

Educational Opportunities for Students with Disabilities: The Experience of a University Student in Brunei

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ABSTRACT

In Brunei, increased numbers of children with disabilities have been given educational opportunities in appropriate programs in schools. Students with disabilities have also succeeded in qualifying for higher studies on completing secondary education. However, there is a need for local university and colleges to cater to the specific needs of students with disabilities. This paper describes the experiences of a student with visual disabilities in Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The student emphasised his use of compensatory learning strategies, the accommodation available on campus, peer relationships and self-advocacy to communicate his needs. The support given to the student facilitated his academic success. The student is fully aware of his capabilities and his positive self-esteem has helped to overcome various setbacks. It is hoped that the information provided in this article will foster improvement in providing facilities for students with disabilities to learn in comfort and for the future enrollment of more students with special needs.

Introduction

The transition from secondary school to university or college is an important event in the lives of many students. This is especially true for students with disabilities who intend to enroll for further education in higher institutions of learning. Many students with special needs are taking on the challenge of post-secondary education and are succeeding

academically. However, such students encounter specific challenges while on campus that need to be addressed in order to accommodate their individual learning and social needs (Heath, 2003). Students with disabilities are not all alike and institutions of higher learning have different missions, admission criteria, programs of studies and facilities to accommodate the special learner (Heath, 2003; Hill, 1992b). Students who have decided to continue their formal education should not be discouraged but instead be provided with appropriate guidance to meet their learning goals and to maximize their learning options. Although attending a university will prove a positive learning experience for most students, certain setbacks and shortcomings faced by students with disabilities can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration on campus (Leyser, 1989). On the other hand, many students with disabilities who were able to face the challenges and take an active role in shaping their environment have managed to successfully complete tertiary education (Michael, Salend, & Harris, 1988; Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990).

Research on Students with Disabilities in Universities

The introduction of laws and regulations in many countries to protect the rights of students with disabilities to a free, appropriate public education has increased the number of students enrolled in institutions of higher learning (Hill, 1992; Norlander, Shaw & McGuire, 1990). However, there is a scarcity of research published on the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding institutional support for their learning needs. The available research has examined such topics as attitudes of students without disabilities towards those with disabilities (Fichten & Bourdon, 1983), the availability of disability services on campus (Michael, Salend & Harris, 1988), accessibility on campus (Hill, 1992b), the willingness of faculty members to accommodate students with disabilities (Nelson, Dodd & Smith, 1990; Scott, 1997) and the focus on the needs of students with physical disabilities (Burbach & Babbit, 1988). According to Hill (1992) the current literature provides little information on views expressed by the students with disabilities themselves regarding their experiences as university students. Most investigations focused on other individuals affected by the presence of students with disabilities in tertiary education such as administrators and faculty members (Leyser, 1989; Scott, 1990; Scott, 1997).

There have been few efforts to investigate whether the facilities and accommodation provided meet the needs of students with disabilities. The students' perceptions are important because their views on institutional support have a serious impact on their access to educational programs in institutions of higher learning (Hill, 1992a; Hill, 1992b). The students' level of satisfaction with provisions made by the university either promotes or hinders their learning process (American Foundation for the Blind, 2005; Heath, 2003). Students with disabilities need to feel welcome on campus (Fichten, Goodrick, Tagalakis, Ausel, & Libman, 1990), given accommodations to learn (Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990) and be satisfied that the institution has a positive attitude towards them (Hill, 1992a).

This article examines the experiences of a student with visual disabilities attending Universiti Brunei Darussalam regarding the facilities and accommodations provided for him to facilitate his learning. Briefly, Universiti Brunei Darussalam is the only university in Brunei Darussalam. It was opened in 1985 with the first intake of 176 students. Today, the university has 300 academic staff and 2,800 students attending programs in 7 faculties. The student interviewed for this article is the only student with a disability on campus. The student contributed his views on his transition in life after acquiring a visual disability, the accommodations and adaptations made by administrators and lecturers, the support of his peers and outside campus organizations and his overall philosophy of life.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to provide information regarding the experiences of a student with a visual disability at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The student is the only individual with a disability presently enrolled at the university but he has successfully pioneered the possible enrollment of other students with disabilities in the future. Based on his personal experiences, the student provided practical suggestions to assist in managing the daily challenges that arise as he continues his education. Information provided by the student is useful for the university to prepare facilities and accommodations for improving tertiary education to future candidates.

