
Accommodating students with disabilities in higher education in Sri Lanka: Identifying more equitable approach

Umesh Moramudali*

Ministry of Finance, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Shashithanganee Weerawansa

Department of Economics, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

**Corresponding author: econlecturer@gmail.com*

Introduction

The term disability can be defined in many ways. World Health Organization (WHO) defines disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers.

In Sri Lanka, as per the estimates 1,617,924 persons live with disabilities which amount nearly to 7percent of the total population. (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013). Accordingly, in 2012, approximately 996,000 people were with visual disability, 734,000 with walking disability and 389,000 with hearing disability.

Western as well as eastern religions had interpreted disability in a negative point of view and stereotyped people with disabilities. Although Judeo-Christian philosophy did not advocate killing, people with disabilities were ostracized and stereotyped. Disability signified "sinner" to the ancient Hebrews, and people with disabilities were thought to be possessed by evil demons. People who were deformed, "crippled," or of short stature were forbidden to become priests. The Old Testament forbade people who were blind or lame from entering the houses of believers (Wright, 1960). In the New Testament, people with mental disorders were believed to be possessed. It was thought that people with disabilities had them because of their own or their parents' sins.

Disability is analyzed using different sociology theories. Out of them, Symbolic interactionists such as Charles Cooley, Georg Mead and Erving Goffman seems to be provided most suitable explanation regarding disability. They argue that the society consists of network of interlocking roles, social order is constructed through interactions as individuals and through shared meaning, make sense out of their social world. According to them, causes of issues are different interpretation of roles and labeling of individuals. In the case of People with

Disabilities (PWDs) they are labeled as incapable and dependent individuals. In order to overcome social issues, Symbolic interactionists suggest reducing impact of labeling and associated stigma (Liyanage, 2016).

Disability conceptualizes within the Sri Lankan culture from a charity perspective. The local languages have rather unique vocabulary to distinguish “normal” from “disabled” such as ‘*arbadita*’ - disabled, ‘*arbaditaya*’ - a person with disability and also particular terms attributed to each impairment such as *andha*-blind, *golu*-deaf, *bihiri*-hearing difficulty etc. These expressions clearly differentiate the ‘able-body’ from the ‘disabled-body’, ‘normal’ from ‘abnormal’ and ‘ill-being’ from the ‘well-being’ where the fixed identity as disable carries stigma and discrimination. Schools for special education are also named as ‘school of deaf and blind’ that segregates from ordinary school system in Sri Lanka (Liyanage, 2016).

It was observed that such labeling prevails in higher education sector, including in the process of enrolling students to universities. On that backdrop, the paper attempts to identify whether the principle of equality is adopted in enrolling PWDs to the universities and attempts to put forward recommendations to facilitate PWDs in a more equitable manner in the process of university enrollment.

PWDs are often identified as a marginalized group. More often than not they are seen as dependents, do not receive sufficient education and remain economically inactive people. Literature identifies that PWDs often left out of major institutions in the country including in educational institutions. In that context, it remain a question whether PWDs are accommodated in an equitable manner in higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka. The study attempts to review the process adopted in enrolling PWDs to the universities, identify shortcomings of the existing process and to suggest a more equitable approach.

Methodology

The research attempts to analyze the opportunities provided for PWDs for higher education in Sri Lanka using the theory of equality of Prof. Ronald Dworking. In his writings, Dworkin argues that the concept of equality of opportunity can be used to explain the way in which PWDs should be compensated to ensure equality and the significance of the state intervention for that. The study examines the university enrollment process for PWDs relating it to the concept of equality of opportunity. Further, the literature is reviewed to identify the barriers faced by PWDs in higher education and several case studies were conducted to investigate firsthand experience of PWDs in universities. For the purpose of case studies 6 PWDs from University of Colombo were interviewed. The sample covers

students with physical impairment, visual impairment and hearing impairment. Sample also includes two PWDs who graduated from University of Colombo.

Results and discussion

Disability becomes a barrier due to multiple reasons. It is often observed that large percentages of those who live with disabilities remain economically inactive people. As data reflect, in Sri Lanka out of nearly 1.6 million people who are PWDs 1.1 million remain economically active. This amount is nearly to 70 percent of PWDs being economically inactive. Literature identifies that more often than not, public tends to look at the PWDs from charity perspective, labeling them as dependent and unable to contribute to any economic activity, hence end up doing household work (Liyanage, 2016). The observations of Liyanage are reflected at the national level statistics as well. Accordingly, in Sri Lanka, 36.9 percent of the PWDs who are economically inactive does household work.

According to statistics, 13.9 percent PWDs had not attended school while only 5.1 percent of PWDs have sat for the G.C.E. A/L and only 1.3 percent of PWDs had obtained degrees. Low numbers comparing to average rates of school attending and obtaining degrees indicates the lack of facilities available in facilitating PWDs within education system. During the interviews conducted with PWDs the failure to facilitate them in universities due to the issues in infrastructure facilities and regulations, were identified.

