



Creating Equal Opportunities: Evaluating Physical Facilities for Undergraduate Students with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Every individual in the world desires to carry out their daily tasks with ease. The surrounding environment plays a crucial role in facilitating this. While able-bodied individuals seamlessly navigate their surroundings, people with special needs often face significant challenges in meeting their requirements. Therefore, it is essential for them to have a moral understanding of the support they receive from their environment. The main objective of this research is to investigate the available physical facilities that were provided to the visually impaired and physically disabled undergraduates by their universities. The purposive sample contained 100 differently abled undergraduates from five universities namely; Sri Jayewardenepura, Colombo, Kelaniya, Jaffna, and Eastern university. A structured interview schedule was used for data collection. According to the results, students had a certain level of awareness regarding library facilities (46%), elevator facilities (53%), cafeteria facilities (75%) and sanitary facilities (67%). They have a moderate level of satisfaction on access to the library (30%), lecture halls (22%), gymnasium (41%) and hostels (29%) at their respective universities. Results revealed that there are some issues that visually impaired students face during their education that need to be addressed. Implementing equal opportunities is essential to create a user-friendly environment at universities and hostels to provide the students a satisfactory experience during their university education in spite of the disability.

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1. Introduction

Every person living in the world likes to perform their daily tasks easily. For that, the contribution from the surrounding environment is vital. Normal people can complete their daily activities by blending with their surroundings effortlessly. However, when considering people with special needs, they have to make a relatively big effort to fulfill those same needs. Accordingly, it is appropriate that they have a thorough understanding of the environment around them. Especially considering the students who are going for higher education, the knowledge and awareness about the facilities provided by the university are more important to successfully accomplish their educational activities (Harun, et al, 2019). Disabilities can manifest in various ways within an individual. Common disabilities observed in society include mobility difficulties, blindness, low vision, hearing impairments and neurological disorders.

According to Harun et al. (2019), individuals with hearing disabilities are classified based on their ability to hear without or with hearing aids, with levels ranging from mild to profound. Visual disabilities encompass individuals who have impaired or limited vision in one or both eyes, despite using visual aids such as spectacles and contact lenses. Visual disabilities are further classified as blind (severely impaired vision) and low vision (better vision than blind individuals). Physical disabilities refer to individuals whose bodily functions are impaired due to defects or injuries, such as stunted or crippled limbs, paralysis, or conditions like spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, and cerebral palsy. However, physical disabilities do not include minor impairments that do not significantly affect functioning, such as having one finger, six fingers, or imperfections in earpieces. Learning disorder refers to individuals with cognitive abilities disproportionate to their biological age including Down syndrome, intellectual impairments, autism, Attention

Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and global development delay. Speech disorders refer to individuals who face difficulties in speaking despite their ability to hear. Mental disorders include severe and chronic mental condition treated or diagnosed by a psychiatrist for at least two years such as schizophrenia, mood disorders, and persistent organic mental disorder. Various disabilities refer to individuals with multiple disabilities that do not fit into the aforementioned categories such as those with both visual and hearing impairments (Harun et al., 2019).

About 8.7% of the Sri Lankan population shows some form of disability by the age of 5. Although most of them have received primary education, less than 1% get qualified for higher education. In practice, students with disabilities or special needs benefit from higher education institutions, but face greater barriers compared to their non-disabled peers (Wagner et al., 2005). Globally, approximately half of the students with disabilities who enroll in a graduate program drops out before completing their studies (American Youth Policy Forum and Center on Education Policy, 2002).

1.1 Equal Facilities Lead to Equal Results

According to the literature, several studies have examined the facilities provided by universities for students with special needs. Many studies have discussed the educational performance of students with special needs in relation to their skill development. However, limited research on the facilities provided by the universities and the satisfaction levels of students with these facilities.

