 2019, p. 16). Despite trying to manage academic challenges with their physical disabilities and studying under difficult conditions, their entire academic life remains a struggle. Meaningful participation and inclusion in education have become critical concepts in disability discourse, and higher education institutions can play a significant role in fostering a diverse and inclusive society (Jayasena & Thakur, 2023; 2021; Wijesinghe, 2019; Suraweera et al., 2022; Jayasena et al., 2021; 2023; Handapangoda, 2021).

In Sri Lanka's education stream, not all students with visual impairment and blindness are successful in university education (Suraweera et al., 2022). Data from the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka estimates that 221,616 people graduated from universities in Sri Lanka from 2020-1990 (UGC, 2020). A survey (AHEAD, 2021) projects that 285 people with visual impairment and blindness graduated from 1966 to 2021 (Suraweera et al., 2022). Thus, there is a need to investigate further the factors behind such a low educational participation rate of visually impaired students studying at the university.

02. Literature Review of the Study

The World Health Organization estimates that disabilities affect 15% of the global population, making them the world's most significant minority. In contrast, Sri Lanka reports a lower rate of 8.7% (approximately 1.2 million people) due to possible underreporting. Factors such as prolonged war, natural disasters, and an aging population may contribute to Sri Lanka's high real rate (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012; Gunawardena, 2010).

According to UNICEF (2020), education is the most critical global barrier for disabled students. About 50% of children with disabilities do not attend school, in stark contrast to 13% of their non-disabled peers. This rate can rise to 90% for children with disabilities in developing countries. In Sri Lanka, children and young adults with disabilities face several educational barriers, such as inaccessible schools, inadequate teacher training, transportation problems, and negative attitudes, hindering their full participation at all levels of education (Disability Handbook, 2021).

The general view of Sri Lankan society is that charity, pity, discrimination, social stigma, and treating people with disabilities as insignificant have been internalized in every sector, including education (Liyanage, 2017; Disability Handbook, 2021).

Education is essential for development, and its findings are critical in ensuring accessibility for all. This study explores the current status of inclusive education in Sri Lankan higher education, identifying challenges and opportunities. Progress has been made in inclusive education at the school level, but the higher education sector is lagging due to inadequate policies. It has been noted that a sound national policy framework and practical implementation are essential to improve the enrollment of students with disabilities (Dorabawila S et al., 2022). This study also did not emphasize the teacher-student interaction of students with different disabilities and the unique problems faced by students with disabilities. Specifically, the interaction of students with disabilities in this study demonstrates the importance of teachers paying attention to the problems faced by students with disabilities and non-disabled students in their social interactions when achieving academic goals.

Sri Lanka is committed to protecting the rights of the disabled population and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2016. However, recent research by Herath (2014), Liyanage (2017), Wickramasinghe and Tharaka (2019), Nanayakkara, (2021), Handapangoda (2021), Jayasena et al. (2021), Dorabawila (2022), Suravira. et al. (2022), Jayasena et al (2023) and Jayasena and Gunrathna, 2023 have confirmed that public universities in Sri Lanka still face challenges in maintaining a unique educational environment for people with disabilities with unique teaching approaches and assessment methods. These studies imply that there are hidden challenges in the field of inclusive education in Sri Lanka's public universities, which can exacerbate the problems as mentioned above in

various ways. Therefore, it is more appropriate to study in depth the problems faced by each disabled person in achieving their academic goal rather than the general problems of disabled students as a whole.

03. Research problems of the study

Providing quality education is the fourth dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusive education is emphasized in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (SDG, 2023). In its inherent principle of “leaving no one behind,” the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reiterates the importance of ensuring that children and young people with disabilities have the same learning opportunities (Abayasekara, 2018). Thus, it is crucial to consider the diversity of all the students being educated in higher education institutions and find out how to provide quality education.

The findings of this study will be helpful in Sri Lankan education policy, including inclusive and disability-related policies, to understand the experiences and challenges of students with disabilities. It can contribute to further research in higher education for students with disabilities.

It is crucial to study what specific academic limitations and barriers visually impaired students in Sri Lankan universities face regarding classroom accessibility, learning materials, and teaching methods and how they use coping mechanisms to overcome these barriers and excel in higher education.

