

## Attitudinal Barriers Encountered by Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions

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### ABSTRACT

The present study is an exploratory in nature. The papers aims to understand the attitudinal barriers encountered by students with disabilities in higher education institutions and its impact on their learning experiences. The study was conducted in the erstwhile State of Andhra Pradesh (now bifurcated in to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), India. For this study, the researcher selected three universities in different parts of Andhra Pradesh by using purposive sampling. In the second phase the researcher interviewed 100 students with disabilities from the selected universities by using snowball sampling. For this study, quantitative and qualitative data analyses were used and in most cases quotes of real text for each theme were maintained and used extensively. The findings of the paper covered characteristics of students with disabilities, attitudinal barriers faced by them. The findings of the study suggests that changes are needed to be made, not only in the physical environment in which teaching and learning takes place, but also in the way in which higher education curriculum is organised, delivered and assessed and changes should also come in attitudes of teachers, university administration, peer group and public at large.

**Keywords:** *Students with disabilities, Higher education, barriers, learning experiences*

Physical barriers continue to exist in higher education institutions for students with disabilities. The examples of physical barriers they face are: lack of access to buildings, classrooms, rest-rooms, and public facilities due to non-existence of elevators and parking facilities within a university (Brown, 1992; Schneid, 1992). A study by West, *et al*, (1993) also shows that barriers identified by students with disabilities were not only inaccessible buildings and classrooms, and lack of other accommodations, but also attitudes of teachers, university administration, peer group and public at large. Further, Howell and Lazarus (2003) suggest that changes are needed to be made, not only in the physical environment in which teaching and learning takes place, but also in the way in which higher education curriculum is organised, delivered and assessed.

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Further, students with disabilities who attend higher education institutions often face attitudinal barriers from their peer groups and teachers. Attitudes play an important role in the success or failure of students with disabilities in higher education institutions (Rao, Ambati, Nageswara, 2012). Attitudes of teachers, peer groups, non-teaching staff, and the administration as well as student services coordinators, can all have a profound effect on the social and educational experiences of these students (Nathanson, 1979). Lucas (1999) defined attitude as 'a favourable, or unfavourable, evaluative reaction towards something or someone, exhibited in one's beliefs, feelings, or intended behaviour'. For instance, Garvey (1991) investigated higher education institutions which developed accessible environment for students with disabilities. The results indicated that the attitudes of students without disabilities towards students with disabilities were more positive and favourable in these institutions as compared to institutions without services and focused on creating an accessible environment.

Student's attitudes towards peers with disabilities in their classroom could also be a significant factor in defining the educational experiences and opportunities available to students with disabilities and involving them in mainstream society (Lipsky, 2005; Maras and Brown, 2000). Similarly, acceptance of students with disabilities in educational institutions is unlikely to happen when their peers have negative attitudes towards them (Antonak and Livneh, 2000). Such students have to overcome various challenges of academic demands combined with their disability. Disability service providers also play an important role in the success of these students at higher education institutions (Reber, 2007). Many of these students, due to fear of being labelled and of the stigma attached, avoid disclosing their disabilities and needs to higher authorities, teachers and friends in higher education. Thus, these students face many problems in higher education institutions due to various reasons.

Similarly, a study by Fichten, *et al*, (1990) also found that staff and students without disabilities used to feel concerned about the needs of these students in the higher education institutions, which created an accessible environment and provided support services in their campuses. These studies suggest that attitudinal barriers should not be ignored in those higher educational institutions which seek to provide equal access for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. The attitude of faculty members and peer groups may be an important determinant for the successful completion of educational experiences for students with disabilities. There is a dearth of research on this topic in the Indian context. Therefore the researcher attempted to understand the barriers encountered by students with disabilities and its impact on their learning experiences at higher educational institutions.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

1. To examine the demographic profile and educational status of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions in the erstwhile State of Andhra Pradesh
2. To understand the attitudinal barriers encountered by these students and its impact on their learning experiences at higher education institutions

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is exploratory in nature. The study was conducted in the erstwhile State of Andhra Pradesh (now bifurcated in to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) which has very high number of academic institutions in India in terms of higher education and also enrolment. For this study, the researcher collected data from three universities in different parts of Andhra Pradesh. After selecting the universities, the researcher interviewed all students with disabilities from each university by using snowball sampling. It was very difficult to get details about students with disabilities from the university management or disability office, due to lack of data base regarding the number of students with disabilities enrolled. That is why the researcher used snowball sampling. Students' were interviewed with the help of semi-structured in-depth interview schedules. In all 100 students were included in this study (48 from one Central University and 26 each from the State Universities (a and b). For this study, quantitative and qualitative data analyses were used and in most cases quotes of real text for each theme were maintained and used extensively.

### *Characteristics of students with disabilities*

Table 1 provides a brief description of the respondents by nature of their impairment.