For instance, Witte et al. (1998) conducted a study at Miami University, a liberal arts institution in Ohio, and found that students with special needs graduated with grade point averages significantly higher than a comparison group of students without special needs. However, they also discovered that

students with disabilities typically take one semester longer to graduate. In a similar study, Sparks, et al. (2004) suggest that among 68 college students with special needs, they were academically competitive with their peers and graduated with similar outcomes compared to typical graduate students. On the other hand, Sachs and Schreuer (2011) studied 170 students with disabilities and 156 normal students across Israel and compared academic performance based on their grade point averages. Their results showed that students with special needs had similar college experiences, from social and athletic experiences to academic experiences. Furthermore, grade point average comparisons showed that the academic achievement of students with special needs was similar to that of students without special needs.

A study based on students with special needs at Technology University Malaysia disclosed that the university provided many significant facilities for students with special needs. The survey also revealed that the students were satisfied with the facilities provided by the university. This implies that the university has not neglected the basic right of special needs students (Harun, et al, 2019). Providing disability-friendly accessibility has been recognized as an essential part of a public university to facilitate the university life of students with special needs. Likewise, those facilities are a right they are obligated to have. Therefore, it has been recognized that it is important to emphasize on providing friendly facilities to students with special needs (Ismail, et al., 2021).

A study of university students with special needs done by Choudhary (2017) found that 9% of full-time university students have some kind of disability. It has also been established that only 1% to 3% of students with special needs actively request services from the services provided to them. Moreover, it has been identified that these students are particularly concerned about the hostel facilities. It has been manifested that

they prefer to get facilities related to hostels and are aware of it.

Mahawariya and Yadav (2021) studied the facilities provided to students by the Equal Opportunity Cell of Delhi University. It was identified that it provides important facilities like short term courses and sports events specially designed and organized for its special needs' students, computer labs according to their needs, scanning and accessible reading equipment for visually impaired students and provision of volunteers. The Equal Opportunity Cell provided transportation facilities to help disabled students. Under these conditions, students with special needs were recognized to do their education in the same way as other students.

Lore (2016) studied the factors influencing the performance of students with special needs in secondary level colleges in Machakos state. It studied how family background affects the academic performance of students with special needs, how attitudes of students with special needs affect their academic performance and how infrastructure affects the academic performance of students. It has been identified that infrastructure has a positive effect on students' academic performance. Additionally, it is recognised that it will be easier for students to participate in lectures through the placement of lecture hall facilities so that they are easily accessible along with the proof that the educational activities will be successful. In preparing a separate section for students with special needs in the libraries, the knowledge they need would be easily accessible.

Suraweera et al. (2022) conducted a research using undergraduate and graduate students focusing on factors affecting the performance of visually impaired and blind students. It considered how the physical environment affects the study performance of students as well as how ICT and English literacy in instructional strategies affect academic

performance. It has been identified that the physical environment has a positive effect on the academic performance of students. The physical environment such as lecture hall facilities, sanitary facilities, canteen facilities etc. has been studied within this spectrum. The study emphasized that providing these facilities effectively promotes educational activities among students.

Maheswari and Suganya (2016) conducted a study on positive factors and negative factors affecting social and academic performance of students with special needs in Madurai Lady Doc College, Tamil Nadu. This study identified that the college provides the necessary infrastructure to successfully carry out the education of students with special needs. The aforementioned study concluded that students have been given the opportunity to carry out their educational activities easily and efficiently.

Majumder (2019) conducted research on students with special needs in India focusing on the facilities provided to them and the policies important for their development. There, several programs aimed at encouraging children with special needs have been identified where the learning activities of those children have proven to be successful through these programs.

1.2 Insufficient Facilities Lead to Less Satisfaction

Research conducted by Preeti and Kiran (2012) identified the differences in infrastructure for students with special needs in public and non-public universities. The study identified the satisfaction levels of state and non-state university students. The results show that non-governmental organizations provide more facilities compared to government organizations. Most non-governmental organizations had properly equipped accessible toilets and hand bars at suitable height in bathrooms whereas government lacked such a facility. The study revealed that students were less

satisfied with the facilities in government universities.

