

**A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' RECEPTIVITY
TO PEERS WITH DISABILITIES**

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A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' RECEPTIVITY TO PEERS WITH DISABILITIES

This qualitative study examined university students' receptivity to peers with disabilities at two universities in Perth, Western Australia (Edith Cowan University and the University of Notre Dame in Fremantle), and two universities in India (The University of Kolkata formerly Calcutta, and the University of Jadavpur). Data were collected by two methods: (1) written open-ended data (N= 201); and (2) two focus groups, one in Perth (N=10) and one in Kolkata (N=10). The two data sets were analysed using the Miles and Huberman approach. That is, the data were segmented and codified in the search for themes, clusters, patterns, abstractions and propositions.

Specifically, the research describes the feelings of responsibility and commitment to educational goals for peers with disabilities in an inclusive or general university environment, documents the barriers and difficulties, and the successes perceived by non-disabled students in an inclusively structured place of education or in integrated education programmes, and compares the data concerning university students' receptivity of peers with disabilities in India and Western Australia to illustrate a different perception of disabilities. The open-ended data analysis on one hand, showed that students lacked knowledge of factors such as awareness, opportunities, and information about disabilities, and information about how they peers with disabilities could be helped, and on the other, helped to establish links between attitudes and behaviours that may lead to better attitude and behaviour to peers with disabilities through more interactions between regular students and students with disabilities.

The main results from the focus group interviews indicate that university students have a positive receptivity to peers with disabilities. Although significant differences were indicated in the actual behaviours of regular students toward peers with disabilities, the attitudes were found to be, in general, positive in all the four universities in Western Australia and India, with students in India being more positive and supportive than students in Western Australia.

Background

The purpose of this qualitative study is to find out how regular university students feel towards their peers with disabilities and why they behave the way they do. So an understanding of attitudes and behaviour is important to this study and is perhaps the right step to begin the exploration.

What is attitude?

“Attitude has been defined in various ways over a long period of time” (Triandis, 1971). An attitude, as defined by Triandis (1971, p.2), is “an idea charged with emotion which predisposes a class of actions to a particular class of social situations”. Attitudes, involve what people think about, feel about and how they would like to behave toward an attitude object (Triandis (1971). Attitude is “a tendency to make an evaluation, reflected in three basic components: thinking, feeling, and acting” (Olson & Zanna, 1993, cited in Fernald, 1997, p. 561). Attitudes are states of mind by which people organize and categorize their information and feelings on various matters (Wrightsmann, 1977, cited in Scarr and Zanden, 1984). It is worthwhile to mention Allport’s definition of attitude. Allport (in Tajfel and Fraser, 1978, p.256) defines attitude as a “mental or neural state of readiness organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related”.

Some researchers have proposed three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Allport, 1935; and Triandis, 1971).The cognitive component involves the

idea that is generally some category used by humans in thinking. Affective means the emotion, which charges the idea. Persons who feel good or bad when they think about the category are said to have a positive or negative affect towards the member of this category. The behavioural component is a predisposition to action.

According to Deaux and Wrightsman (1988), attitude has three components: The cognitive is the commonest consisting of beliefs and ideas which a person has about another person or object, the affective component, which refers to a person's likes or dislikes of another person or an object, and the behavioural component which refers to the action tendencies of a person in regard to an attitude object and determines the actual action of the university students. Literature related to attitude also reveals that there is a close relationship between attitude and the other variables of the affective domain, namely beliefs, values and opinions Triandis, 1971).

From where do attitudes come?

Howard Johnston (no date) in his article Shaping Beliefs and Attitudes, lists some complex forces that give rise to attitudes. (i) Attitudes are learned; and what is learned can be unlearned and changed. (ii) Some attitudes are developed by copying those of people who are important to us, particularly parents or older siblings. These include preferences and convictions. (iii) Trying out an idea and being rewarded or punished for doing so often form our social beliefs.(iv) Some attitudes like those toward environment or politics are formed by just talking to them, perhaps by particularly persuasive communications [Source: Shaping Beliefs and Attitudes: A Handbook of Attitude Change Strategies, no date].

Formation and Change of Attitude

The literature associated with attitude formation shows that social psychologists have been concerned with the formation of people's attitudes about objects, groups, issues and events (Darley, Gulcksberg, Kamin & Kinchla, 1984). As identified and documented by Gleason (1991), Reber (1995), and Gerber (1997), attitudes towards people with disabilities can be formed or developed in the participants during childhood, at the age of 4 or 5 years. However, attitudes can be modified and further developed in both in older children and adults. The question often asked is how do these attitudes form, change or develop? As Fernald (1997, p.562) states "they arise initially through contacts with our parents, early teachers, and other adults. Later, peers and friends influence the various components." There are, at least, three processes by which these attitudes form (Fernald (1997, p.563): (1) Direct instruction and modelling where the child learns by following the example of another; (2) Classical and operant conditioning which is associated with good outcomes or positive consequences; and (3) Role of Cognition: Attitudes may develop or change through the way we think about things, without direct instruction, modelling or any significant conditioning. According to Triandis (1971, p.101) "Attitudes are learned" and they are acquired from other people. The sources of attitude change are a person, a group, a newspaper, a radio or an object of attitude. A child's attitudes are often influenced and shaped by parents or peer groups. Attitudes about people with disabilities are formed during early childhood and these, as research indicates, are negative (Gerber, 1977). This is because of cognitive immaturity. But, as Aboud (1988) observed, children should not be held accountable

for such attitudes for, as they gradually mature, their attitudes often change. However, this literature review includes an example of some adults demonstrating negative attitude toward those with disabilities. A research study conducted by Innes and Diamond (1999) reported the ways mothers talk with their pre-school children about physical disabilities and Down syndrome, and the relationships between their comments and the children's acceptance of peers with disabilities. Findings indicated that the children's comments about children with physical disabilities were positively related to teachers' ratings of social interactions with classmates with disabilities, while mothers' comments were negatively related to the same variable.

Attitude and behaviour links

Attitudes, as Triandis (1971) suggested, could be changed in various ways. Change needs to occur in all the attitude components. New information, pleasant and unpleasant, and even traumatic experiences with the attitude object can change the cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Triandis, 1971). "Attitudes influence behaviour, and behaviour influences attitudes" (Scarr & Zanden, 1984, p.316). A study of attitude shows that attitudes to some extent can explain or predict a person's behaviour and attitude implies that attitude influences a person's behaviour (Payne cited in Schibeci, 1985). However, Schibeci suggests that the relation between attitude and behaviour is not always consistent. Studies cited by Fernald (1996), also demonstrate inconsistencies in individual's cognitions. However, Skinner (1989, p.3) asserts "How people feel is as important as what they do". It is also believed that "Behaviour is often attributed to an initiating, originating, or creative act of

will” (Skinner, 1989, p.15), and as behaviour is often said to grow or develop (Skinner, 1989), overt behaviour is not always an indication of an attitude.

The foregoing literature review indicates that numerous studies related to attitudes and behaviours toward people with disabilities have been conducted in the past. Surveys and research have focused on steps to make campus climate more congenial for students with disabilities, and to improve parents’, educators’, and peers’ attitudes and behaviours towards those with special needs. Opportunities are being provided to usher students with disabilities into regular classrooms and higher education. However, there seems to be a lack of studies of attitudes and behaviours of university students toward peers with disabilities. University-based issues on disability have been mostly dealt with in American or British contexts. Studies indicate that similar literature in the Australian context is inadequate.

Receptivity to students with disabilities

There seems to be a lack of research, in India, from the regular students’ perspective, whether at school, college or university level, and there were no studies involving the creation of a unidimensional scale of regular students’ receptivity of peers with disabilities. The present study is, thus, expected to provide critical missing information from prior survey studies, to generate new knowledge, producing a new scale of Receptivity of Peers with Disabilities in which the person measures and item ‘difficulties’ are calibrated on the same scale, and helping administrators to better cater for students with disabilities. Studies exploring personal and societal attitudes and behaviours toward students with disabilities show that, in spite of the changing policies promoting equal

opportunities for students with disabilities, peer attitudes and behaviours toward those with disabilities, still need to improve. Regular, non-disabled university students certainly need to be motivated into accepting peers who have special needs. This is possible with student awareness and understanding of disabilities, and also appropriate behaviour toward individuals with disabilities on the university campus.