Methods

A structured interview was used to gather information for the following questions:

1. What is the student's background and how has his disability affected his education before entering the university?
2. How did the student manage the transition in learning when he acquired the disability?
3. What accommodations were made by the university's administration to facilitate the student's tertiary education?
4. What adaptations were made by the university's lecturers to facilitate the student's learning?
5. How did the student's peers respond to him and assist him on campus?
6. What type of support did the student receive from outside the university?
7. What are the changes the student would like to be made in the future?

The interview was conducted in the researcher's office in February 2006. This location was considered suitable because it is close to the student's faculty. The office environment also ensured no interference and complete privacy during the interview. The interview was audiotaped and lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. The student was given the proposed paper to read before it was published. This allowed him to review the responses and to suggest any necessary amendments.

Background

The participant in this case study is a twenty-four year old male student with a visual disability. He is, as noted already, the only student with a disability presently enrolled at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. He is studying at the Faculty of Business and Economic Policy Studies majoring in Public Policy and Administration. He lost his eyesight at the age of seventeen due to the delayed onset of meningitis. The disease damaged his optic nerve, which resulted in total blindness, which is irreversible. After recovering from the illness, the participant became depressed for three years and only stayed at home. At the age of twenty he recovered from this period of depression and decided to continue with his "A" level examination.

Findings

The Student's Response to Disability

The student comes from a family of educated professional parents who work for the government of Brunei Darussalam. When the local hospital failed to provide the diagnosis of his illness, he was flown to another country for further medical tests. When meningitis was diagnosed, the disease has already progressed to damaging his optic nerve. The student indicated that:

“When I was told I will be forever blind, it was not easy for me to accept. I spend a long time at home not knowing what to do.”

After a three-year period, the student decided to finish his secondary education by finishing his “A” level examination. He enrolled in Form Six in a local school and was provided with auxiliary aids to facilitate his learning. He mentioned his experience of going back to school as:

“I felt good being able to continue with my studies. There weren't any visually challenged students prior to myself in that school. I learned Braille but I did not use Braille very much. But I had a reader and recorded my lessons on the computer.”

The student successfully finished his “A” level examinations and obtained admission to Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Positive Influences on the Student

According to the student he owed his strength to continue his life to his parents who are extremely supportive and caring. As he admitted:

“Overcoming my disability was not easy. Even though I accepted it, there are many things that I use to do before which I could not do now. One of them is mobility. I have to depend on my parents to drive me and my friends help me to move around in school.”

The student clearly has a positive attitude towards learning and going back to school was a decision he made on his own after hearing success stories of other blind individuals. He emphasized his optimism by saying:

“I met this man from Malaysia who is blind and has a doctorate from the US. I was so impressed by him and how he succeeded in life after becoming blind due to a road accident at the age of fourteen. He was very encouraging and made me feel that if he can do it, I can do it too.”

When he decided to continue with his education, his parents contacted the Special Education Unit of the Ministry of Education, Brunei. The Unit facilitated his re-entry into a local secondary school where he learned Braille.

Institutional Support

The experience of studying in a secondary school helped the student to regain his confidence and independence, which facilitated his transition into campus life. The university formed a committee specifically to cater to his needs as a student. The university committee consists of the Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economic Policy, the Head of Department, the university's Student Affairs Officer, a Disability Officer who is also an expatriate Lecturer in Special Education in the Department of Educational Psychology, a librarian, an instructional technology personnel and all the lecturers involved in teaching the student during the semester. The Disability Officer provides advice on how best to meet the educational needs of the student and acts as the scribe for his exams. A librarian was assigned to help him with library searches. The instructional technology personnel provide help with assistive technology and scanning of reading materials. The committee meets at least twice every semester to organize his reading materials for the courses and for arrangement to scribe his examination. Most of his reading materials require scanning but he prefers to read them using the computer. In terms of administrative support the student elaborated that:

“The university tried its best to help me but there is no formal arrangement for readers. I get my friends to read to me or most of the times my computer reads my notes to me. It's a lot easier to use my computer because it can re-read the parts I don't understand.”

Support from Lecturers

Overall, during the three years the student has been in the university, he found the lecturers to be supportive and enthusiastic to help him learn. Some of his coursework require him to understand charts, graphs and diagrams for which the lecturers provide him with individualized instruction during tutorials and lectures. The lecturers ensure that the student has access to all the information without diluting the content. Accommodations were made for his exams to ensure fair assessment for subjects requiring visual information. The student commented that:

“My lecturers for every semester so far were very helpful. They were willing to see me most of the time and give me individual lessons whenever I need them. I feel privileged to have teachers who are concerned for me. They all want to see me succeed.”