Likewise, considering the global trends in the last 25 years, the number of children with special needs has increased by 62% in the world. One in 20 children under the age of 16 have been identified as having special needs. About 60% of them attend school. The Bog Standards campaign conducted research on toilets in schools for students with special needs. According to the research, 57% of the surveyed schools do not have toilets for students with special needs.

Bakari (2017) studied the infrastructure provided by schools based on the students of Benjamin William Mkapa High School, Jangwani and Pugu Secondary Schools. Among the issues identified there, the lack of adequate infrastructure for students with special needs is notable. The fact that the infrastructure is not suitable for use is also a major problem faced by the students. Lack of adequate and quality infrastructure has led to poor academic performance of students with special needs. It also indicates that poor quality and inadequate infrastructure can directly contribute to students' negative psychological responses.

Gohain et al (2020) studied the difficulties faced by students pursuing higher education in Jorhat district of Assam due to existing problems in infrastructure. Students from various colleges reported difficulties with infrastructural facilities such as an entrance gate with a cattle bridge (66.66%), no alternative entry point (91.66%) for differently abled students, a lack of ramps (25%), a classroom on the upper floor (66.66%), slipping floor finishes, and a lack of accessible toilets. These infrastructural challenges significantly hampered the education of students with special needs. These issues have contributed to poor academic performance and negative psychological responses among students with special needs.

The provision of equal facilities leads to equal outcomes. Several studies have examined the facilities provided by universities to students with special needs. Those studies emphasized that providing these facilities effectively promotes educational activities among students. However, it is crucial for government universities and educational institutions to provide all the required physical facilities for special needs students and there is a problem regarding this issue to some extent. The research question of this study was how the physical facilities at universities can be evaluated to create equal opportunities for undergraduate students with special needs. The research problem addressed in this study was to determine whether the university adequately provides the necessary physical facilities for students with special needs and to assess the students' awareness of these facilities. The main objective of this study was to evaluate the existing physical facilities for students with special needs. Additionally, a secondary objective was to enhance student awareness of the available physical facilities.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology for evaluating physical facilities for undergraduate students with special needs involves a comprehensive approach to gather data and insights. This section outlines the research design and methods employed to assess the current state of physical facilities and their impact on creating equal opportunities. Both primary and secondary data were utilized with a combination of literature review, structured questionnaire, site visits and case studies to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The study sample consisted of undergraduate students with special needs from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of Colombo, University of Kelaniya, University of Jaffna and Eastern University. The purposive sampling method was used to select the sample. Qualitative and

quantitative data were collected through the administration of a questionnaire, site visits and through case studies. Out of the 130 students, 100 students completed and returned the questionnaire accurately. In addition, 10 case studies were conducted with special needs students at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The data were analyzed using SPSS (version-26) software and Microsoft Excel software. The analysis involved assessing the students' perceptions of the facilities available to them and their awareness of these facilities. Likert scale responses were utilized for data collection, and the data was then analyzed based on the information gathered.

3. Results and Discussion

The students who participated in the study were classified into various categories based on their special needs. These categories included visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, multiple impairments, physical impairments and other health impairments. The sample comprised of 74% visually impaired students, 6% hearing impaired students, 2% students with multiple disabilities and 18% students with physical disabilities (Figure 1).