Just as government and university policies and legislation on disability in Western Australia seek to bring about change, provide people equal opportunities to realise their individual capabilities and potentials, through full participation in social and university activities, the Government of India has also announced a plan to make education disabled-friendly by 2020 and ‘to make mainstream education not just available but accessible, affordable and appropriate for students with disabilities’...(Singh, 2001). However, it is not just enough to give admission to students with disabilities. It is also important to provide necessary facilities for them in the colleges so that they are part of the mainstream in the true sense of the word. Recent reports show that the Government of India is providing scholarships to students with disabilities to pursue studies at post school level.

Findings indicate that regular university students often lack motivation and experience to establish interpersonal relationships with peers with disabilities (Biswas, 2002). The study also indicates that the general attitudes of university students toward peers with disabilities are positive, but it is hard for many to translate their attitudes into actual behaviour. This study is important from the point of view of students with disability who rarely need special treatment. What they need is our understanding, fair treatment, a positive approach to their problems, receptivity and acceptance. This study is important for

it examines perspectives on disability, investigates the possibility of changes through interactions between disability-related legislation and educational programs, social and university policies, and establishes links between attitudes and behaviours that may lead to better receptivity and better acceptance of peers with disability at university.

Response to Disability

Current research in Australia indicates that the mainstreaming of secondary school with disabilities into the regular classes (now called inclusion) has a significant effect on these students and helps them to develop better self-esteem, social understanding and interpersonal relationships (Noland, McLaughlin, Howard & Sweeny, 1993). Special provisions are determined for students with severe physical or sensory difficulties, and for students who have a specific learning difficulty, to assist them to access and complete the course being undertaken on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers in Western Australia. Available literature shows that there had been surveys focusing on integration, introducing steps to improve the campus climate for students, and promoting classroom-awareness in high schools. Kemp (2003) and Ward, Center and Bochner (1994) investigated the possibilities of integrating children with disabilities into regular classrooms. A search of the literature found no other related studies with Western Australian data. However, literature shows that research on attitude towards students with disabilities and studies on integration in schools were conducted by Gannon and MacLean (1996). Forlin, 1997), Darcy and Daruwalla (1999), Tait and Purdie (2000), who focused on integration, introducing steps to improve the campus climate for students, and promoting classroom-awareness in high schools.

The Indian scenario is somewhat different. It has been part of India's cultural heritage to help the poor, the aged and those with disabilities. However, it was only half a century ago that it was understood that people with disability conditions had potential and talent which needed to be understood, realized and promoted. Of late, there is a realization that people with disabilities are capable of living independently and that they can be useful contributors to society (Saravanabhavan & Saravanabhavan, 2001). As understanding attitudes toward people with disabilities is an important necessity to build an effective educational system and an integrated society (Saravanabhavan & Saravanabhavan, 2001), more and more articles on the acceptance of disability have been published, and studies had been undertaken by researchers in India. Studies focused on educational and vocational training, social integration of the visually impaired, and rehabilitation of children with disabilities particularly the visually impaired were conducted. Singh (2001), in his book 'Enabling the Differently Able', discussed various kinds of disabilities, and social problems faced by those with disabilities.

As the research shows there is a lack of similar or related studies in Australia and India.

Data collection methods.

Types of tools

The qualitative data was collected via (a) open-ended question and (b) focus groups. It has been already mentioned that attitude plays a very significant role in education, for it is linked with behaviour, and it influences behaviour, but not

necessarily in a consistent way. Attitudes need to be analysed for a better understanding of behaviours. This means a technique is required to obtain proper findings.

The foregoing literature review indicates that numerous studies related to attitudes and behaviours toward people with disabilities have been conducted in the past. Surveys and research have focused on steps to make campus climate more congenial for students with disabilities, and to improve parents', educators', and peers' attitudes and behaviours towards those with special needs. Opportunities are being provided to usher students with disabilities into regular classrooms and higher education. However, there seems to be a lack of studies of attitudes and behaviours of university students toward peers with disabilities. University-based issues on disability have been mostly dealt with in American or British contexts. Studies indicate that similar literature in the Australian and Indian contexts is inadequate.

Aims

The study aimed at (i) identifying university students' receptivity of peers with disabilities based on six aspects- (i) Academic (Special and Alternative Programs), (ii) Interactive (Inclusive Courses and Interaction and Improvement of Self-image), (iii) Social (Promote Relationships through Recreational Programs and Recognition of Achievements), (iv) Personal (Involvement), (v) Professional (Integrated workforce) and (vi) Supportive (Special University Policies and Procedures); and (ii) To design an interview to gather information about university students' receptivity of peers with disabilities based on six supporting aspects.

Significance and Relevance

The present study is significant because the diversity in university students' attitudes and behaviours toward disabilities in the two countries may help to improve the understanding of disabilities. It is also expected to open new avenues for further research in education related to receptivity of disabilities in peers in universities. It will serve as an extension to the study of receptivity of peers with disabilities in higher study levels with a view to examining aspects of university students' attitudes and behaviours toward disabilities on campus and in classrooms. The present study is important because it is designed to yield new information about university students and their behaviours towards disabled peers, and their receptivity of them. The study could provide information that may help university administrations cater to the needs of the students with disabilities in a better way. Specifically, the research is expected (a) to describe feelings of responsibility and commitment to educational goals for peers with disabilities in an inclusive or general university environment, (b) to document the barriers and difficulties, and the successes perceived by non-disabled students in an inclusively structured place of education or in integrated education programmes, (c) to isolate the data concerning university students' receptivity of peers with disabilities in India to illustrate a different perception of disabilities.

The significance of the study was that the outcomes showed that there is a lack of knowledge about disabilities among university students. It identified regular university students' understanding of disabilities and of the needs of their peers with disabilities. The study will benefit all students for it could lead to improvements in universities' services, and decrease discrimination. The present study is expected to be

useful for policy-makers, administrators and lecturers at the universities in Perth, for I believe it will provide new knowledge about student interaction on the campus and in lecture theatres, and could lead to improvements in the educational environment for individuals with disabilities.

Method

Permission was obtained from the University Ethics Committee, Heads of Schools and lecturers of all the four universities concerned, to conduct a survey which involved a questionnaire with an open-ended question, and later a structured interview, based on the aspects which were addressed in the questionnaire. Interviews and focus groups were conducted on appropriate days and time as per the availability of students.

Out of a sample of almost 996 regular university students who volunteered to complete the survey questionnaire, 201 pre-service teaching students, and 4th and 5th Year students of Education across four universities in Western Australia and India participated in the qualitative study. Participation was voluntary, and anonymous to ensure the confidentiality of the subjects. Subjects included both male and female students between the age of 20 and 30 years from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, reflecting ethnic make-up and varying social and religious beliefs.

Results

. Quantitative analysis of the 996 questionnaires was performed using the Rasch Unidimensional Measurement Model computer program RUMM (Andrich, Sheridan & Luo, 2005). However, there was the need of a qualitative analysis to probe further by requesting the university students to provide more information about their attitudes and

behaviour regarding peers with disabilities. The data source was one open-ended question which was voluntarily and anonymously answered at the end of the questionnaire- *Are there any other comments that you would like to make about the issue of university students' receptivity to peers with disabilities?* This question gave the respondents the chance to provide commentary on any issues that were important to them and which were not already canvassed. The researcher mentioned this verbally at the administration of the questionnaire and 201 students took the opportunity to provide further comments.

