Empowering the Disabled At Pondicherry University: a Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT *Disability is an important public health problem especially in developing countries like India. The problem will increase in future because of increase in trend of non-communicable diseases and change in age structure with an increase in life expectancy. Though a number of legislations are enacted from time to time, most of these are mostly in the form of paper and also not suitable for a developing country like India. This paper uses a case study approach based on the measures and practices taken by Pondicherry University to foster a disabled friendly learning and working environment practices which has not only helped it win the coveted award Best Training Institution for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2011 which is usually reserved for NGOs, special schools and training Centre's. The case discussed is an eye opener for other institutions to emulate so as to make the disabled inclusive society through empowering them by creating in them employable skills for sustainable development.*

Introduction

The Constitution of India ensures equality, freedom, justice and dignity of all individuals and implicitly mandates an inclusive society for all including the persons with disabilities. Despite differing estimates, empirical evidence as of 2007 suggests that between 4 to 8 percent of the population in India is comprised of people with disabilities (World Bank 2007). This translates into 40-90 million people, a substantial number. People with disabilities in India are subject to multiple deprivations and limited opportunities in several dimensions of their lives. Households with people with disabilities are 25 percent less likely to report having 3 meals per day year around, more likely to have members who are illiterate and children who are not enrolled in school, have much lower employment rates, and have limited awareness of entitlements and services available by law for people with disabilities (World Bank 2007).

The experiences of people with disabilities are in stark contrast to the fact that certain government departments in India such as the education sector have been viewed as progressive in their delivery of options to children with distinctive needs (World Bank 2007). Disability statistics were collected in the Census of India from as early as the late nineteenth century and the country had special schools that catered to the needs of people with disabilities from around the same time period. However, integration of people with disabilities and policy commitment to their participation as equals in society occurred only twenty-five years ago with the passage of four important laws. These included the Mental Health Act of 1987, the Rehabilitation Council of India Act of 1992, the People with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act of 1995 (PWD Act), and the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act of 1999 (World Bank 2007). India also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007. There are strong contradictions in the implementation of the various provisions of these acts as they are more applicable for developed nations of the world than for the developing countries like India.

Though a multi-sectoral collaborative approach, involving all the appropriate Governments i.e. Ministries of the Central Government, the State Governments/UTs, Central/State undertakings, local authorities and other appropriate authorities is being followed in implementation of the various provisions of these Acts. However the constitution in the schedule of subjects lays direct responsibility of the empowerment of the persons with disabilities on the State Governments.

Review of Literature

According to the UN, around 10 per cent of the world's population, or 650 million people, live with a disability. They are the world's largest minority. Children and adults with disabilities face myriad challenges: abuse, lack of education, illiteracy, and unemployment to name a few. While technology in locomotion and mobility for the disabled has taken great strides worldwide, India continues to use antiquated tricycles and wheelchairs. This is evident in the case of thirty-two-year-old Usman, who works for a company manufacturing aids and appliances for the disabled in Bangalore, and he has never boarded a bus or train. "Even though people are willing to help him, it is still nearly impossible to use public transport there." While in the case of nineteen-year-old Hanumantha, he has an arrangement with a colleague to drop him home every evening. In return Hanumantha buys him a ticket to the movies once a fortnight. "His father brings him to office every day, carries him and sits him down". There are references to the urgent need to provide a more conducive learning environment to the disabled revealing that the experiences of people with disabilities are in stark contrast to the fact that certain government departments in India such as the education sector have been viewed as progressive in their delivery of options to children with distinctive needs (World Bank 2007). However studies show that the Indian schools are not equipped to provide an equal learning environment to the normal and disabled alike due to social restrictions and hence special schools solely catering to the disabled are only preferred.