It is important to note that while various disabilities were discussed, the focus of the study was primarily on visual impairment. In all five universities, majority of students with special needs (95%) were enrolled in degree programs related to the humanities and social sciences. Among them, most of the students (99%) were limited to a few specific subjects such as Sinhala, Mass Communication, Psychology and Buddhist Civilization. It was found that only 91% of them were aware of the availability of an instructor for the special need students in the university who could assist them with subject selection. Furthermore, these students seemed to be unaware of their potential to pursue different subjects beyond the limited options they were aware of. One reason for this situation was lack of physical facilities that enable

them to reach the faculties to carry out their educational activities easily and efficiently. A significant portion of the students (60%) demonstrated awareness of the services provided by the universities (Figure 2). Specifically, when considering the awareness of sanitary facilities, it was observed that 67% of students were well aware of the nearby facilities. However, 17% had limited awareness in this regard, and 14% lacked any awareness. Similarly, regarding the awareness of elevator facilities, it became apparent that 53% of the students had a good

understanding of their locations within the buildings. Conversely, 26% of the students had limited awareness of the elevator facilities, and 21% of the students were completely unaware of their existence. The study revealed that a higher level of awareness was present regarding cafeteria facilities. Approximately 75% of the students were aware of the nearby cafeterias. However, 18% of had a limited understanding of these facilities and 7% had no awareness of their existence (Figure 2).

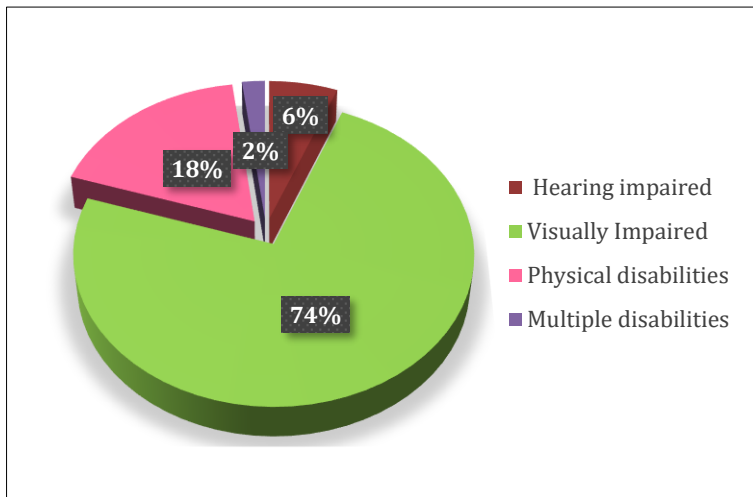


Figure 1. Types of disabilities identified in the sample (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

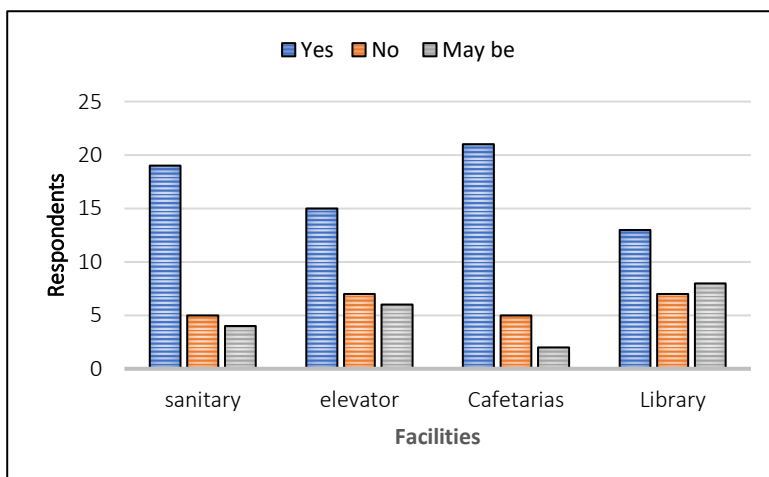


Figure 2. Student awareness of the services provided by the universities (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Although the universities do provide facilities, there is a lack of dedicated facilities specifically designed for differently abled students. The existing facilities are common for all undergraduate students, without special attention given to those with special needs. During case study interviews, students emphasized the need for special facilities.