3.1 Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design (Patton, 2015) to investigate the barriers faced by visually impaired students in higher education in Sri Lanka, along with their strategies for overcoming these challenges. With the help of constructivist research philosophy, the study tries to observe the multiple realities shared by individual with visual impairment. This perspective recognizes that each student's experience is unique thereby, influenced by personal, social, and cultural contexts.

Using purposive sampling, (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018), 20 participants were selected from universities known for their educational accessibility, ensuring a gender-balanced and socially stratified sample. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes, promoting candid discussions. Additionally, secondary sources such as published articles and online resources were utilized for the literature review. Data were gathered from January to February 2022, with interviews lasting between 30 to 45 minutes, conducted at the University of Colombo and the University of Peradeniya.

Thematic analysis was applied to the collected data, enabling the identification of core themes and patterns relevant to the experiences of visually impaired students. Participants provided informed consent, adhering to strict research ethics.

The findings highlight the need for comprehensive educator training, individualized student interventions, accessible materials, improved understanding of disabilities, and enhanced infrastructure to further an inclusive learning environment. Additionally, the study reveals that self-directed visually impaired students exhibit improved coping mechanisms through clear educational objectives, peer networks, social skills, and support groups. The above insights emphasize the importance of fostering an inclusive and innovative learning atmosphere in Sri Lanka's higher education system.

3.2 Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives of this study concerning the main problem.

- To identify specific academic barriers faced by visually impaired students in Sri Lankan universities, including issues related to classroom accessibility, learning materials, and teaching methods.
- To Explore the adaptive mechanisms visually impaired students use to overcome academic limitations and challenges in higher education.

04. Results and Discussions

4.1. Participation Background Information

The study participants were students enrolled in the University of Colombo and the University of Peradeniya who were categorized as fully visually impaired or semi-visually impaired based on the International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health (ICF, 2001). The sample comprised male and female students with fully and semi-fully impaired vision. It should be noted that excluding locomotor impairment and students with speech and hearing impairments may have implications for the generalizability of the study findings. Furthermore, the participants were representative of all provinces of Sri Lanka from rural and urban backgrounds, different economic strata, specialized educational backgrounds, interactive educational backgrounds, and totally and partially visually impaired female and male students enrolled in the university through specialized recruitment were included in this study. Students who participated in this study were Second- and Third-year students from social sciences following General and Special degrees. Students were enrolled in History, Sociology, Education, International Relations, and Buddhist Studies.

4.2. Institutional Support and Accommodation

The study identified that universities had taken varied of progressive steps towards Students with Disabilities (SWDs) while recognising and addressing their unique needs. Both Universities have established Centres for SWDs. The centre for SWDS had strived to address the needs of the students by providing disability specific needs. “As of 1st September 2021, the University of Colombo had made significant strides to ensure accessibility and participation for students with disabilities” (Disability Handbook, 2021, p. 12).

The finding for the above is from the World Bank's Higher Education Expansion and Acceleration of Development (AHEAD) initiative and the Disability Education Research and Practice Centre of the University of Colombo. The European Union, funded under the Erasmus project, had set up a centre to facilitate interactive education for students with disabilities at the University of Peradeniya)Disability Handbook, 2021; Yatigamma, 2022).

Apart from building necessary infrastructure for students with disabilities, attention has also been given to disability awareness and sensitization, expansion of assistive technologies, and courses on individual disability awareness for academic and non-academic staff. The intended purpose of these themes was to build an accessible environment for students with disabilities, as well as the teaching and learning ethos of the university, based on principles of inclusive education.

The students who participated in this study believed that Colombo Kelaniya and Jayawardenepura universities were satisfied with the services provided for students with disabilities.

“Centre can contribute to assist students with disabilities in making the learning process inclusive, but the classroom teaching pedagogy needs to be changed. It should be able to recognize the diverse needs of students with disabilities”.

(Focus Group Interview, Females, Visually Impaired)

Pedagogy and interactions with students privileged ‘keeping up’ with the pace of the standardized general education curriculum, which resulted in inequity and marginalization of students with disabilities in the co-taught classroom (Ashton, 2016). The institution should make efforts to institute a diversity of inclusive teaching strategies as part of everyday practice (Matthews,2009).