The personal experience of people with disabilities suggests that they face an issue of social stigma which is based on interpretation given by the society. This labeling which is often negative tends to segregate people with disabilities from others and imposes certain social barriers on them. It was identified that PWDs are mistreated in the process of enrolling to universities. Although there is a separate intake for PWDs, that intake only facilitates PWDs to follow four major degree courses. According to the University Admission Handbook 2016/17 the UGC may at the request of the universities concerned, decide to admit a limited number of blind students [who sat the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) Examination, 2016 using the Braille system] to the course of study in Arts and differently abled students (who are medically certified as disabled) to course of study in Arts, Commerce, Biological Science and Physical Science. This can be identified as an instance where PWDs are labeled by the society. In this case, the accepted norm seems to be that PWDs are incapable to pursue a degree course other than the four courses mentioned and most importantly a PWD who gets a higher Z score, which would be sufficient to enroll to university through normal intake is not compensated by allowing such PWD to apply for the degree course which requires a Z score higher than the one obtained.

Authors argue that the system adopted in enrolling PWDs to the universities contradict with the equality of opportunity concept. Dworkin, using the concepts of equality of welfare and equality of resources also argues that such concepts can be used to compensate for all "physical or mental handicaps through ensuring equality of opportunities (Iorns, 1993). Dworkin is in the view that the absence of equality in resources leads to inequality in opportunities, thereby highlight the importance of establishing equality of having resources. (Dworkin, 2017).

Interestingly, such chances (having a lower Z score than the national Z score to enroll in to any degree course) are provided to students under three circumstances. About 5 percent of university enrollment takes place from 16 districts, recognized and classified as educationally disadvantaged districts and 5 percent of the total available seats are given to the students of these districts.

Secondly, students who have excelled in extracurricular activities too are provided with a chance of applying to degree course having lower Z score than the average one. Accordingly, up to 0.5 percent of the places from the proposed intake in each course of study other than courses offered by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts have been reserved for candidates who have obtained 1st, 2nd or 3rd places at national level and/or achievements at international levels in such fields as sports and cultural. Candidates with such achievements are qualified to enroll to a degree course if they obtain a Z Score that is lower not more than 0.2 of the Z Score required generally to follow a particular degree course (UGC, 2017).

Thirdly, children of enlisted personnel of armed forces, Police Services and Special Task Force are entitled to enroll themselves into selected degree courses having lower Z score than the specified score to enroll to follow such degree courses. Accordingly, up to 0.5 percent of the places from the proposed intake in Medicine, Dental Surgery and Engineering is reserved for the personnel enlisted in the Armed Forces, Police Service and the Special Task Force serving in operational areas.

In that context, authors argue that PWDs too should to facilitate in similar manner as students from educational disadvantaged districts, those who excelled in national level achievements and children of the army forces, in enrolling to universities. Authors are also in the view that Dworkin's equality of opportunity approach was followed in enrolling students from educationally disadvantaged districts. While acknowledging the good efforts of the UGC in facilitating students based on the issues in resource distribution, it is recommended to follow same approach in admitting PWDs to universities.

Conclusion

The paper identifies that the majority of the PWDs remains economically inactive, which authors attribute that in mainly majorly to the social labeling. It was identified that social labeling of PWDs took place in university enrollment as well. Authors argue that Dworkin's equality of opportunity principle is not being followed in enrolling PWDs while same principle is followed in enrolling students under different provisions.

It was observed that under the special provision to enroll PWDs, their choices are restricted and are allowed to pursue only four degree courses. Further, this approach seems to label PWDs as incapable of pursuing certain degree courses. Moreover, the efforts of PWDs who got higher Z scores are not compensated by allowing them to apply for a degree course which requires higher Z score than the score obtained by PWDs. Yet, such method is followed in enrolling students under certain other provisions. Thereby, it is recommended to allow candidates who are within a Z-score of 0.2000 of the cut-off-point applicable to the admission district of the candidate in the relevant course of study, to apply compensating disability.

Keywords: *Equality, people with disabilities, rights of the PWDs, university admission, Z Score*

References

- Department of Census and Statistics (2013). *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2012/13*. Colombo: Ministry of Policy Planning Economic Affairs, Child Youth and Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka, 85-98.
- Dworkin, R. (2017). *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. 4th ed. London: Harvard University Press, 8-18.
- Iorns, C. (1993). A feminist looks at Ronald Dworkin's theory of equality. *Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law*, [online] 1(1). Available at: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/MurUEJL/1993/6.html> [Accessed 2 Aug. 2017].
- Liyanage, C. (2016). Socio-cultural Construction of Disability in Sri Lanka: Challenges towards Charity Perspective to Rights-based Approach.
- Wright, A. B. (1960). *Physical disability: a psychological approach*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2-15.
- University Grant Commission (2017). *Admission to undergraduate course of university in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: University Grant Commission, 7-14, 149-155.