The study presents written responses from the questionnaire, summarised results in forms of tables, and propositions abstracted from the data. The data collected were not statistical but descriptive. An appropriate code using abbreviations and numbers has been devised to enable an audit trail. Codes are noted at the end of quotes to trail comments at the end of the survey questionnaire. Comments are coded according to the following format: Name of university and respondent number. For example, ecu: means Edith Cowan University; respondent 1; und means the University of Notre Dame; ju means Jadavpur University; and cu means the University of Calcutta (called Kolkata in 2006). P= Perth, K=Kolkata. Responses are also identified by the line numbers.

Process of Analysis

Open-ended Question

This section reports the findings on the written responses of students at the end of the questionnaire. It should be noted that the absence of favourable comments on a particular

aspect does not reflect that this is not an area of best outcome. Rather, students are aware of their limited experience, and seemed to prefer to focus on areas in need of improvement.

201 provided further comments on issues important to them. Table 1 represents a summary of the students who volunteered to provide feed-back.

Table 1:

Summary of number of responses received for the open-ended question

University	No. of students	No. of responses	Percentage
1. Edith Cowan University	208	86	41.3%
2. University of Notre Dame	150	40	26.7%
3. University of Calcutta	344	24	7.0%
4. Jadavpur University	294	51	17.3%
TOTAL	996	201	20.2%

According to Table1, 20.2 % of the total student sample responded to the question at the end of the questionnaire- *Are there any other comments that you would like to make?* However, it was meant not only to be answered as a question, but also to provide feedback, and an understanding of university students' approach towards peers with disabilities and their personal reflections, to help throw light on the present study. Open comments were invited to gain access to student perceptions of their receptivity to peers with disabilities and also to review student concerns for peers with disabilities. The observations from the feedback and what factors influenced the university students' behaviours towards peers with disabilities are presented here. The most common factors were identified as categories and grouped into clusters by nature of their content. Responses refer to single or multiple factors. The factors address aspects related to disability within the university setting.

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Student responses also reflect social and cultural beliefs, personal experience, and issues related to the factors provided further information not provided in the main part of the questionnaire.

The open-ended question data from the returned surveys were collected and typed under separate headings. They were closely examined, analysed and put into separate categories and coded. Comments from each of the four universities were analysed separately and responses were coded and put into categories. As analysis progressed in each university, more factors were identified and the number of categories increased. During the process of analysis, similar quotes were linked and categories were merged due to repetitions. Problems that arose during the process of comparing the quotes within a category were (a) the absence of clarity (b) contradictory statements, and (c) irrelevant comments. Such responses were either edited or discarded.

There was a reasonable consensus in the comments of students from all four universities and similar responses were also identified within and across the four universities. For example, there were some comments along the line that *I would do more to be involved with students if I had the extra time and the university should do more to alert us students to problems of students with disabilities*. Such similar expressions and prevalent items and key phrases such as *opportunity*, *personal involvement* and *awareness* were helpful in identifying the main factors which influence university students' attitudes and behaviours towards peers with disabilities. Three main features emerged from this analysis:

1. Common factors influencing receptivity of peers with disabilities;
2. University students' knowledge of disability gained through experiences outside university; and
3. Opinions, suggestions and recommendations, related to receptivity to peers with disabilities at university.

Propositions

The written data clearly shows that most regular students are positively receptive to students with disabilities, and would readily offer support to students with disabilities if not confronted with serious issues which hinder communications between regular students and those with disabilities. According to the analysis of the question data, students' responses to the question seemed to have been influenced by ten major factors which are summarised in Table: 2.

Table 2.

Summary of frequently cited responses by propositions and university_

Summarised Propositions	University			
	ECU	UND	CU	JU
Lack of Awareness of those with disabilities.	3	2	1	0
Lack of Information and Knowledge of Disability.	10	3	1	6
Lack of Communication with pwd.	36	12	2	2
Busy schedule / No time for others.	9	3	1	1
Reactions from Peers with Disabilities.	1	1	1	1
Social and Cultural Beliefs/ Barriers.	4	1	4	3
Identification of persons with disabilities.	5	5	0	1
Resentment/Animosity	4	3	0	1
Little Opportunity to interact with pwd.	10	3	8	21
New findings / Suggestions	5	7	6	15
	n = 86	n = 40	n =24	n =51

Note

1. ECU represents Edith Cowan University
2. UND represents University of Notre Dame
3. CU stands for University of Calcutta (Kolkata)
4. JU means Jadavpur University
5. pwd means Peers with Disabilities

A number of propositions that were abstracted from the qualitative data now presented. The propositions address the ten factors and the issues which emerge in the process.

Proposition One

Some regular students felt that one of the factors that influenced their attitude toward people and peers with disabilities was lack of awareness of those with disabilities.

A limited number of students who self-reported positive receptivity to peers with disabilities wrote that they could translate their attitudes to actual behaviour better only if they were aware of any peers with disabilities. A few comments are listed.

...awareness does not occur (ecu: 021).

This survey has introduced me to this issue and made me more aware... (ecu: 154).

There are no disabled students I am aware of (sic) & in contact with at this university (ju: 081).

Some regular students are receptive to students with disabilities and would willingly interact with them if social networks at university promoted advertisements in regard to helping students with disabilities to develop companionship, and new and stronger friendships. Examples of students' comments are:

I'm not aware of any disability support group over campus (sic) (ecu: 168).

The reality is being an external student who is working and engaged in online study, there's little or no interaction or opportunity to follow through on what should be the ideal (ecu: 189).

Only aware of 1 or 2 people with disabilities. Have had no contact really...Not aware any programs were available. Not familiar with what to do really (ecu:).137

Some students commented that lack of awareness of disability hinders direct contact with peers with disabilities. It appeared that receptivity to peers with disability might increase if students were given the opportunity to interact more with fellow-students who receive special academic services from the university. Thus a better outcome might be possible with adequate information about disabilities from university administrators and this was directly commented upon, as described in the proposition two.

Proposition Two

Most students were positively receptive to students with disabilities but some said that their university did not publicise that students with disabilities needed help or..... information about how they could be helped by regular students, so they did not do anything to help students with disabilities.

Students who consider lack of information on disability as a factor that influences receptivity to peers with disabilities at university and who had self-reported positive attitudes to receptivity to peers with disabilities commented on this. Students are positively receptive to peers with disabilities but found little or no information about disabilities at university and had few opportunities to behave the way they feel, and hence they couldn't do much to help improve the status of their peers with disabilities.

I would like to support and encourage the disabled person (sic) for the university education but actually I don't have the opportunity to help them due to lack of appropriate infra-structure in India (ju: 050).

...I would say that it could have been better if a little information was given to the class ... (ju: 012).

If I was asked to be a mentor or assist in any of the programs mentioned in this survey then I would definitely consider it. However, most students are not informed and our help doesn't seem wanted (ecu: 176).

There is not enough advertisement or awareness in the uni (sic) that we as students can do to help and assist peers with disabilities to succeed at uni. Not enough is known Awareness does not occur (sic) (ecu: 021).

... People should be made more aware that there are support groups & clubs that promote helping peers with disabilities...I was unaware that there were support groups... (und: 128).

Proposition Three

Some students perceived that communicating with peers with disabilities would be enriching and rewarding. However, few regular students spent any time discussing with peers and friends how they could help students with disabilities. It is self-interest rather than peers with disabilities that is prioritised.

As I don't have any disabled people (sic) in the close vicinity, I seem to ignore the requirements. If I knew a disabled student (sic) my efforts would increase... (ecu: 203).

Most of my real behaviour at university is valued –it is because I am not much in contact with the peers at the university having some disabilities. It was only at my master's level I could show my actual behaviour (cu: 014).

As a student myself I would definitely like to help & assist in their betterment in my own little ways; but I very rarely come across any such opportunity (ju:111).

If I come across physicaly chalange (sic) students I believe like to help them (sic) [ju: 028).

Some students reflected on the issue and students also felt that they would better collaborate with peers with disabilities if they came into direct contact with them. Examples of responses categorised in this area are given below.