The Centre for Students with Disabilities tried to address the needs of students by providing the particular services that are needed. However, besides the standard service provision, these students experienced personal biases through teachers' teaching pedagogy.

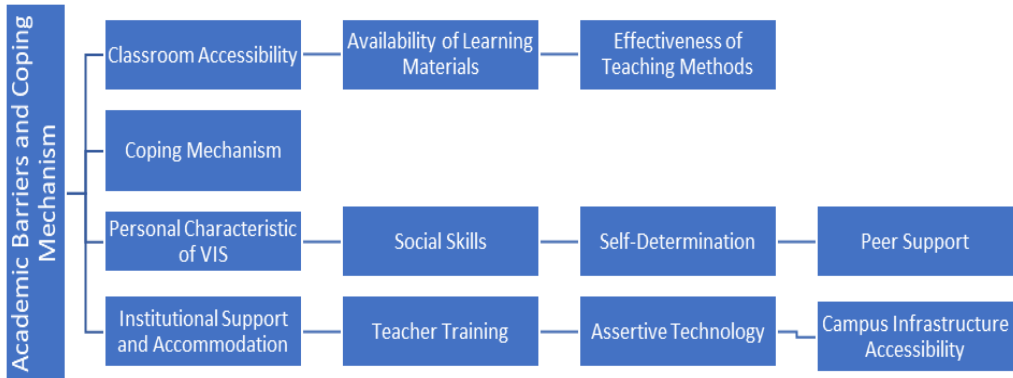
Centre for Students with Disabilities tries to address the needs of the students by providing the special services needed. However, the classroom environment is not inclusive for students with visual impairment. The teacher follows the pedagogy that is not accessible to people with visual impairment in the class.
(P18, Female, Visually Impaired)

The study conducted by Norman et al. (1998) provides evidence that teachers of science and professors teaching science methods have had little training and experience in teaching students with disabilities and are not aware of the research on best practice as it applies to students with disabilities, and often hold stereotypical views of what students with disabilities can and cannot do. (Norman, & et.al. (1998).

The findings of the study also revealed that the admission of students with disabilities takes place late in the university, and students with disabilities take some extra time to adjust to campus life. According to Bhuvanewari et al. (2016), visually impaired adolescents experience significant levels of psychological and psycho-physiological problems, affecting their adjustment and overall well-being. Many study participants expressed that students with disabilities face academic difficulties due to joining academic activities after a few semesters. They lose on initial academic instructions and get less time to complete their assignments.

4.3. Everyday Life Experiences of Visually Impaired Students about Academic Barriers

Below is a template of the overall findings according to the primary research objectives of "Resilience in Higher Education: An Analysis of Academic Barriers and Coping Mechanisms among Visually Impaired Students in Higher Education Universities in Sri Lanka."



)Source: Field Data, 2022(

This study explored visually impaired students' daily academic life experiences in depth. This demonstrated the students' experiences with the significant academic barriers they face daily. Fully and partially visually impaired students of both universities in this study faced many challenges throughout their academic journey in the second and third years.

In coding the responses of the students who participated in this study, the students with disabilities often find difficulties in accessing essential course contents such as lectures in formats including PowerPoint, images, videos, charts, graphs, diagrams, PDF documents, and learning management systems (LMS). Standard learning materials provided by the teachers are inaccessible formats that are out of their reach.

According to Rule et al. (2011), adaptive materials, such as tactile or auditory materials, can enable students with visual impairments to be as successful and engaged in science and mathematics as their sighted peers. (Rule et al. (2011).

The students in this study indicated a lack of meaningful interaction with their teachers. Teachers, while teaching in the classroom, often use visual methods to teach, which is entirely inaccessible for students with visual impairment sitting in the class.

It revealed the inadequate knowledge among teachers on inclusive teaching methods, personalized support, and interactive learning. According to Habulezi and Phasha (2012), appropriate educational support strategies for learners with visual impairments must be implemented to improve their access, participation, and success in higher learning institutions.

Large classes and inadequate teacher training compound the difficulties for students. They emphasized that no matter how much they try to lead an academically independent life, overcoming specific educational barriers requires time, energy, and

financial resources. Students have revealed that not providing accessible lectures, assignments, and tutoring financially burdens these bursary-dependent students.

