

TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL ORDER TO ENABLE AND EMPOWER DIFFERENTLY-ABLED STUDENTS IN SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITIES THROUGH E-LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

Disabled people commonly labeled as ‘handicapped persons’ was termed as *differently-abled persons*, by the US Democratic National Committee. This euphemistic term was introduced not to show sympathy but to let people know that differently-abled people can reach equal levels of accomplishments, if they are provided with the necessary logistics, equipment and clinical and augmentative support. Since the recently concluded war in Sri Lanka, there are many differently-abled persons that are yet to regain their lives. According to the available statistics in Sri Lanka, those with restricted mobility, vision and hearing, including youth make up an estimated 15 percent of Sri Lanka’s population i.e. 3 million. In a 2002 survey it was reported that 54 percent of Differently-abled people see internet as essential to their quality of life compared to only 27 percent of non-differently abled respondents.

The term “E- Learning” has come into our day to day vocabulary and into regular use. Its exact meaning is not yet widely understood among the majority. The definition of E-Learning for the purpose of this paper can be stated simply as “the delivery of a learning, training or education programmed by electronic means, involving the use of a computer or electronic devices. However, the major omission in this definition is the other two “Ds” in addition to “delivery”. A more accurate definition should state “the design, development and delivery of learning programmes by electronic means”.

The special advantages of E-Learning, especially if it is used for the differently- abled people can be stated briefly under the following headings:

- **Anywhere, anytime learning.**

Learners can pursue their studies at their convenience and are not limited by geography or time constraints. This is of particular benefit to people who face barriers to learning such as disability of any kind, living in a remote location, discrimination based on gender or having competing work/home responsibilities.

- **A window to a world of learning.**

In other words , E-Learning allows online access to a huge array of resources – the libraries and museums of the world, and much more and this is a great help for differently abled people especially who are home bound and cannot move easily.

- **Faster communication.**

E-Learning speeds up communication. Students of all types, especially differently abled people, can benefit from timely feedback, and electronic submission of assignments can eliminate delays in transmission.

- **Access to a global intellectual repository.**

A rapidly expanding array of open educational resources (OERs) is available online today, as people, mainly academics, contribute E-Learning materials to online repositories. Instead of going to the libraries in search of knowledge libraries come to them. These materials can be freely used and adapted for one’s own needs, resulting in saving of time and cost.

Today, education has different connotations due to trends in globalization and advanced technology. It is in this context that teaching to differently-abled people presents new and compelling challenges. This study attempts to focus on how education via communication technology, especially E-learning can create opportunities towards making a positive change in their conflict affected lives.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to explore through a narrative analysis how the enrolled differently-abled undergraduates cope and find out whether the available facilities and teaching methods meet their physical and emotional needs and how they could be met through advanced e-learning.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant at two levels. First, it makes a modest contribution to the e-learning discourse from the perspective of a developing country like Sri Lanka. Secondly, it offers important insights into how E-learning can be integrated in to the study programmes offered by universities with limited resources for the differently abled, so as to enhance the rapid adoption of e-learning. This study is useful in terms of understanding the impact of disability on the persons themselves and on the university authorities so that they can come up with pragmatic policies to empower and enable differently abled students to the maximum. As far as the researchers are concerned this is the first time a research of this nature has been planned to be conducted covering all the national universities in Sri Lanka.

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The participants of this research were differently - abled students enrolled in the national universities in Sri Lanka engaged in undergraduate as well as post graduate studies. One hundred and twenty interviews were conducted in this study consisting disabled undergraduate and post graduate students from the universities where our sample population was drawn. Throughout the research, the narrative method, namely with the help of a pre-prepared questionnaire, differently-abled students were asked to narrate their story. Before listening to their stories consent of their parents or guardians as well as university authorities was taken and they were assured that the identities of the participants will not be divulged.

Narrative method was chosen because narrative texts enable the researcher to understand how participants experience, live, and tell about their world. People construct and understand the world through stories (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). We live within and by the stories that we affirm and re-affirm throughout our lives from early infancy. Our personal and shared stories are a crucial and integral 'modus operandi' of human life, a means through which we define our lives, our identity, culture and society. Researching stories told verbally, in writing, music or art has become a specialist methodological field within qualitative research methods. The growth of narrative approaches to data collection and analysis has opened up a range of innovative ways for researchers to access and capture social and cultural experiences.

It is agreed that, the telling of stories is an integral part of human social communication – occurring in all types of textual, verbal, nonverbal and creative expressions – as a means to describe reflect, share, perform or entertain. In this context, we define the term 'narrative' – often used interchangeably with 'story' or storytelling – as a form of expression recognizable as a story, i.e. "discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way." Based on time, stories are typically recollections of events with an identifiable 'storyline' or 'plot' having a beginning, middle and an end (Ricoeur, P 1984, Riessman, 1993). Even a single sentence can be enough for us to identify a narrative/story as opposed to the statements on related or unrelated

facts, a set of instructions or comments. Story is one of the most significant media through which we define and shape our cultural and personal interactions.

However, it is important to distinguish between qualitative analysis applied to narratives and narrative analysis as a method. In the former, general methods of qualitative analysis such as thematic, discourse and conversation analysis may be applied to the interpretation of narratives as well as other sources of data, while in the latter specific, analytic techniques have been developed for narratives alone. Narrative research methods aim to explore the meanings within individual narratives and gain a general overview of subjective experiences. There are certain features that distinguish narrative research methods within the broad field of qualitative methodology. Narrative research only deals with stories (in any media), and research is specifically designed to work with or to generate stories.

FINDINGS

(a) Students' perceptions of E-Learning.

The study reveals that a considerable number of undergraduates are not very familiar with the term or the benefits of E-learning. Disabled undergraduates who belong to the previous war or conflict zone were not familiar with e-learning while the disabled undergraduates from the capital had a fair understanding of the above.

(b) Facilities available in the state universities for differently-abled students.

We found that in most universities the examination division generally provides disabled undergraduates with basic equipment such as slate, brail type writer etc for examination purposes. One of the Universities in the previous war zone has two centres established: Center for Physically Challenged and Students' Service Center for the disabled undergraduates. Center for physically challenged provides easy access within the library. The special service center provides voluntary services and free photocopying. The same university provides hostel facilities with special facilities to accommodate the disabled undergraduates.

(c) The challenges encountered by the female disabled undergraduates in the universities.

The study reveals that this depends more on the personality of the female disabled undergraduates. Also culturally rooted issues and safety concerns are certain issues which the parents of these disabled undergraduates worry mostly about.

(d) Recommendations for policy makers.

The disabled undergraduates showed their concern regarding the fact that policy makers should work on issues related to accessibility, provide trained professionals to address their needs, financial assistance or scholarships, purchase equipment and for medical assistance, systematic process to give adequate support within the university premises and hostel facility with toilet which suit the disabled.

CONCLUSION

We recommend to the relevant authorities concerned, starting from the legislative, to have a national policy on differently abled persons and also to have section where the differently able undergraduates and postgraduate students are equipped with necessary provisions. Although legislative have taken initiatives to have accessibility for disabled persons at all constructions from year 2010 onwards it is worthy to assure that these instructions are followed by the constructors and to place a proper mechanism to look in to proper standards of construction as well .Especially universities have to work on the accessibility issue with ramps, and elevators. The availability of e-learning facilities including internet access, equipments and trained staff has to be equally distributed among the national universities.

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