The literature also highlights that education in general, and post-secondary education in particular, is a predictor of gainful employment in meaningful occupations, opening opportunities for career development, hence for quality of life (Duta, Scguri-Geist, & Kundu, 2009; Getzel, Stodden, & Brief, 2001). This finding is even more significant for people with physical and sensory disabilities, whose range of employment is limited to jobs that require fewer physical abilities and skills (Kendall & Terry, 1996; McGeary, Mayer, Gatchel, Anagnostis & Proctor, 2003). Accessibility to education is therefore especially important for people with disabilities (Drake, Gray, Yoder, Pramuka & Llewellyn, 2000; Dorwick, Anderson, Heyer & Acosta, 2005; Inbar, 2003; Inbar, 1991; Getzel et al., 2001; Rimmerman & Araten-Bergman, 2005) .Despite the revolution in social and legislative policies on provision of equal

opportunities for education and employment for people with disabilities, there is still a long way to go. Hence the status quo of the disabled is only at cross roads in India as in many countries abroad.

The articles reviewed only bring to fore the dire need of the society and the social institutions in creating environments which are disabled inclusive.

Objective of the Study
The objective of the study was to highlight the various steps initiated by the University of Pondicherry to provide a learning environment more friendly to the disabled and also the various actions and programs being taken from time to time to help the disabled not only to make them socially acceptable but also foster their career growth through providing higher education and employment opportunities and also constantly innovating for the disabled to achieve inclusion.

Research Methodology
The methodology followed is case study approach of collecting and presenting the various facilities provided, initiatives taken by Pondicherry University over the last few years, which indeed has made it eligible for the most coveted award "Best Training Institution for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities" in the year 2011.

PONDICHERRY UNIVERSITY – EMPOWERING THE DISABLED
Seeing a professor roll into class on a wheelchair or visual-impaired students in the library listening to their lessons is a fairly common sight at Pondicherry University. One also witnesses paper presentations by the disabled especially the visually challenged students at almost all the conferences organized in this University, which is a missing scene in conferences organized elsewhere in the country. The best teacher awards instituted in the University also regularly sees disabled faculty being adjudged as the "Best Teacher" which is based on a 360 degree appraisal process and not on humanitarian grounds.

So it comes as no surprise that the Ministry for Social Justice and Empowerment has chosen Pondicherry University for the national award for being the Best Training Institution for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2011 which is usually reserved for NGOs, special schools and training centre's. The vice-chancellor of the university Prof. J.A.K. Tareen received the award from President Pratibha Patil at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi on 3rd December 2011.

The university has become the first institution in India to receive such recognition for its affirmative action on the empowerment of persons with disabilities. The University introduced a number of innovative steps for disabled students which includes free education as well as boarding and lodging at the University hostels, disabled friendly campus infrastructure.

Ever since the 11th Plan was implemented, the mission of the University was that people with physical disabilities were not denied quality education because they could not access certain areas or lessons. The campus has about 60 students and 13 faculty who are physically challenged — both visually and orthopedically-challenged and steps have been taken to make sure that they do not lack anything on the campus.

Some of the various facilities offered for the disabled are:
· All of the differently-abled people who join the University will be given free education. This is not limited to the tuition, but also for boarding and lodging at the university's hostel.
· There is a 3 per cent reservation for physically-challenged students as per the government norms.
· One of the biggest steps the university has taken to bridge the learning barrier is to equip the computers at the library with special software 'Jaws' for the visually-challenged, so that they will be able to download coursework and journal entries and listen to them.
· Scanners have also been provided so that they can read any of the books in the library.
· The University Library, where there will be a dedicated area for the visually-impaired is under construction.
· A special section has been started at the University Library with the state-of-the-art facilities of hardware and software to enable the visually-challenged students and faculty to carry out the routine reference works.
· Apart from this, the university has ensured that all the buildings have been provided with ramps and elevators that can accommodate wheelchairs. Even the older buildings have been modified to allow wheelchair access. In the hostels, physically-challenged students are given single rooms with attached, modified bathrooms.
· For students who choose to travel from the town, free transport is provided from town to the university as well as within the campus. Seats are reserved on these buses/vans for people with special abilities.
· Additionally, motorized wheelchairs have been provided in the mess and the library, to be used by students and faculty.
· Also, whenever new modifications are made to buildings on the campus, great care is taken to ensure that wheelchair access and other facilities for physically-challenged people are provided.