Students with disabilities make sufficient efforts to meet minimal academic requirements. They spent significant time grasping the concepts presented in the classroom, with a substantial portion dedicated to converting inaccessible reading materials into accessible formats. Their entire campus life revolved around fulfilling the academic demands of the university. Higher education encompasses more than just teaching and learning; it provides opportunities for students to interact with diverse people, make new friendships, and engage in various activities that inculcate essential skills necessary for future growth and development. Unfortunately, students with disabilities often lack the time to participate in these extracurricular activities. They complete their educational degrees through immense hard work and effort yet struggle to establish a sustainable social network for their future progression.

The study revealed that the challenges of their disability while engaging in academic activities are not easy to ignore. They pointed out that it required unbearable stress. It also led to dropouts and hindered their overall educational progress. Economic barriers, language proficiency issues, limited technology familiarity, and challenges associated with assistive technology further intensify this struggle. In summary, these findings highlighted the significant barriers visually impaired students face in pursuing higher education.

As per the findings there are main three types of barriers encountered by Visually impaired students: Academic barriers faced by visually impaired students, Contribution to the adaptation and mechanisms to overcome the academic limitations and challenges.

According to the study findings, sub-themes identified in the analysis include classroom accessibility, learning materials and teaching methods, students' personal characteristics, social skills, peer group support, and self-determination issues.

Theme: 1. Academic Barriers for Visually Impaired Students

According to the findings of this study, the classroom or lecture environment does not provide sufficient support for visually impaired students to learn. The support provided to students with disabilities varied according to the social subjects they study. As one of the interviewees puts it:

I am doing sociology. Although I cannot see the PPT, they let me record the lecture. When I was studying social statistics, the teacher who taught me that subject just came and taught me the subject as same as for all of my peers. He didn't know at least what kind of accommodation I needed to grasp the subject. Many visually impaired students cannot write an answer systematically. No one guides it. No one knows how to guide. Some visually impaired students have no support from family, parents, or university friends. Photocopied old books or imaged PDFs are given to

students studying other subjects. So, they cannot read. Those students have to work hard. Education is becoming an unnecessary burden.

(P7, male, 23, Visually Impaired)

Some teachers have an in-depth understanding of the teaching material and the subject, and they may expect the same from others: expecting the student to be prepared with pre reading and research on the subject matter. This may lead to ignore the diversity of the students in the classroom and also polarizing students with disabilities as poor learners.

The sub-themes that emerged from the focus group discussion included lack of proper attention from teachers, inaccessible class notes, lack of inclusive teaching pedagogy, barrier-ridden infrastructure, excessive time required for assignments of visually impaired students, economic hardship, lack of adequate technological knowledge, Lack of English proficiency, and the need for appropriate assistive technology.

Theme 2: Cultivating Self-Determination and Coping Mechanisms

The study explored the self-efforts of visually impaired students to overcome academic barriers and challenges for personal growth and development. However, in the university, poorly catered disability friendly teaching methods and study materials have pushed towards resort to other alternative mechanisms. Choices for such students to cultivate self-determination and coping mechanisms are family help, help from friends, self-efficacy.

Theme 2: 1, Family Support

Affection and Care provided by the family to visually impaired students, close relationship with a parent, and equal economic status guide visually impaired students to cope with the challenges they face in social situations. Social support and social interactions are well managed by appreciating and acknowledging parental behavior. (Manitsa et al., 2022). Visually impaired students can share happy and fulfilling family relationships if they are treated equally with their non-disabled siblings and are included in all family activities (Data & Sabir, 2021). Those who receive appropriate care and support from the family succeed in the academic journey, overcoming the persisting academic challenges at the university.

The effortful care and facilitation of parents have brought absolute changes in the lives of students with disabilities. The following quotation from one of the in-depth interviews confirmed that the mother of the child's promising commitment and dedication to living at the hostel university significantly contributed to the student's academic progress.

My mother knows Braille. My mother has been with me since my school days. She translates the tuts I do in Braille into Sinhala. Mother is staying with me in the

hostel. As it was impossible to write the regular note quickly in Braille, I asked for the notes from friends.