"for us, it would be convenient if the university could provide separate toilet facilities. Sometimes it is difficult for us to access the existing facilities, depending on the places where they are located. As a result, we have to return to the hostel from the places where the lectures are held to use the toilet." (Student - A)

"we feel quite helpless when we are unable to reach the toilets by ourselves. Because we have to rely on friends for assistance, which can make both parties uncomfortable. So, if they are strategically placed for easy access, it would greatly enhance our comfort." (Student -B)

Moreover, it was evident that students with special needs face challenges primarily due to the deficiencies in the university facilities. These problems significantly impact the

educational activities of these students. Issues were particularly identified in areas such as entrances, ramps and elevators, staircases, classrooms within the universities.

In relation to the five universities included in the study, it was observed that there are issues with the existing access entrance to enter the university. It was noted that the students with special needs face difficulties when using the main entrance which is congested due to constant traffic. This poses a significant problem for students using wheelchairs. Similarly, visually impaired students had to spend a considerable amount of time to navigate through the main entrance. Therefore, it is essential to establish an alternative entrance to facilitate easier travel for students with special needs.

Furthermore, 68% of the respondents in this study identified the uneven pathway from the main gate to the building as a problem. Additionally, 88% of the students mentioned the lack of a roof on the main entrance road or alternative roads as a concern. Moreover, 96% of students indicated that the absence of alternative access for students with special needs is a problem (Figure 3).

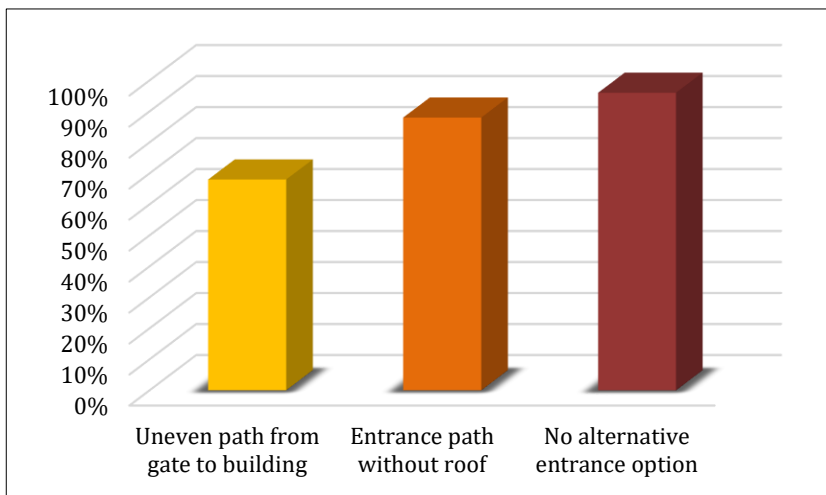


Figure 3. Challenges Faced by Students Regarding Entrance Accessibility (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Thus, it is evident and crucial to designate an alternative route to facilitate easier access for students with special needs. Additionally, installing roofs on the necessary access routes would enhance their comfort and convenience.

Upon examining the ramp and elevator facilities within the universities, it was discovered that they are not adequately available. A significant portion of students (59%) expressed discomfort in using the existing ramp and elevator facilities. Furthermore, 51% of students reported the absence of handrails on the ramps. It became apparent that certain buildings lacked ramp and elevator facilities altogether, presenting a major issue for students with special needs. Through discussions with the students, it was evident that they often had to rely on the assistance of their friends. In some cases, they were unable to attend lectures due to difficulties in finding friends available to help them. Additionally, 87% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the placement of ramps located behind the buildings. Consequently, students with special needs frequently had to travel long distances around the buildings, resulting in unnecessary effort when accessing lecture halls. The challenges faced by students with special needs regarding the steps in most of

the entrances in the universities have been identified as a severe crisis.