I like to do many of these activities but I hardly get any chance to do them (ju: 008).

At the university level we get hardly get an opportunity to interact with this kind of disabled students (sic) (ju: 013).

In Calcutta University we don't have much scope of volunteering in such type of group activities, social outreach to such disabled persons, (sic) so even if we wish to do such things, we are unable to do (sic) (cu: 094).

Proposition Four

Some regular students showed support for students with disabilities but their own lives were busy with many activities (work, study, social, family, sport) and they felt that they didn't have enough time to help students with disabilities.

Students reflected on a busy schedule which was meant for personal well-being or time spent for academic excellence in competitive situations and said that they just didn't have time to fit any other activities into their schedule.

I have not been able to serve the disabled (sic) due to my busy schedule (ju: 018).

Students don't have time to do a lot of volunteering. ... (ju: 016).

I think without question that students with disabilities should be given every possible opportunity to succeed in all areas of life. It is difficult, however, to ask university students to give up their time (if they have demanding courses) to help others when they barely have time for themselves (ju: 005).

In spite of being supportive to peers with disabilities, some students find it challenging and stressful to maintain satisfactory performance at university, and then find time to help peers with disabilities.

I think that a lot of these things should be done. It's just a matter of whether people have the time, comfort level etc to help (ju: 013).

Time. Having the time can be a hard part (ecu: 164).

As a student myself lack of time to commit myself in activities related to the disabled is highly regretted (ecu: 194).

Some regular students gave priority to their own lives aiming to improve self- image through achievements at university rather than making contributions to improve the academic status of a peer with disabilities.

Do not know many people with disabilities at university. Also too concerned with yourself at uni to contribute to helping disabled (sic) (und: 014).

I'm also very involved with my own studies and do not have interest in other university activities (ecu: 022).

Proposition Five

Some regular students were not biased against peers with disabilities, but they felt that students with disabilities wanted to be treated just like regular students and so they did not offer much in the way of help.

Students found their freedom to offer help to peers with disabilities rather restricted when students with disabilities reacted adversely and refused to accept any assistance from regular students. Students who experienced rejection from peers with disabilities wrote about this in the following way.

I don't think disabled people (sic) should have too much advantage. I don't think they like to be singled out (ecu: 139).

Doesn't it seem like singling them out & making them aware of your awareness of disability? (ju: 120).

Proposition Six

Some students were positively receptive to peers with disabilities studying at university but they kept their views to themselves owing to social or cultural beliefs which restricted them from going out of their way to help the students with disabilities.

Some university students wished to help others with disabilities, offering academic assistance. However, they refrained from doing so due to social taboos and cultural beliefs.

Even the attitude of the common people towards them doesn't give them the right friendly feeling. Either they are considered as a burden or they are being given sympathy. But never are they considered at par with others (ju: 033).

I wish to do so many things for my disabled peers, (sic) but I don't think I can do anything to help them (und: 107).

I feel that I should help them, but there are limitations obvious.(sic) I want to help them overcome their difficulties (und: 109).

I would like to do and interested maximum, (sic) I try to do in many way I am permitted, but sometime and some cases I am only an on-looker, can't do anything due to certain rules (sic)(und: 049).

Some regular students don't seem to have a helping attitude in regard to learning and helping students with disabilities achieve. They don't include them in their circle of friends with whom they discuss their learning difficulties. Hence, some responses comprised the issue of individual effort and some students who would not go out of their way to influence others or to help them achieve academically.

On an individual basis I would go out of my way to help students with disabilities, but I really can't say I could force or convince my peers to do the same.... (ju: 120).

Students generally believed that receptivity to peers with disabilities does not create stress but improves the learning environment. It builds attributes of support, collaboration and understanding which are conducive to learning.

...There's one person in our course with special needs who is in a wheel-chair but is very independent and has lots of friends. I am very supportive of her... (ecu: 206).

Proposition Seven

Some regular students found it hard to identify students with disabilities particularly when the disability was not physical or visible.

Some students said that it was difficult to identify peers with disabilities that were not physical or visible. They expressed their willingness to be supportive to students with special needs but regretted their inability to do so without knowledge of disabilities like intellectual conditions.

...It is often difficult or impossible to identify them [peers with disabilities], so you can't help them (und: 087).

It can be difficult to help these people as some disabilities are hard to identify if it is not brought to our attention (ecu: 17).

It was suggested by some students that the university could organise programs to help regular students identify certain disabilities and this could be most beneficial to improve interaction between regular students with peers with special needs.

The uni could possible (sic) bring in speakers with disabilities to speak to students. (Especially those who got their disabilities via accident) (ecu: 183).

Proposition Eight

Some regular students think that students with disabilities should be treated in exactly the same way as regular students at university and so they don't offer or expect to give them help and support.

A very prominent issue of resentment and animosity was revealed by comments which directly communicated a negative attitude towards peers with disabilities gaining what is perceived to be an unfair advantage. Some regular students say that they are not biased against students with disabilities studying at university, but singling them out seems as though they are getting special treatment.

It is mentioned they (peers with disabilities) should be seen as equal yet it sounds like special treatment is wanted. E.g. be friends (und: 041).

I say why not, if they are capable. As long as they can speak, read & write they are like people without disabilities (und: 038).

Top regular students, who spend time self-regulating their own learning in order to achieve highly, do not want to involve students with disabilities who they consider will disadvantage them, not help them.

...In India we have a quota system for the disabled. Sometimes I feel resentful of the fact that students with merit lose out on seats while students with disabilities get places at universities though poor in achievements (ju: 120).

Some regular students have their own circle of friends and they do not want students with disabilities intruding in their life. Some regular students are not receptive to students with disabilities because they believe that they obtain advantages and concessions in assessment, examination times, and access to lecturers that are not fair.

I don't think any special considerations should be made just because someone is learning impaired. If they choose to participate in the same course as those perhaps more competent then they should be subject to exactly the same expectation and marking. As for mobility impaired students I do agree there should be some form of extra program. However, in terms of academia, I believe all students should be subject the same system, be it in university, and there should be no inequality (sic). We all have to work hard regardless of our ability level (ecu: 013).

Proposition Nine

Many regular students were supportive of students with disabilities and they said that they would be happy to help them if they were given the opportunities by universities.

Students who reflected on the issue of little opportunity at university reported it as one of the many factors which influence regular students' receptivity to peers with disabilities at universities. They considered that helping their peers with disabilities and getting involved with them would be beneficial and expressed positive feelings towards students with disabilities. Students have expressed interest in supporting peers with disabilities if only they get the opportunity. Some of them regretted their inability to go out and be of help.

No opportunities to help out with disabled students etc now (und: 020).

Would like to help if given the opportunities by university (und: 02).

I have never found suitable opportunity to help the disabled but given opportunity I would like to do something for them and help them to come forward (ju: 017).

I would like to support and encourage the disabled person for the university education but actually I don't have the opportunity to help them due to lack of appropriate infra-structure in India (ju: 050).

Students with experience outside the university made further observations of the issue of no opportunity to interact with peers at university in the following way:

Before being accepted into university this year, I had the pleasure of working as a teacher Asst with special needs students. I value them as members of society & what they contribute. I have not had the opportunity to interact with students with disabilities yet this year though (ecu: 148).

Proposition Ten

Some students made further observations with their responses reflecting on possibilities to reach out to students with disabilities in other countries strongly implying on further promotion and development of receptivity towards peers with disabilities.

This new finding adds an extra dimension to the factors and a new direction to receptivity to university students with disabilities. However, regular university students who wished to be supportive implied that though they were aware of the needs they would have to rely on other sources for help.

I hope... this as (sic) an awareness to institutions, government and organisations to help in places like Sudan m Iraq and Afghanistan (ecu: 138).

Summary

In their responses, the respondents communicated or implied what they believed or perceived about their attitudes and behaviours toward peers with disabilities and reflected on the factors that hinder their receptivity and their actual actions at university

towards the disadvantaged peers. The major findings have already been presented in the foregoing sections of this paper.