(P2, Female, 23, Visually Impaired)

Here's the corrected version with improved grammar:

However, increased commitment towards a child with a disability can hinder the distributive responsibility of the mother, who is the primary caregiver of the family and whose role is socially constructed to encompass caregiving duties. The following excerpts from the present study echo this:

I have a mother and sister to help me. I read the notes from a friend to my mother. My mother knows braille. Mother learned Braille with me. I have no problem getting help with note assignments.

(P3, Male, 24. Visually Impaired)

My parents taught me Braille since I was little. A braille-type writer was also bought. Mother transcribed all the books and taught me. That is why I do not have any academic problems in school or university.

(P4, 26, Female, Visually Impaired)

The discussion that emerged from the above interviews was that there is a naturally constructed mechanism to manage the academic problems of visually impaired students who receive family contributions. The family can advocate for their children to overcome their visual impairment, even if the academic staff is unwilling to help. The above interviews also depicted that academic barriers are more accessible to overcome for students provided with technology and accommodations and often with the family's contribution to navigating learning efforts in acquiring education through the general mode of teaching and learning. Thus, the findings summarized that family members who support visually impaired children in translating Braille materials, adapting reading materials to audiobooks, and adapting to technological devices have directly contributed to their success.

By teaching Braille technology from a younger age, students have the chance to develop technical and language skills, which are more supportive of interacting with stakeholders of the university. Accordingly, the pre-provided opportunity and training have led to developing relationships with non-visual students.

Peer Support

Visually impaired students often face difficulties in building and maintaining social relationships. Research shows that social support provided by these students' peers and staff members in educational institutions can positively impact their academic learning and social-emotional development (Manitsa et al., 2022). As depicted from

the following excerpts, evidence from the present study is also consistent with these findings:

I am fully visually impaired. I am in a university with non-disabled students. It came to me from school, and I attended a regular school. Since my school days, I used to go everywhere with my friends. When going for a walk, they do not see me as special. Even though the university has a separate centre for students with disabilities, I learn things outside. Now I am doing a media course. I am also learning IT and English. So far, I can handle my education things. I have no significant obstacles in my education because I have good friends who help me at the university.

(P17, Male, Visually Impaired)

I used to write in Braille when I was in school. Now I have switched to a laptop. I can efficiently work with a computer. When I get an assignment, I can work alone. I have that and English knowledge. Sometimes, when we got a team, everyone made me the leader and gave me all the responsibilities.

(P4, Female, Visually Impaired)

This study also covered the students using Braille who were helped by their classmates. Primarily, they provide class notes. Peer support is often provided to walk to lecture halls. While adapting to the university environment, visually impaired students find the most accessible mechanism as working with partially sighted students.

However, average students often do not know how to interact with students with disabilities appropriately. According to one of the interviewees:

When helping a visually impaired student to go to the lecture hall, where exactly they should touch? They do not know if it is by hand or elbow. It is okay if they tell the direction. They will understand it. They took me by the hand and did not inform me that there was a staircase. One day, a friend of mine, without understanding the obstacles on the road, hit a concrete while climbing a staircase.

)P19, Female, Visually Impaired)

There are still misconceptions among non-disabled students. When a disabled student is given group work, it is thought that marks will decrease if he is included in that group. That it cannot be done correctly.

)P7, male, 23, Visually Impaired)

In general, if a student with a disability needs help based on their disability from their peer group, as noted above, relationships with students with disabilities are more charitable than friendship. However, even students who do not want to join a group of

visually impaired students are willing to join their group if it is full of skills of visually impaired students. Visually impaired students are absorbed into the group and even come forward to lead their group. Therefore, the responses in this study highlight that students with disabilities are further excluded from the academic environment apart from the skills and social relationships that students with disabilities have.

In addition, considering the unique barriers experienced by the students, it is identified that not all facilities in the faculty are physically accessible for the students, which has made them depend on the support of their peers. In some cases, visually impaired students are reluctant to seek support for the studies from the non-disabled students as they all are parallel students of the same academic year. Those who participated in the study mentioned that although peer group help is expressed positively, it is still seen as a charity rather than helping a friend. Since helping the disabled is often conceptualized within Sri Lankan culture as a charitable act, and therefore students with disabilities seek assistance, and their peers also readily available to provide assistance.

The social model of disability allows people with disabilities to move from personal narratives of tragedy, compassion, and pathology to collective action and social change (Liyanage, 2017; Shakespeare, 2006).