Response and Assistance from Peers

Mobility on campus is not a problem because the student gets help from peers to locate buildings and to drive him to campus. However, he did mention that

“Sometimes I have problems crossing open drains and a few times I slipped on cracks in the floor. So I have to be careful when I move. This is also a problem even with sighted people. One of my friends fell into a drain and she can see!”

He described his peers as helpful and friendly:

“My friends are very supportive. We work as a team and we revise our work at my home. Some of them help me by reading the handouts to me.”

Apart from support for learning his peers also provide support for social activities:

“They take me out to socialize and we do a lot of fun things together in and outside of campus.”

Support from Outside Organizations

The student has proven his academic excellence and has won book prizes every year. He is interested in advocating for other people with disabilities and is currently the Vice President of the Brunei Association for the Blind. The student is also a frequent speaker at conferences and local school functions. He also works part-time with an international bank that has a branch in Brunei Darussalam. The bank provided him with a scanner and trained personnel to help in his studies.

Some Proposed Changes

Students with disabilities who enroll in Universiti Brunei Darussalam in the future may require different facilities and accommodations. According to the student, accessibility on campus is a major issue:

“I feel the university is not disable-friendly because there are open drains and potholes everywhere. This can be a hindrance to the mobility of students especially those like myself who is blind.”

In addition, no specific signs are set up to help him locate buildings:

“I constantly need to get my friends’ help to find the location of my lectures. I can’t locate the buildings myself. This is in addition to depending on my family to drive me to campus.”

At the end of the interview session, the student summarized his experience as follows:

“I have no regrets about being blind. To me it is not a punishment but a blessing. My blindness has changed me into a better person than the person I was before. Many people out there do not understand what it is like to be disabled. As a person with a disability it is my job to explain my needs to others and be open to new and different ways of doing things.”

The student elaborates further the importance of self-advocacy:

“I am the one who knows my needs and strengths the best. I need to identify persons that I can approach and state my needs to them. Stating my needs in a reasonable way is an important

skill I must have otherwise nobody is going to listen to me. I need to advocate for myself if I want to be an independent adult.”

Discussion

The student in this study has a favorable disposition to the university. Overall, he feels included in mainstream campus life. The administrators have been fair and willing to accommodate his needs and they closely monitor his academic progress. Some important themes have also emerged from the interview with the student. First and most importantly, the success of students with disabilities in adjusting to campus life is dependent on the students' ability to self-advocate for their rights and express their concerns openly in a reasonable and informed manner to the administration concerned that might be unaware of the types of accommodations, adaptations and provisions necessary. Self-advocates are individuals who can speak up in a logical, clear and positive language to communicate about their needs. Self-advocates also take responsibility for their decisions in life. Effective self-advocates understand their disability and their learning strengths and weaknesses including their learning styles.

Second, an important consideration for tertiary education is the need for preparation to maximize the educational options of such students such as acquisition of compensatory learning strategies. The student needs to understand the extent of the disability and his strengths to adapt to a new learning environment. The student must be familiar with the types of modifications, accommodations and auxiliary aids provided by the educational institution. There needs to be a match between the student's learning needs and the availability of the learning aids on campus. To be academically successful, the student needs to know the best way to learn and the ability of the institution to provide the facilities.

Third, students must learn to overcome frustration when setbacks occur during the learning process. The student needs to learn to cope if some facilities are not available and the learning process is affected. It is necessary to approach the office for disabilities or an officer who can be of assistance to solve issues related to effective learning.

Fourth, it is the student's responsibility to learn to integrate by making new acquaintances and managing own social life. Prior to enrolling in the university, the student can consider part-time jobs or volunteer services

with an organization. National organizations too can encourage students to pursue their educational and social goals.

Conclusion

In general, the student in this study rates the facilities and accommodations provided as adequate in meeting his specific needs. However, in terms of future improvements he would like to see more physical barriers removed to ease mobility for future students with visual disabilities. Although this study is based on the opinions of one participant, the views expressed and recommendations made are important to assist students with disabilities become advocates of their rights, and to promote awareness of the university staff of their unique needs while pursuing tertiary education.

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