DATA ANALYSIS: FOCUS GROUPS

This paper also describes collection and processing of the data from the focus groups, and then reports the analysis of the interview data. It presents the findings of the focus groups data, and tells the reader that university students, whether in Western Australia or India, have particular issues which are common to all. The study also addresses the relevance of focus groups which were formed to provide opportunities for the participants in the research survey to meet, answer questions that are relevant to receptivity to peers with disabilities, and discuss issues related to students' attitudes and behaviours toward disabilities. Propositions about student receptivity to peers with disabilities which were abstracted from the data are then presented.

Focus Groups: Importance and Relevance of Interview Data

The Focus Group interviews were organised to seek further information that could not be gained from the Rasch analysis, such as identifying university students' perceptions regarding disability, and differences in perspectives between groups of students in different countries. The researcher tried to understand why positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities could not be translated into behaviours or real action at university, to investigate the role of the family, social backgrounds and cultures in the formation of attitudes and behaviours of university students, and also to identify factors which emerged from the responses to the interview questions.

Initially, the researcher had considered selection of four groups comprising regular Education students (N=40). It was decided that ten students from each of the four universities, two in Perth and two in Calcutta (Kolkata), would be involved in the interview schedule. However, due to the pressure of examination student response to participation in the focus group was not as spontaneous as in the questionnaire survey. A small number of students gave their informed consent, and after reconsideration, the researcher decided on involving twenty information-rich participants who, had different levels of knowledge related to the issue (Kruger and Casey, 2000). The students were selected to structure the four focus groups (N= 5 each university). The groups comprised of second, third and fourth year students enrolled in courses other than Education, such as Business Administration, Professional Accounting and Human Resources. The investigator was interested in perceptions of students with certain demographic characteristics (Kruger and Casey, 2000), which involves cultural norms and differences which would help get more information on the study. Q. 4, for example, *What will you do if a family member with a disability is not treated with respect?* seemed to work well with students in India due to their family characteristics. Much data was generated by the responses as it was easier for the Focus Groups in India to share their experiences and opinions with others who had something common in them. On the other hand, students in Western Australia who are, comparatively, more familiar with disability-related programs were more comfortable discussing and sharing their views on Question 6, for example, *What do you think about the disability-related policies and legislation that provide special services to your peers with disabilities?*

The researcher was sensitive to the spoken language of students in the Universities of Calcutta and Jadavpur. The local language (Bengali) was substituted for English to make certain individuals feel comfortable in talking. Notes and audiotape were then translated back to English by researcher.

The interviews involved semi-structured and open-ended questions, responses for which would yield valuable information. Two types of subjects with different cultural or family backgrounds were to participate in the focus group, and so it was important that questions were appropriately constructed. Responses were expected to generate data about the attitude and behaviour of university students from four universities which have been influenced by different factors, such as prior experiences, knowledge of disabilities and programs, willingness to help and so on.

Previous Knowledge

Prior to the interviews, the researcher had some idea about what university students might know or believe about disabilities. Having assumed the range of responses on disability, it was possible to design an interview instrument consisting of semi-structured questions that allowed open-ended responses. Some questions aimed at uncovering factors that influenced university students' attitudes and behaviours toward their peers with disabilities, students' knowledge of university policies and special programs which benefited students with physical and intellectual difficulties. The questions topics included knowledge and beliefs about disabilities and about people with disabilities.

Data Collection

The same set of questions was used as ‘starters’ for focus groups in universities in Western Australia as well as in India, but the students from the different countries were allowed and expected to spend different amounts of time answering different questions.

The coding of qualitative data entails assigning unique labels to text passages that contain references to specific categories of information (Bernard 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994; Punch, 1998). For this study, it was necessary to develop and assign codes that corresponded to respondents and responses. The following format was devised for audit trail: P: R1/2/iii/I Perth is represented by P (likewise Kolkata is represented by K), first respondent is identified as R1, 2 denotes response to Question 2 and iii represents transcript page number.

The aspects of self-image and social relationships were highlighted. It was suggested that the attitudes and behaviours of peers with disabilities should also be considered as it is crucial when it comes to interaction with some of them. This issue, as the feedback indicated, is the cause of the low response to real behaviour at university. The issues and outcomes, which were discussed, were consistent with the questionnaire. Responses indicated that inadequate knowledge of disabilities, difficulties in identifying peers with disabilities, lack of time and sometimes the attitudes of those with disabilities prevent regular university students from putting into action what they really believe in and are capable of doing.

Data Analysis and Initial Findings

The data were rich with information from those respondents who had direct contact with people with disabilities at universities and sometimes in the family. Although discussions about each question varied, they reported three common factors: (1) Common reaction towards those with disabilities which in general was positive. (2) Cultural or family characteristics influencing receptivity to and acceptance of disability; and (3) Limited knowledge and understanding of disability, influencing behaviour towards peers with disabilities at universities. It is important to mention here that the levels of receptivity to peers with disabilities are different at each university depending on the different factors reported by the students. Findings show that there were three levels of student receptivity to peers with disabilities in this study. A summary of the initial findings on the factors are presented here.

A common reaction towards those with disabilities, which in general was positive, was demonstrated by most of the students across the four universities. The general positive reaction was reported in four clusters of sources of influence by most interviewees:

- (a) experiences and involvement with people with disabilities prior to enrolment at university (environment: home, educational institutions, public places and transport);
- (b) media: reports, talks;
- (c) interest in the issue leading to enrolment / involvement in disability programs;
- (d) empathy towards those in need of support.

The findings which are presented below are closely related to the sources listed above. It is important to identify the aspects which address the initial findings. The focus groups responses and comments demonstrated participants' reflections of observations and concerns related to receptivity to peers with disabilities. The findings helped to identify how focus groups revisit opinions and beliefs which were presented in two different sessions. The researcher has reported the initial findings in categories according to the regular students' levels of receptivity to peers with disabilities at universities across Western Australia and India. The levels of receptivity reported in this chapter are high, medium and low.

Category 1 (High level of receptivity)

This category of students has a positive approach and a high level of receptivity to people and peers with disabilities. A positive approach, as their responses reflect, has been influenced by:

In my family (sic), my mother is the one who has multiple disabilities caused by a severe attack of schizophrenia (K: R1/1/ iii) [Translated from Bengali].

I have a six-year old autistic nephew who needs our love and understanding...all of us have to know more about autism through reports and talks to understand him better (K: R2/ 1/iii).

We have a friend in BEd (Bachelor of Education), who is blind, and we do our best to make him comfortable; discussing lecture-notes, lesson-plans... (K: R1&R5/1/ii). [Translated from Bengali].

A high level of receptivity was reported by regular university students having adequate information about disability and people with disabilities, and the opportunity to

interact with either children, young people or the aged with special needs. The following quotes illustrate reflections of respondents who advanced their learning through direct involvement, through participation and experiences as teachers of those with disabilities, their ability to communicate effectively with people with disabilities, and their high level of receptivity to anyone with a disability.

Before being accepted into university this year, I had the pleasure of working as a teacher Assistant with special needs students. I value them as members of society and what they contribute. I have not had the opportunity to interact with students with disabilities yet this year though (P: R1/1 /ii).

...As my mother's carer I had to get much information on schizophrenia to understand her difficulties and act accordingly (K: R1/ 1/iii).

The above quotes illustrate the knowledge of students with high levels of receptivity who had experience of people with disabilities outside the universities. Those students with experience outside the university made the following observations of the issue of no opportunity to interact with peers at university in the following way.

..I have not had the opportunity to interact with students with disabilities yet this year though (P: R1/1 /ii).

At the university level we get hardly get an opportunity to interact with this kind of disabled students (sic) (K: / R2/ 2 / iv).

There's one person in our course with special needs who is in a wheel-chair but is very independent and has lots of friends. I am very supportive of her... (P: R4/ 2 /iii).