A non-disabled friend came with us to help us through the buddy system introduced by the University's Centre for Students with Disabilities. He got criticism from other students, who put him down.

(P19, Female, Visually Impaired)

Cooperation, empathetic behavior, and practical support are the main components of social support for visually impaired students (Manitsa et al., 2022). Despite actively seeking social support from peers, visually impaired students face many challenges due to a lack of training and awareness on technology. The social outlook of visually impaired students is also based on such ignorance. Academic staff support improves students' academic performance, and peer support contributes to social inclusion. It improves their self-esteem and social acceptance.

Social Skills

Visual impairment has a negative impact on individuals' social-emotional development due to the limitations of their social interactions. They may present problems in behaviors and acquiring social skills than sighted classmates. Also, there is a tendency to develop lower self-esteem, leading to social isolation (Manitsa et al., 2022). The positive influence of family and peer groups on visually impaired students was discussed above. Regarding the social skills of the visually impaired students who participated in this study, the family and peer groups' strong relationships led to the development of such.

I could see it before. Then I lost my sight. After knowing that I cannot see, I had nothing else to do. My mother was a teacher. Through her intervention, a teacher came to our house to teach Brail. From then until I finished school, I worked in braille. Later, when I finished school, I studied IT and English. Now that I can work with both, I have overcome many learning difficulties associated with my visual impairment. Currently, I am doing a special degree. That is why I don't have to write in Braille and translate when doing assignments. When doing group assignments, I do everything. Others are left to me. It is not difficult for visually impaired students to overcome academic obstacles if they know IT and English...the problem is that many visually impaired students do not have this ability.

(P11, 23, Female, Visually Impaired)

The research findings shed light on a significant correlation between self-directedness and developing more effective coping mechanisms among students with disabilities. It became evident that several key features manifested these coping strategies. Firstly, self-directed students exhibited vital clarity regarding their educational goals, allowing them to navigate their academic journeys with purpose and determination.

Furthermore, self-directed students harnessed the power of peer group networks, tapping into the support and insights of their fellow students. This collaborative approach, bolstered by advanced social skills, enriched their academic experience and contributed to their ability to cope with challenges.

Perhaps most notably, self-determined students were adopted in creating and maintaining support group networks. This active pursuit of supportive communities enhanced their self-empowerment, enabling them to adapt effectively to the demands of academic environments and make informed decisions when faced with obstacles. As the interviewees put this:

I have very high results in my batch. The friendly team of teachers and my soft skills contributed to my success. Another reason for my success may be that I use the computer to type what I want. If I worked with Braille, my results would be less.

I have to constantly get used to depending on others. Many visually impaired students who use brail have to deal with this situation. If there is something wrong with us, we need to know how to adapt. Visually impaired students have to learn technology. Visually impaired students have to develop language skills and learn soft skills. Usually, those students try to stay in a comfortable zone. We have to get out of it. Meanwhile, the problems of students with difficulties should be looked at case by case. I feel that the teachers' outstanding contribution to education has given me a fair approach to learning. If the group of friends is strong, we can do a lot. Friends treat me not for a special reason. Not out of pity. I am an average person among them. But I cannot see the problems of others in my way. There are students who are educated only through brail familiarised with online education.

(P12, Male, Visually Impaired)

I'm fully visually impaired. I'm in a university with non-disabled students. It came to me from school, and I attended a regular school. Since my school days, I used to go everywhere with my friends. When going for a walk, they don't see me as special. Even though the university has a separate centre for students with disabilities, I learn things outside. Now I am doing a media course. I am also learning IT and English. So far, I can handle my education things. I have no major obstacles in my education because I have good friends who help me at the university.

(P17, Male, Visually Impaired)

Taken together, an analysis of these excerpts suggests that the success of these students, which has been mediated by resilience and resourcefulness, is a result of nothing but their self-directedness and social connections. In essence, their self-determination translated into a proactive approach to overcoming challenges and the cultivation of substantial social support networks that played a crucial role in their success. These findings underscore the vital role of self-directedness and social connections in the lives of students with disabilities, showcasing the resilience and resourcefulness that can be developed when these factors intersect.

