

Residential Experiences of the Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions: Case of University of Dhaka

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims at identifying the existing residential facilities and exploring the living experiences of the students with disabilities of Dhaka University. The students with disabilities and the house tutors of residential halls of Dhaka University were the respondents for the study. Findings from in-depth interview are extracted through thematic analysis which indicate various issues, limitations and areas of improvement. The findings are presented through several themes such as accessibility and mobility in the hall, facilities within the room, canteen and washroom, acceptance in the room and hall library, attitudes of the staff and authority. The study also investigates how these experiences affect the personal and academic lives of the students with disabilities. Based on the findings of the study the university authority can modify its ongoing reformation plan to create a more learning-friendly equitable and inclusive environment for the students with disabilities in the campus.

Keywords: Residential Experiences, Students with Disabilities, Higher Education, University of Dhaka

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Introduction

Higher education is considered as significantly important for the young generation, and also it is regarded as an important strategy to ensure the participation of the students with disabilities in this education system (Howe, 2013). Residential life in an inclusive campus facility can be an excellent opportunity to the disabled students for social engagement and it will enhance a sense of belongingness for them in campus life (Soorenian, 2013).

Disability is a physical or mental impairment of a human being that limits his/her normal functioning of life. It may be described as a complex form of deprivation. Disability involves dysfunctioning at one or more levels of physical function, individual activity or social participation (BBS, 2011). According to the recent law concerning to ensure the rights and protection of the persons with disability, Rights and Protection for the Persons with Disabilities

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Act (2013) which ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (2006), characterized the disability type as follows: Autism or autism spectrum disorders, Physical disability, Mental illness leading to disability, Visual disability, Speech impairment, Intellectual disability, Hearing impairment, Deaf-blindness, Cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, Multidimensional disability, Other disability.

In higher education, individualized accommodation of students with disabilities is the norm. Though individualized accommodation may seem like the best practice, it is often costly, time-consuming (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003). One of the important arrangements for the university students is appropriate residential facility (Gilson & Dymond, 2010). The accommodation of students with disabilities at university is a complex process because it involves many concerns and regulations (Gilson & Dymond, 2011). A lack of accommodation can impact the learning and attainment of students who depend on supports and services to pursue their studies. Moreover, personalized accommodation relies on students disclosing their individual accommodation needs (NEADS, 2018). Residential living is needed for independent living of the disabled which doesn't disable them further. The diversity and integrations of accommodations for the students with disabilities are almost enormous because of the variety of nature and severity of the students' disability, the physical topography of the institutions, the specific physical facilities the students will use (Steele & Wolanin, 2004).

Students with disabilities have additional needs of living on their own and dealing with the disability in an educational environment. The daily living tasks of the individuals with disabilities are more complicated than students without disabilities (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly & Lauterbach, 2016). The limitation of choosing the facilities (often to the residential halls) may result separation, isolation and exclusion to the students with disabilities (Soorenian, 2013). Most of the facilities for the students with disabilities are focused on their academic needs and there is not enough addressing of their other needs (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010). The students with disabilities face barriers from university provided accommodation (Hemingway, 2011).

A residential student's experience on campus is mostly related to their experience living with a roommate (Hanasono & Nadler, 2012). Aside from infrastructural issues the students with disabilities may face problems with the assignment of roommates (Payne, 2017). Since there is a shared space amongst multiple students, there may have some challenges which come from using the shared space together (Hanasono & Nadler, 2012). Understanding how to share a space with roommate can bring comfort of living and it allows for peaceful and friendly living together with roommates (Emerson, 2008). The students may need assistance from a roommate or other students depending on their disabilities. Although disability is one of the known major social and economic phenomena in Bangladesh, there is very little reliable data available on this issue, especially in the absence of a comprehensive national survey on persons with disabilities (BBS, 2011). At the national level, the Government of Bangladesh has also

initiated a number of policies and legislative frameworks to ensure the education of all students including those with disabilities (Kawser, Ahmed & Ahmed, 2016).