Further as instances reviewed in the literature review indicate many people with different abilities are losing faith in their abilities to have a quality education from a good university. The case of Pondicherry University clearly highlights that it is doing its best to ensure that its campus is friendly towards the differently-abled and that they see it as a way to fulfill their dreams.

ECHOLOCATION WORKSHOP FOR BLIND - TOOL FOR SELF DIRECTION & AUTONOMY
Recently a one-day workshop was also organized at Pondicherry University for the visually-challenged students and staff of the university. It was organized by the Department of Library Sciences. Daniel Kish, the founder of World Access for the Blind, a non-profit organization was the resource person for the work shop. He has visited over 30 countries to train visually-challenged people.

The highlight of the training was Mr. Kish, a visually-challenged person himself, rode on a bicycle marking the end of his day-long interaction with visually-challenged audience, to teach various skills to cope with everyday life. One of those skills, which he is now famous for, is 'echolocation'. Mr. Kish, who had his eyes removed when he was 13 months old due to retinal cancer, learnt to make palatal clicks with his tongue, and the echoes from these clicks inform him about an object's distance, size, texture and density. This helps him navigate his surroundings easily, without the use of a cane. He currently trains other blind people in the use of echolocation. As "Blind people will always have to use a cane or an assistant or something, but by teaching these life skills it is possible for blind people to stop being passive and be more active members of society". The idea of the training was to give these visually-challenged people a crash course in developing a new perspective, to get a new sense of freedom, self-direction and autonomy. The aim of this course is that there will be some people who will benefit, who will use these skills, including echolocation, to be more mobile. It will also give them a chance to retrain their thinking to get more self-direction. He also initiated the students to walk around the portico of the administrative block using echo location. He then asked them to identify the various objects they sensed in the area. He even instructed them on how to locate various positions, like the door of a bus or a plant.

Finally, he walked them over to a fence. One student "Initially, when he started walking around, identified the fence, but he thought it was a bus because of its size. Later on, he realized that since it was not as solid as a bus it had to be something else. Another student managed to successfully use echolocation to identify a mat on the portico and plants lining the area. Daniel Kish himself mounted on a pink ladies' cycle. As he pedaled the cycle, wobbly at first and then with incremental confidence he soon managed to complete one round around the portico of the administrative block of the Pondicherry University. After the first round, the second round was much more effortless and when he dismounts, there is sounding applause from the witnesses, many of whom are visually-challenged.

These programs clearly signify that the University has taken directions not merely to satisfy the infrastructure requirements of the disabled or the legislative requirements of the government but has truly initiated action oriented programs towards empowering the disabled and fostering a more inclusive society.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are made in the light of the literature reviewed and case study presented for discussion.

- Designing user-friendly appliances would ameliorate their conditions.
- Change in the mental attitude of the society to provide learning spaces more acceptable for the disabled.
- Introduction of ICTs as it provides a model to allow disabled people to better integrate socially and economically into their communities. For example, the Internet allows those with disabilities to organize and network. Perhaps most importantly, technology is slowly transforming the education sector by providing greater access to a variety of learning materials. Screen-reading software reads content aloud. Voice recognition software composes spoken messages.
- Banks can have special cells for speedy clearance of entrepreneurial loans put forward by the disabled.
- Making the Employers aware of special incentives when they employ disabled.
- Special loans to disabled for purchase of aids which can be provided through banks to the SHG's
- Government of India can insist corporate's to set aside a certain percentage of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) fund which has been made mandatory this budget 2013 for empowering the disabled in the rural areas.

Conclusion

As Rabindranath Tagore rightly say's "The problem is not how to wipe out all differences, but how to unite with all differences intact"

The case study of empowering the disabled at Pondicherry University is a true story which can be emulated by other learning institutions to make the disabled co exist with their counterparts and pave a way for sustainable development of the disabled rather than providing them concessions through legislations which in most of the cases is enjoyed by their care takers rather than by the beneficiaries. The paper also emphasizes the need for a public – private and people initiative to enable the disabled to reach a level of sustenance after which they would become progressive on their own.

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