**Table 5.1: Characteristics of students with disabilities**

| Variables          |                 | Nature of Impairment              |                               | Total<br>(100) |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
|                    |                 | Orthopedic<br>impairments<br>(72) | Visual<br>impairments<br>(28) |                |
| Gender             | Male            | 48<br>(73)                        | 18<br>(27)                    | 66<br>(100)    |
|                    | Female          | 24<br>(71)                        | 10<br>(29)                    | 34<br>(100)    |
| Age                | Less than 25    | 34<br>(72)                        | 13<br>(28)                    | 47<br>(100)    |
|                    | Between 26 – 30 | 36<br>(84)                        | 07<br>(16)                    | 43<br>(100)    |
|                    | Above 31        | 02<br>(20)                        | 08<br>(80)                    | 10<br>(100)    |
| Course of<br>study | M.A. /M.Sc      | 62<br>(81)                        | 14<br>(11)                    | 76<br>(100)    |
|                    | M.Phil          | 3<br>(38)                         | 5<br>(62)                     | 8<br>(100)     |
|                    | Ph.D            | 7<br>(44)                         | 9<br>(56)                     | 16<br>(100)    |

*(Note: The figures in the parenthesis are percentage)*

As per the above Table, among the total number of students with disabilities, male students constitute a greater proportion (66 percent). The diminish in the number of enrolment of female students with disabilities are based on varied reasons, which include negative attitudes towards girls' education, less expectations from girls, over-protectiveness towards girls, and under-estimating the talents of the female students by their parents. It is also seen that 72

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percent of the respondents were orthopedically impaired and 28 percent were visually impaired. The number of orthopedically impaired students is nearly two times higher than that of the visually impaired students. Students with other types of impairments were not found during the period of data collection. It is possible that some of the students actually did not want to disclose their disability.

Higher education tends to attract various social groups constituting of people of different age due to multiple factors. Table 5.1 also provides a brief description of the gender composition of respondents by the age bracket. It is observed that about half (47) of the students were less than 25 years of age, and very negligible proportion of students were above 31 years of age. Similarly, it was found that orthopedic impaired students between 26–30 years are more in number than students who are less than 25 years of age. Similarly, it was also found that a greater number of visually impaired students were above 31 years of age. This data indicates that visually impaired students have to face more hurdles, so there are more gaps in pursuing their education in comparison to orthopedic impaired students. It is possible that these students might have joined rather late in schools because of over-protection of their parents, lack of proper support services that include assistive devices, as well as lack of awareness about policies and support services. In summary, we can conclude that there are more orthopedic impaired students in the younger and middle age groups and more visually impaired students in the older age groups.

The above Table further shows that more students have enrolled for Masters' courses, whereas very few students have registered for M. Phil courses. Moreover, the enrolled number of orthopedically impaired students is more than the visually impaired students. However, more visually impaired students have registered for PhD course, followed by M. Phil courses. Thus, as per the collected data, more number of visually impaired students pursues higher education than orthopedically impaired students.

### ***Attitudinal Barriers***

Attitudes play an important role in the success or failure of students with disabilities in higher education institutions (Nathanson, 1979). These findings also indicate that most of these students, like other minority groups, desire to achieve acceptance and integration in society. Here, the researcher attempted to understand the perceptions' of students with disabilities about other people's attitudes towards them and their experiences of interacting with them. The narratives from the student's interviews show that these students also often faced attitudinal barriers from their peer groups, and family members.

Nearly half the respondents indicated that they had encountered different attitudes. While some believed that they face sympathetic attitudes towards them in their day-to-day life wherever they go, others, especially, students with both legs affected and totally visually impaired students have encountered attitudinal issues. Respondents encountered this problem not only with their friends or peer group but also with their family members, neighbours', and even with the non-teaching staff in their universities. They believed that their family

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members had low expectations and they used to be over-protective. They also expressed their concerns about those who are helping them in their studies and day-to-day activities. They further elaborated that even though the intention of students, teachers were to help them, but their attitudes made them feel guilty. Respondents were also concerned with the usage of terminology, unnecessary questions on their way of living and day-to-day activities. The following quotes represent their experiences:

*“Actually, after completion of degree, I wanted to do masters but for that I had to go out of my district and would have to stay in a hostel. But that was not acceptable for my parents. They said that you cannot go out and do your further studies. Due to their over-protection and low expectations on me, I wasted one year of my precious time. Finally, I convinced them and joined this campus.”*

*“They used to ask me questions such as how would I be able to manage all my works including basic things without any one’s help. It has always been a big problem to me. Even though I know that they don’t have any wrong intention other than to know how I would be able to manage, but for me giving answer to every one’s concerns actually makes me feel guilty”.*

*“People used to say that this is because of the deeds of my last birth; in fact I become upset with their words.”*

*“I am wearing shoes as they used to look at my legs and my way of walking.”*

*“People think that I am here just because of the reservation policy and getting help from teachers.”*

*“People were very sympathetic towards me because I used to crawl”*

Some of the respondents stated that they did not think of all these things. A few of them also stated that the negative attitudes of other people towards them at the universities were comparatively less than in school life. They noted:

*“In the college life, I did not face any problem with my friends. They treat me just like their other friends.”*

*“Till the school level, the attitude of others was different because the environment was also different. So I had many problems with my friends during the school days.”*

## CONCLUSION

Overall, from the students’ narratives, it was found that students with disabilities encountered various types of attitudinal barriers, from parents and peer group. Such barriers included low expectations from parents, usage of terminology, sympathy and unnecessary questions regarding their day-to-day activities, at their universities. It is also found that these students had less attitudinal barriers in higher education institutions, as compared with what they had faced at the school level. Interestingly, none of the students mentioned any negative attitudes of teachers towards them. This is perhaps due to the fact that in higher education institutions, the teachers have less interaction and responsibility of taking care of the needs of these students, as compared with their counterparts in schools. Overall, these findings highlighted the inherent limitations in the current piecemeal institutional arrangements for these students and attitudes of university management, staff and students parents which affected their

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learning experiences at higher education institutions. A comprehensive access service is required that addresses the needs of all these students and becomes an integral part of the institution.

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