Some students with a positive approach and high level of receptivity to peers with disabilities, and who had been voluntarily, developing materials in response to the needs of people with disabilities, expressed uncertainty in contributing to the university's disability needs saying:

On an individual basis I would go out of my way to help students with disabilities, but I really can't say I could force or convince my peers to do the same...that's frustrating (P: R4/ 2 /iii).

With my past experiences with people with disabilities and sufficient knowledge of the facilities offered to them I would like to help if given the opportunities by university (K: / R2/ 2 / iv).

I would like to support and encourage the disabled person for the university education (sic)but actually I don't have the opportunity to help them due to lack of appropriate infra-structure in India (K: R2/ 2 / iv).

Category 2 (Medium level of receptivity)

Some responses reported on a second category of students who demonstrated a medium receptivity to peers with disabilities. The level of their approach had been affected by two factors: (i) lack of opportunities to interact with peers with disabilities at university, and (ii) lack of information on how to behave with peers with disabilities at university. Students in this category expressed an inability and a lack of confidence to interact with peers who need support.

I have not had the opportunity to interact personally with disabled peers at the university (P: R5/ 2/iv).

In Calcutta University we don't have much scope of volunteering in ...social outreach to such disable persons, so even if we wish to do such things, we are unable to do (K:R4/2/iii).

I actually have very little scope to do what I think I should for my peers with disabilities. I sometime feel shy... nervous... as I don't know how to help. So I end up sympathising myself (K: R3/2/iv).

Category 3 (Low level of receptivity)

The focus groups reported a small group of students who demonstrated a very low level of receptivity to peers with disabilities firstly, due to lack of knowledge about disability and people with disabilities.

Do not know many people with disabilities at university (P: R4/ 2 /iii).

Some students did not express positive thoughts or empathy towards peers with special needs. On the contrary they demonstrated antagonistic feelings which were probably stimulated by a sense of discrimination, personal interest and ambition for a bright career.

It is mentioned they (peers with disabilities) should be seen as equal yet it sounds like special treatment is wanted. E.g. be friends (P: R4/ 2 /iii).

I'm also very involved with my own studies and do not have interest in other university activities ((P: R4/ 4 /vii).

... too concerned with myself at uni to contribute to helping disabled (sic) (P: R2/ 4 /vii).

There was anger expressed by some respondents over the special services offered to students with disabilities. They were not happy with the university policies and special procedures designed to benefit students with physical disabilities, in particular.

I say why not, if they are capable. As long as they can speak, read and write, they are like people without disabilities (P: R2/ 5/ viii).

...In India we have a quota system for the disabled. Sometimes I feel resentful of the fact thatstudents with disabilities get places at universities though poor in achievements (K: R2/4/viii).

There were some students who appreciated the benefits of services for their peers with disabilities, but did not advocate for those who had the mental ability to cope with the same course as their regular counterparts.

...As for mobility impaired students I do agree there should be some form of extra program. However, in terms of academia, I believe all students should be subject to the same system, be it in university, and there should be no inequality. We all have to work hard regardless of our ability level (P: R3/4/viii).

I don't think any special considerations should be made just because someone is mobility impaired. If they choose to participate in the same course as those perhaps more competent then they should be subject to exactly the same expectation and marking (K:R2/4/viii).

Commentary on the Starting Questions

The focus groups can be said to have established reliable and trustworthy findings across different groups in two different countries as the results demonstrate similarities among the students concerning reflections of observations and concerns related to receptivity to peers with disabilities. A close study of the data led to the following findings extracted from the responses, question by question, which would seem to apply to the universities in both Perth and Australia.

Question One

During discussion of the first question, *What do you understand by disability? Name a few disabilities*, four out of ten interviewees considered that it was important to receive updated information on disabilities, and they reported similar views. Their

responses are brief and indicate uncertainty of what they have to report. The following quotes illustrate this point.

It is inability to perform something normally, such as blindness (sic) (P: R1/1/i);

Mobility problem... preventing my grandfather to move about (sic) (K: R3/1/iv);

- Many students considered that they have a better understanding of disability for having family members who have disabilities. They also found themselves in a better position to interact with other people with disabilities provided that they get the right information about they felt would help them identify better different kinds of disabilities.
-
- *Question Two*
- During discussion about the second question, *Have you come across people with*
- *disabilities? Where?* most of the students considered it easier to report physical disabilities, such as paraplegia, without any difficulty, than to name those conditions which are not physical or visible such as intellectual disability, [verbal communication disorders](#), [learning disabilities](#), deafness, and stuttering. Only one participant reported knowledge of intellectual problems in her response due to communication and learning from others with intellectual difficulties in the family.

I have an uncle who is mentally retarded (P: R1/1/i).

Lack of communication and/or information of disability led to the following quotes.

My neighbour's son has a disability, but I can't identify it (P: R1/1/i).

Generally you don't have a problem with someone who has polio for example; but if someone is deaf or dumb or someone is blind you really feel awkward, you don't know what to do (K:R2/ 2/ ii).

A discussion among the group led to the sharing of personal experiences by participants who have close relatives with disabilities. Most of them consider that receptivity to people with disabilities depends very much on one's knowledge or understanding of disability.

I must have come across many people with disabilities, but did not understand what it was (P: R1/1/iii).

We don't know how to react or may be we ignore it 'cos (sic) we ourselves have personal issues (K: R4/ 2/ ii).

Question Three

The question is *How would you usually react to someone with a disability?* The most frequently cited response indicated that they should be supportive. Students felt that reactions would differ according to situations and relationship with the person with disability.

It depends who the person with disability is- my feelings would certainly be deeper and more genuine for a sibling or a member of my own family... I will be more understanding. But my reaction to a stranger with a disability would be one of impersonal compassion provided that I am receptive to people with disabilities (K: R4/ 3/v).

Honestly speaking I would not be comfortable as I am usually apprehensive of how the person with disability would react to me (P: R3/ 3/v).

I would be respectful and not speak in a condescending voice which creates a kind of pity. I have seen people treating someone with a speech or some other physical disability as stupid... but that's not the case because a physically disabled person can have the smartest brain in the world. Take for instance, Stephen (ahhm)... from England...ah I forgot the name. I think he is a Physicist. What I wish to say is we must be respectful (K: R2/3/vi).

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(This person is referring to Professor Stephen Hawkins, Lucasian Professor of Physics at Cambridge University who has Motor Neurone Disease- technically Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis).

A sense of strong conviction seems to be apparent in certain responses which also indicated that a student's demographic background played an important role in one's receptivity to people with disabilities. A female respondent seemed to be more compassionate than her male counterparts.

I have a strong Catholic upbringing and I'm always available to help anyone with a disability (P: R1/3/i);

Having lived with aged and disabled grand-parents, it's a natural thing for me to offer help to someone who has a disability... I don't need to be specially made aware of the needs of those with disabilities (K: R1/3/vi).

Some students (who probably had past experiences) considered that it was better not to show sympathy to a person with disability but to treat them like normal people.

I would not treat the person with disability in a different way or show pity (P: R1/3/vi);

Well, I would be careful before offering assistance to someone with a disability... wouldn't want to hurt their pride or independence (K: R3/3/vi).

Question Four

What will you do if a family member with a disability is not treated with respect?

Students seemed to want to give priority to support the needs of people with disabilities, and they felt that it's rather impolite not to treat such people with respect or

kindness. They considered empathy towards people with disabilities as the requirement that leads to being receptive to them and in the long run accept them for who they are.

Being sensitive to the needs of a person with disability, and all the more of one close to me, I will definitely get agitated and critical of the other person's behaviour (P:R1/ 4/vii).

I will concentrate on the emotional changes, if any, of my family, and ignore the rest. I shall try to understand their frustration for not being able to deal with the situation and set some ways to help the one in need without offending any one (K: R1/ 4/ vii).

