

Empowering First-Year Undergraduates with Disabilities in Sri Lankan State Universities during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

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The purpose of this study is to interrogate the crippling impact of the covid-19 pandemic upon the challenges faced by students with disabilities in Sri Lanka, when transitioning from secondary level education to their tertiary level education at state universities. Research on the education of the students with disabilities at state universities has focalised the impact of unaccommodating built environments and stigmatizing of disability, creating a dearth in the studies that interrogate the facilitation of the psycho-social and pedagogical requirements of the target group, when adopting to a new educational reality. Informed by the lived experiences of learning/teaching in a Sri Lankan state university, the researcher intends to address this lacuna to highlight the importance of a disability inclusive approach to policymaking in the higher education sector.

The present study engages with eight narratives of first-year undergraduates with disabilities from the universities of Kelaniya, Colombo, Sri Jayewardenepura and Jaffna representing different gender, geographical and ethnic identities. Data gathered by interviewing the research participants will be analysed by drawing on the theories of intersectionality, disability and critical pedagogy.

This study contends that the Covid-19 pandemic has constructed new hierarchies based on the access to technology, technical proficiency and English language awareness, while exacerbating the impact of segregated learning environments, inflexible pedagogical practices and institutional constraints such as fixed timetables and rigid curricular. Thus, it argues for the importance of improved communicational skills, enhanced participation in extra-curricular and core-curricular activities and the increased accessibility to assistive technologies has been crucial to empower the target group. It also aims to interpret the pandemic as a point-of-departure to re-evaluate the legacy of disability in higher education through a more inclusive perspective.

Key words: Undergraduates with disabilities, Tertiary level education, Sri Lankan state universities, Covid-19, Critical pedagogy