Particularly, visually impaired students encounter significant difficulties in navigating the steps. This is attributed to some stairs being constructed with a higher step rise, posing a problem. A majority of students (69%) have expressed their concerns about the height of the stairs. It is imperative to adhere to established standards when designing stairs to address this issue. Moreover, visually impaired students face severe obstacles due to the absence of tactile marking on the floor landings. As a result, they find it challenging to locate lecture halls independently when no one is available to assist them. To mitigate this problem, it is necessary to implement tactile markings on the floor landings at appropriate locations. Additionally, 21% of students reported encountering stairs without handrails which significantly hampers their ease of movement. Furthermore, a significant proportion of respondents (98%) highlighted the problem of slippery floors in the buildings. The students mentioned that such slippery places lead to accidents, including slips and falls. Therefore, it is crucial to design the floors of buildings to ensure they are suitable for students with special needs, promoting their safety and accessibility (Figure 4).

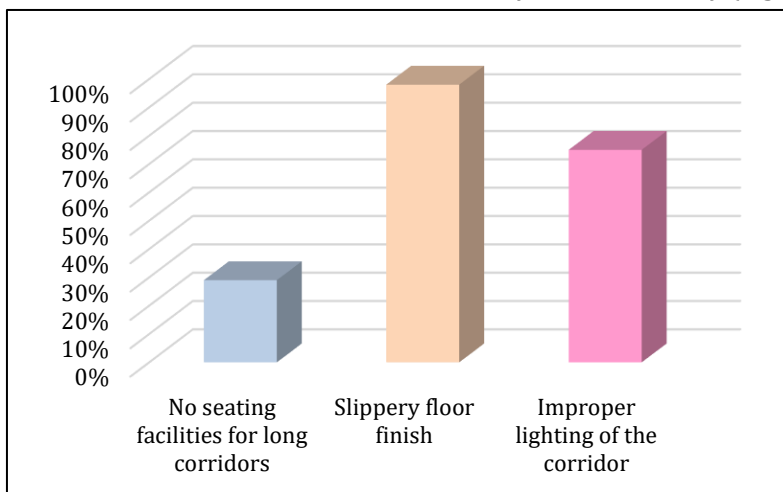


Figure 4. Physical problems faced by students with special need (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Upon examining the existing corridors in the university, it was evident that students across all the universities included in the study encountered the issue. The availability of seating facilities in long corridors was assessed, and 29% of the students reported the lack of necessary seating arrangements. Students expressed the need for seating facilities in long corridors to enhance their comfort. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of students (98%) expressed concerns about the corridor being slippery which hampers their easy navigation. This slipperiness poses a hindrance to their smooth movement towards their destinations. Furthermore, the adequacy of corridor lighting was considered. A significant portion of students, 75%, expressed dissatisfaction with the lighting in the corridors, stating that it is insufficient. Visually impaired students specifically mentioned that the lighting in the corridors is sometimes inadequate for their work. It is essential for the university to address these weaknesses and take necessary measures to

improve the facilities provided in the corridors, including the availability of seating, addressing slipperiness, and ensuring adequate lighting, thereby promoting accessibility and convenience for all students.

Furthermore, upon assessing the classrooms, it was evident that there are issues that need to be addressed. It is crucial for students with special needs to have appropriate facilities in the lecture halls to facilitate their studies effectively. This study investigated the availability of suitable seating facilities for students with special needs in the lecture halls. Unfortunately, 43% of the students reported the absence of suitable seating arrangements. Additionally, it was also examined whether the classrooms were situated on upper floors, requiring students to climb stairs. The findings revealed that 76% of students had classrooms located on the upper floors, resulting in difficulties and preventing them from attending certain lectures (Figure 5).