It's not easy to change one's attitude towards disability, but I shall make an effort to talk about the changes receptivity to disability can bring (P: R3/ 4/vi).

I was little when my mother was bed-ridden with arthritis and I saw how harshly she was treated by my own father who could not cope with the pressures of work, my bringing up and above all comments from family members. Ours being a different social system it's not easy to always protect or put up a fight for those with disabilities. However, I tried to be a good son and make up for the unkindness my mother had to endure. Now as an adult with some knowledge as a student of special education, I am sure I can object to improper treatment of those who have disabilities (K: R3/4/vii).

Question Five

How do your peers with disabilities affect you?

Some students felt that though they are limited by time, and they prioritise their own career, they feel good to be helpful and be a mentor to someone who is trying to reach the same goal. Others wished they could behave the way they felt and be supportive, but were apprehensive of losing time or focus for their studies and other goals (such as sports).

I have a peer who is visually disabled. I admire his courage and perseverance to train as a teacher, and I feel privileged to be able to help him academically... prepare teaching aids for example (K:R2/5/vii).

It would be nice if I could help a peer with disability and make his task easy. But I think it's a lot easier to want to do something than to do it in real life. It involves compromise and I'm not ready (P: R4/5/vi).
I feel uncomfortable for not being supportive to a peer who is blind. But he has got others to help him (K: R1/5/viii).

Question Six

What do you think about the disability-related policies and legislation that provides special services to your peers with disabilities?

Most of the students expressed dissatisfaction with their universities for not making the student community aware of special disability services. They are not advertised or publicised within the university communities.

I guess there are such services, but the knowledge of this availability is missing (P: R4/6/v).

...Such programmes are seldom popularised either by universities or by the NGO's (K: R5/5/ iv). (NGO means Non- Government Organisations).

Some students expressed anger over the university services and said that it was discrimination against regular students. There was a sense of antagonism towards the administration and more towards individuals with disabilities because of a perceived discrimination against regular students for a perceived positive discrimination for students with disabilities.

What special services? – Well, if there are such services it's not fair! (P: R2/6/v).

Doesn't it seem like singling them out and making them aware of your awareness of disability (K: R3/ 6/v).

However, some said that they were not interested as there was no time to read about them on the bulletin board, in the magazines or university newsletters.

There was a little bit of a pamphlet on the board; but only if you have time to look for it, you can read it (P: R2/ 6/vi).

As the responses reveal, students consider that receptivity to peers with disabilities involves more than just empathy. It requires an interest and an opening up of the mind to the needs of those who have disabilities, an understanding of disabilities and people with disabilities, and together with university education in special needs, personal experiences and holistic knowledge to apply acquired concepts in relevant areas of disability.

Students with disabilities, particularly those who are deaf, dumb or blind, deserve to be awarded with special services. I think it acts as an incentive and encourages more students with disabilities to access higher degrees (K: R1/6/viii).

Propositions

Twelve propositions were abstracted from the transcripts of the Focus Group interviews. They do not apply equally to universities in Perth (Western Australia) and Kolkata (India) and a comment on this is given at the end of each proposition.

Proposition 1.

Regular university students considered that it was important to receive updated information on disabilities. They placed importance on receiving information which they

felt would help them identify others with different kinds of disabilities, during their university courses.

Most of the time all educational institutions do not have special academic or training programs for students with special needs... (K: R5/5/iv).

However, this applies more to Perth (Western Australia) and Kolkata (India), and the quotes below indicate the non-availability of the required information at universities in Perth. Lack of information was one of the main factors abstracted from student responses and more than ten interviewees in Perth reported no information on disability at university.

Examples are:

I'm not aware of things going on at university-things related to disabilities. For example, in sports. Nothing is advertised or published (P: R2/ 3/ iii).

I cannot interact with a peer with disability without proper knowledge of the special disability programs (P: R4/ 3/ iii).

There's no publicity (referring to disability at university). We hardly know what's going on. It's hard to keep track of what's going on at university in general. So the same goes for peers with disabilities (P: R1/ 3/iv).

Students in Indian universities reported otherwise.

University authority expects regular students to behave well... (Referring to peers with disabilities). Authority forces it upon us ... (K: R4/ 5/iii).

As research shows, attempts are being made in universities in Western Australia to design websites and to launch training programs to lift the participation rate of people with disabilities. For example, website launch for students with disabilities at Edith Cowan University (ECU, 2003), which, the researcher hopes, would also help create awareness

among regular students towards their peers with disabilities, and provide the required information on disability.

Proposition 2

Regular university students considered that they have a better understanding of disability for having family members who are disabled in some way. They also found themselves in a better position to interact with other people with disabilities provided that they get the right information about their needs. Evidence of high level of receptivity towards peers with disabilities, confirm better knowledge of disability and the needs of those with disabilities.

If I was asked to be a mentor or assist in any of the programs mentioned in this survey then I would definitely consider it. However, most students are not informed and our help doesn't seem wanted (ecu: 176).

This proposition applies equally to Perth (Western Australia) and Kolkata (India) where many students have previous contacts with people with disabilities due to the social and cultural backgrounds. Respondent P: R2/ 5/v obviously feels positively towards a person with special emotional needs and confirms it through the response reporting her reaction to someone with a disability. Some students in Western Australia reported very positive understanding of their peers with disabilities confirming their experience with disability cases in the family. High levels of receptivity to people with special needs and knowledge of specific disability programs and services were reported by international students from Malawi, Africa.

I would oppose any discrimination against a peer with disability for having assisted my mother, who is a disability volunteer back at home, I'm fully aware of their needs (P:R2/ 5/ v).

I have deep feelings and emotions for the disabled peer group, and would be glad to participate in any program for those with disabilities if given the opportunity at university (K: R3/ 6/ vii).

...it was easy to answer when (as) I had the experience...
(K: R2/ 2/ii).

Proposition 3

Regular university students considered it easier to report physical disabilities such as paraplegia, without any difficulty, than to name those conditions which are not physical or visible, such as intellectual disability, [verbal communication disorders](#), [learning disabilities](#), [deafness](#), stuttering. Students in Perth and India shared similar views on this abstraction as the responses to question 5 (How do your peers with disabilities affect you?) confirm.

It's because we don't know about the problem we don't know how to react
(K: R4/3/ii).

It can be difficult to help these people as some disabilities are hard to identify if it is not brought to our attention (P: R4/ 3/ii).

Though a former support worker for the disabled in Bosnia, respondent P: R1/2/ii too shares similar views about conditions which are not physical, and confirms difficulty in identifying them.

It is difficult to handle intellectual disability as we don't come to know it
(P: R1/2/ ii).

Students with high receptivity towards disability in Perth (Western Australia) and Kolkata (India), showed better attitudes, and a readiness to make an effort to learn how to identify disabilities that are not visible and extend help and support to peers who need

them. The following quotes represent the same view and reflect a similar level of receptivity in their responses which demonstrated or implied this approach.

The problem is social acceptability of such people...student attitudes at university most of the time is ok, as most of them will be educated
(K: R3/ 2/ii)

May be there's someone in the class who has mental condition, and the person says something that sounds rude to me; I become judgemental and I decide not to communicate with him/her. But I don't mean to do so...
(P: R3/ 2 / iii).

Proposition 4

Regular university students believe that they should be supportive of peers with disabilities through advocacy or direct involvement in interactive activities and programs at university. The proposition applies equally to Perth and India. Based on their responses to questions on how they are affected by the disabilities of some of their peers, students suggested ways to make them feel comfortable in the company of regular and non-disabled students. The following quotes illustrate a feeling of empathy towards peers with disabilities, and support the proposition and confirm their views.

...Treat them normally (P: R3/ 5/ iv)

Make them feel as they are...don't give special attention. For example, *asking people to move away, warning others saying 'see he's coming', 'let him sit down'*. It should happen automatically. Someone offers his own seat, but don't make him (referring to a peer with disability) feel that you are giving it to him because he's disabled (K: R5/ 5/iv). [Translated from Bengali].