Theme 3- Challenges for Those Lacking in Self-Determination

Self-determination combines “skills, knowledge, and beliefs and enables a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior” (Field et al., 1998, p. 2). Self-determination skills include self-knowledge, self-advocacy, decision-making, and problem-solving (Wolffe & Rosenblum, 2014). Self-determination means setting goals, identifying steps to achieve goals, and overcoming various obstacles to achieve goals. Under that, the ability to choose, the ability to make decisions, and the ability to solve problems are also possible to identify.

Non-disabled can see, so lecturers don't look at us separately. When lectures put a PPT, we can't see it. Sometimes, videos are posted. We can't understand. We are afraid to make a request. They don't put it on the board in a way people can't see. We can't understand. Some of it is unreadable. It is better to put it in a way that can be known. It would be good if lectures approach these visually Impaired students and see if they understand what I am saying.

(P5, Female, Visually Impaired)

Except in the English class, no teacher teaches separately. In many subjects, Teachers pay less attention to us. That means we do not even ask if we understand; only a few lecturers rarely do. It is not easy to read the presentation. If I tell a friend, I can read it. We write in Braille while doing assignments. Just record it and send it. Also, the assignment was not done as we wanted in the end. We, who are visually impaired, do not understand anything when Sinhala is

taught to Sinhalese in a subject unit like Tamil. Visually Impaired Sinhalese students can only do Tamil orally. However, there is no attention to that. Some lecturers do not like to give an extra class. We enjoy that experience every day. If we are not allowed to do a subject of our choice, it is a great injustice to us. I was interested in psychology. However, I could not do it... When visually Impaired students are taken from a particular intake, those students are taken much later than non-disabled students. Those visually Impaired students missed the subjects on campus.

(P5, Female, 23, Visually Impaired)

What emerged from the above study reflected that they do not get the support of significant social networks, they are further uncomfortable with the teaching method, and they have to exert an effort for an unnecessary amount of self-studies instead of self-empowerment; it is seen that they are suffering from educational difficulties.

To a certain extent, yes, because of the problems I had to face, as explained above, I feel like I was excluded from the university system.

(P3, Female, Visually Impaired)

Students use self-determination to empower themselves, adapt skillfully to academic environments, make informed decisions, overcome obstacles, and cultivate significant social support networks. In contrast, those who lack self-determination and less intense social networks face negative attitudes, increased stress levels, and doubts about self-fulfillment.

The absence of clear definitions for different types of disabilities among educators resulted in a lack of tailored support for visually impaired students. Consequently, the teaching environment cannot deliver accessible lectures, assignments, and tutoring. Visually impaired students often turn to their peers for help, and those with family support, financial means, IT skills, and language proficiency can navigate these challenges. However, students who lack these resources experience significant economic hardships and inconveniences.

Limited understanding of visually impaired students further restricted their access to specialized subjects. Despite disability support centers in universities and potential instructor training, barriers to inclusive education persist. Visually impaired students often employ their skills to succeed academically, yet they remain excluded from an environment where their disability is not fully acknowledged or understood.

05. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study brought to light the obstacles that visually impaired students in Sri Lankan universities encounter in their academic lives. Among these, the ease of access to classrooms, the efficacy of instructional strategies, and the accessibility of educational resources were emphasized. It is advised that extensive support be provided, including teacher training, easily accessible materials, and upgraded infrastructure, in order to remove those obstacles. Additionally, research revealed the importance of self-determination in helping visually impaired pupils overcome obstacles in the classroom and advance personally. Furthermore, the significance of social support networks is underscored. Sri Lanka can help create an environment in higher education that is more inclusive by concentrating on these academic concerns.

This study suggests that techniques based on visually impaired students' experiences should be given consideration in order to handle their educational obstacles. Education administrators should put more of an emphasis on student-driven ideas for better teacher-student relationships, accessible materials, better-trained teachers, and tailored interventions. Furthermore, based on the results of this study, it is possible to provide an inclusive learning environment through adaptable policies, visual-verbal support, and strategic learning methods. Addressing societal perceptions of disability, creating student organizations to advocate for the rights of impaired students, and guaranteeing equitable treatment, curriculum adaptation, and universal access to education should all receive more attention. The study's recommendations included strengthening English language development, tackling the lack of qualified teachers, and raising technological awareness for equitable access to educational resources.

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