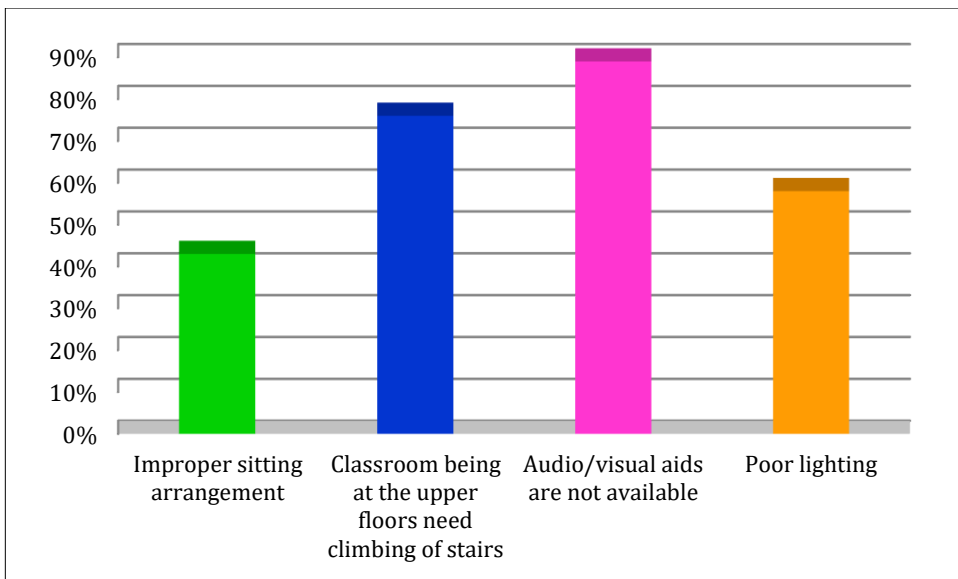


Figure 5: Examining Lecture Hall Problems through Response-Based Analysis (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Moreover, the availability of audio-visual aids in the lecture halls was investigated. Majority of students (89%), stated that audio-visual aids were not available, making it challenging to engage in their studies effectively. Similarly, when considering the adequacy of lighting in the lecture halls, it became apparent that the lighting conditions were not satisfactory for the visually impaired students. About 58% were of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the lighting conditions in the lecture halls. These findings highlight the need to improve the lecture hall facilities in the universities to better accommodate the students with special needs (Figure 5).

The study also explored the awareness and opinions of students regarding the university facilities available to them. Table 1 illustrates the locations of these facilities and the students' ability to locate them independently. They were asked whether the university provides selected facilities in a user-friendly manner for visually impaired and physical disability students. The findings indicated that 46% of students with special needs were aware of library facilities. However, 25% were unaware of such facilities, and 28% had no awareness, emphasizing the need for improved communication and awareness regarding available resources.

Table 1. Students' opinions on the physical facilities provided by the universities

Variable	STUDENTS' OPINIONS about the location and accessibility (%)				
	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
The campus infrastructure	6	10	33	37	14
Library	5	8	30	52	5
Cafeterias	4	11	39	27	19
Gym	9	21	41	20	9
Hostels	3	19	29	34	15
sanitary facilities	3	5	26	30	36
Classrooms	13	27	23	24	13
Average percentage (%)	6.14	14.42	31.57	32.00	15.85

(Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Results revealed that the visually impaired and physically disabled students lack adequate knowledge about the available facilities at their universities. Students expressed different opinions regarding the accessibility and user-friendliness of the provided facilities. These opinions can serve as valuable feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the services offered to these students by the universities. By considering and addressing their perspectives, improvements can be made to enhance the overall support and inclusivity for students with special needs.

Considering the friendliness of the infrastructure provided by the universities, 50% of the students perceive it as friendly to them. However, 33% had a neutral opinion. However, 16% of the students strongly expressed dissatisfaction with the user-friendliness of the facilities.