We get to interact (referring to peers with disabilities) whenever possible-conversing or discussing government issues... (K: R3 / 5/ ii).

Proposition 5

Regular university students felt that reactions to peers with disabilities would differ according to the situations and relationships with different people with disabilities. For example, a student who has a friend with a disability would be more receptive and positive in his/her reactions to peers with disabilities than other students who did not have a friend with disabilities. This proposition applies equally to Perth and India. The following quotes support the proposition.

If you know someone [who] has a problem it makes it much easier to interact with peers with disabilities (K: R3/ 3/ii).

I have done part time jobs at disability centres and so I'm aware of their needs (P: R2/3/ii).

...I had worked with people with disabilities for four years and have an awareness to a certain level (P: R4/ 5/ vi).

Previous knowledge of disability is considered an important requirement to develop receptivity to peers with disabilities. And the responses of students R2 and R3 quoted above, support this.

Proposition 6

Regular university students seemed to want to give priority to the needs of people with disabilities, and they felt that it's rather impolite not to treat such people with respect or kindness.

Proposition 6 applies particularly to India where factors like social and family structures sometime influence one's attitudes and behaviours towards people with

disabilities. This brings us to the social attitude towards disability. Most Indians view disability as a matter of charity; and there are exceptional situations within or outside homes where people with disabilities are confronted with animosity or unfair behaviour, such as indifference, injustice or stigmatisation, due to lack of knowledge about disabilities and unreasonable social norms or cultural beliefs. However, such negative approaches do not go uncriticised by students who are receptive to those who need peer support at university. Survey and interview data show findings that the general approach of university students towards disability is positive.

Most show pity; but the last thing such people [referring to those with disabilities] need is pity... (K: R2/ 5/vi).

We should not stare at peers with disabilities for they feel uncomfortable. (K: R4/ 5/ iv). [Translated from Bengali].

Referring to the disrespectful treatment and impolite behaviour towards someone with a disability looking for employment in the government sector:

Employment opportunities don't come easily to people with disabilities in spite of the legal provisions and reservation policies for the disabled. Job-seekers with physical or mental conditions are frequently harassed (K: R1/ 5/v).

Proposition 7

Regular university students considered that empathy towards people with disabilities is a requirement that leads to being receptive to them and, in the long run, accept them.

As expected, people with disabilities have similar needs and desires to regular people and would like others to interact with them. This brings us to an inclusion system, and getting rid of barriers by using strategies initiating students with disabilities into social connections by means of empathy and trust. Empathy is a platform for effective understanding, communication and relationships. Findings from interview data show that empathy leads to regular students' and family members' interaction with others and also their counterparts with disabilities. This Proposition applies more to Kolkata than to Perth for the same reasons as stated in Proposition 6, p.177.

Family members are required to be able to understand and communicate with the one with disability. Empathy and trust and listening to the individual or understanding their problems and their needs creates rapport and trust (K: R2/ 5/ vi). [Translated from Bengali].

I say the same thing [as above] and also family members should try not to ignore or deny their feelings. On the other hand try to read the body language as well as the verbal communication to assess feelings of the individual (K: R4/ 5/ vi).

Proposition 8

Some students felt that though they are limited by time and, though they prioritise their own career, they feel good to be helpful at least a little and might be a mentor to someone who is trying to reach the same goal if the opportunity was given, This applies particularly to Perth than India as the quotes denote.

University students who pursue a sporting career are ready to mentor others and particularly someone with a disability. But lack of time causes hindrance to do so.

Time is a very important factor and I have no spare time to accompany a peer with

mobility impairment to the gymnasium every weekend. I'm glad I can be of some help (P: R3/5/ iv).

Students enrolled in demanding courses and with a high level of receptivity to peers with disabilities are willing to spend more time assisting a peer with special needs but they barely have time to help themselves.

It's a matter of time; I'm happy to help my peer with disabilities at the university. But it's hard to find more time for myself (P: R1/ 5/ i).

It may be possible that regular students would be able to find more time to interact with their peers with disabilities and to provide them with consistency and an emotionally supportive environment at university, if there were more support, a better environment at university and more opportunities to help peers with disabilities.

Proposition 9

Some students wished they could behave the way they felt and be supportive, but were apprehensive of losing time or focus for their other studies and other goals such as sporting achievement.

It was a question of excelling in the program in which the regular students had enrolled. So, in spite of being highly receptive to peers with disabilities and being willing to be supportive, some students had to remain focused on their own career.

I wish I could spend some more time to think about my peers with disabilities, and be their mentor but I have to pursue my own sporting career and so got to devote quite a few hours on the field (sic)...I'm glad I can help (P: R2/ 5/ vi).

My goal in life is to do my best in the course I'm enrolled in and get a job. I am also passionate about helping students with disabilities at university. But it's a pity that I cannot sign up as a buddy (K: R1/5/ vii).

Proposition 10

Most of the students expressed dissatisfaction with their universities for not making the student community aware of special disability services as they were not adequately advertised or publicised at these universities.

There is not enough advertisement or awareness in the uni that we as students can do to help and assist peers with disabilities to succeed at uni. Not enough is known Awareness does not occur (sic) (ecu: 021).

Such programmes are seldom popularised either by the universities or by the NGOs (K: R1/3/iii). (NGO means Non-Government Organisation).

Many students who were very highly receptive to peers with disabilities were disappointed at not being able to behave the way they felt or interact with the students with special needs, due to lack of information about disability programs at the university. The proposition applies to both Perth and India where most students expressed a willingness to interact with students with disabilities as they were confident of the positive outcomes.

Proposition 11

Some regular students expressed anger over special services for students with disabilities and said that it was discrimination against regular students. They thought that for academic standards such as involved in getting a degree, all students should have to meet the same standards.

It was found that there was a section of regular students in Perth and India who were aware of disability programs and had the knowledge of academic equality and discrimination. Such students were neither sympathetic nor benevolent towards their peers who were given special attention. Students in Perth reported more animosity toward the recipients of special services at universities than those in India where the level of receptivity to peers with disabilities was higher.

I believe all students should be subject to the same system, be it in university, and there should be no inequality(P: R4/ 5/vi).

I don't think disabled people should have too much advantage...
(P: R2/ 5/ v).

While I believe some people require special attention I do not believe priority should be given to them in all cases (P: R3/ 5/vii)

It is important that some students investigate the difficulties for students with disabilities instead of making an effort to develop a higher level of receptivity to peers with disabilities. If efforts are not made successfully then a big segment of our population, and a section of our student community, will remain stigmatized and socially isolated.

Proposition 12

The information about provision of special services for students with disabilities did not interest some regular students, as there was no time to read about them on the bulletin board, in the magazines or university newsletters, and they did not believe that they had time to act on them, either.

Although inclusion of students with disabilities in university and community activities has become an accepted focus, the challenge to create collaborative linkages still remains. Findings in Perth show that a number of university students still nurture antagonistic feelings toward peers with disabilities. The following quote demonstrates the indifference and anger of some regular university students.

I don't think any special considerations should be made just because someone is learning impaired (P: R2/ 5/v).

Similar feelings were demonstrated by a student in India.

Sometime I feel resentful of the fact that students with merit lose out on seats while students with disabilities get places at universities though poor in achievement(K:R2/4/viii).

Summary

The study attempted to address the relevance of focus groups for the students who completed the research survey, to meet, answer questions that are relevant to receptivity to peers with disabilities, and reflect on issues related to students' attitudes and behaviours toward disabilities. Propositions about student receptivity to peers with disabilities which were abstracted from the data were then presented. Readers were also made aware that university students, whether in Western Australia or India, have attitude and behaviour issues which are common to all. The Focus Group interviews were able to seek further information that could not be gained from the Rasch analysis. The researcher tried to understand why positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities could not be translated into behaviours or real action at university. The interactive session was helpful in identifying factors which emerged from the responses to the interview questions.

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