Regarding library facilities, approximately 57% of students deemed them friendly, while 13% reported the opposite. A significant proportion (30%) had a neutral opinion. When considering cafeteria facilities, 39% had a neutral opinion, while 46% found the service to be friendly. However, 15% felt that

the cafeteria service was not accommodating to their needs. Opinions about gymnasium facilities were mixed, with 41% remaining neutral and 30% perceiving them as unfriendly to students with special needs. For hostel facilities, 34% found the services friendly, 15% fully agreed, and 29% remained neutral. Sanitary facilities were considered user-friendly by 66% of students, but 26% claimed to have no knowledge of them. Regarding classrooms, 37% believed they were friendly, 40% disagreed, and 23% had a neutral stance.

Based on the analysis, it is evident that the universities have made efforts to provide necessary facilities for students with special needs, but challenges persist. Lack of awareness about available services and insufficient facilities have been identified as the main contributing factors. Bakari (2017), Preeti, and Kiran (2012) have also highlighted the negative impact of inadequate facilities on students. This study reinforces the notion that students with special needs suffer due to insufficient support. Insufficient awareness of available services among students further exacerbates the challenges they face. Similar findings have been reported by Majumder (2019), Sachs and Schreuer (2011), and Harun et al. (2019), who have emphasized the need to address these issues to enhance the academic performance of students with special needs.

Almost all Universities are not able to provide the minimum facilities required by the students with disabilities and those students do not have the freedom to choose the courses that they wish to follow. Instead, they are expected to follow courses as determined by the faculties/Departments which violates their right to higher education. Further, the provision of suitable teaching methods, learning material, devices and tools in accessible alternative formats which would help students with disabilities to engage in higher education are minimum. Also, physical accessible facilities available in every higher education institute are far below the

standards and not at all-sufficient. Hence, it can be pointed out that studying the facilities provided by the university for students with special needs and their satisfaction with it must be given prominence. Hence, it can be pointed out that studying the facilities provided by the university for students with special needs and their satisfaction with it must be given prominence.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

In focusing on the students' awareness of the services provided by the university, it was revealed that the students have a significant level of understanding of those services. However, overall, it was found that some students are not aware of the facilities. Accordingly, differently abled students need some degree of awareness on the available facilities in their universities. Normally, they gain awareness through their colleagues. Nevertheless, as students had to adjust to online education due to the Corona pandemic, they couldn't cope with their colleagues and the physical environment of the universities. This could be a main reason for the unawareness.

This study also focused on to the available services, whether they are user-friendly or not. There, many students were satisfied with the services as a whole, but in the same way, there was a neutral opinion among the students. Accordingly, it means that the students who were not satisfied and had a neutral opinion about the friendliness implies that the services should be improved to a more student-friendly manner.

It is especially important to pay attention to the classrooms. The primary objective of the university is to provide education to the students. For that, it is essential to create a suitable learning environment for all the students. Hence, it is necessary to arrange classrooms so that students with special needs can easily reach them. It is important that the classrooms need to be designed as wheelchair accessible. Also, the visually

impaired students should reach the classrooms without assistance. Thus, differently abled students can carry out their educational activities more independently.

Likewise, the university needs to pay attention to the cafeteria facilities, as emphasized by the students. They stated that they had to wait in queues for a long time when using the same cafeteria with other students. According to them, on the one hand, it is a good opportunity to mix with the normal society, but it is physically exhausting as well. As a result, it is important to allocate a separate counter for students with special needs to avoid waiting a long time to fulfill the requirements.

Similarly, with reference to hostel facilities, providing hostel facilities to all students with special needs during the study period is essential. In that case, providing room facilities for them mixed with other students is necessary as students with special needs will be able to get help from other students when needed. Also, attention must be given to design separate toilets at least at their hostels for the special needs' students, especially the students with moving disabilities. Furthermore, no transport facilities are provided for traveling within the university. Some physically disabled students as well as visually impaired students find it very problematic to move from one place to another. They mentioned that if there is a transport facility from hostels to the faculty, it would be helpful. Thus, as a whole, there are many changes that need to be addressed for the betterment of differently abled students. The government and the university administration should pay attention to provide additional facilities for the differently abled undergraduates to ensure an equal education in the university system.

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