Due to the lack of current scholarly studies, it can't be understood by the policy makers and the other responsible actors about the experiences of the SWD who are included in the higher education system. Their experiences at institutions of higher education need to be understood so educators, policymakers, and researchers can make informed decisions that increase degree attainment (Zambrano, 2016). There is also very little research on the effectiveness of postsecondary accommodation Supports (Wizikowsky, 2013). Without understanding disability and the needs of disabled people the situation cannot be improved to solve a problem; it first needs to be understood (BBS, 2011). Contemporary research has failed to understand the lived experiences of students with diverse disabilities in higher education using the students' own voices (Soorenian, 2013). Residential experience is a significant element of their overall university experience and these students get negative experience. Expanding on the research within this specific area would provide residence life professionals insight into what they can do more to prepare the staff for them and support students living with roommates (Payne, 2017). Residential staffs are needed to be trained so that they can understand the resilience and abilities of the SWD. In this case further research is needed on the issue of administrative response and on the difficulty in residential living environment (Duma, 2019). Additionally, more research is needed to provide a better understanding of higher education institutions' barriers and facilitators to success, as the current literature is limited. For example, several studies examined what supports are offered to students, but little research has been conducted regarding the effectiveness of services and the impact of those supports on academic success (Stodden & Conway, 2001)

There is very limited research to explore the experiences of the residential lives of the SWD in higher education of Bangladesh. The study is an opportunity to explore the campus residential lives of SWD and find the recommendations to improve the situation.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the residential facilities in the halls for the students with disability in Dhaka University
2. identify the challenges of residential lives faced by students with disability in Dhaka University

Methods

To explore the residential facilities and understand the residential living experiences of the SWD, the researcher adopted qualitative approach in this study. The participants of the study were the

current residential students with disabilities and the house tutors of the residential halls of Dhaka University. In this study purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used to select the sample. The researcher selected three types of samples in this regard. 12 residential students with disabilities were selected conveniently and purposefully. These 12 participants are from different residential halls, different course of study, different level of study and different types of disability. Moreover, among the 12 participants, 9 male participants and 3 female participants were selected. Besides, 2 house tutors were selected with the purpose of addressing both of male and female residential halls. On the other hand, 8 residential halls were selected as sample with the purpose of addressing equal number of male and female residential halls.

In this study, the researcher had used two types of instruments to collect the data which are: in-depth interview and observation checklist. The aim of this study was to explore the residential facilities & experiences which would require hearing their voices. Besides, the house tutors' expression will be helpful to understand the authority's perspectives. Also observing the existing facilities in the residential halls for the SWD would provide the real scenario. Due to this nature of the study Semi-structured questionnaire is used in in-depth interview. Besides, structured observation checklist was developed to identify the existing facilities in the residential halls for the students with disabilities.

In-depth interviews were conducted in several days. All interviews were conducted in-person. During conducting this study, proper consent was taken from each respondent before data collection. Before data collection, each respondent was briefed about study purpose and how it will be used. Observation checklist was developed following the ADA checklist for existing facilities (2010). Structured checklist was used to observe the selected residential halls of Dhaka University to identify the existing residential facilities for the students with disabilities.

The data from in-depth interview were analyzed by thematic analysis approach and the data from observation checklist were analyzed by descriptive analysis approach. As the study is qualitative, the data from observation checklists were analyzed through the description where the researcher used those data as secondary and supplementary data to cover the gap of primary data.

Result and Analysis

Analysis of the in-depth interviews from the SWD and house tutors and the data from observation revealed several themes related to the experiences the SWD face in their residential lives. Seven major themes were identified and some of them contained sub-themes which are: Accessibility in the hall, Room facilities, Washroom Facilities, Acceptance in the room, Attitude of the staff and hall authority, Canteen facilities, Academic facilities, Impact on daily life and Impact on academic life.

Accessibility in the hall: Many respondents commented that most of the residential halls don't allot students with disabilities except a very few halls. The hall authority shared similar opinion in this case. They acknowledged that most of the halls are not ready yet. They also disagreed to the respondents' complain about not switching the hall. Many respondents shared to the researcher that they couldn't enter the hall because the hall was totally inaccessible for them. Following this issue respondent-9 told that,

There was no ramp, no toilet accessible to enter with wheelchair. I had to go to the hall office for many days and after 6 months later they finally built the ramp and the accessible toilet.

Only male respondents shared that they had to wait for a long to get the seat in the hall. On the other hand, the female respondents shared that they didn't have to wait for a long to get the seat. The house tutors shared that they always provide the seat to the SWD as fast as they can. The male respondents with visual impairment (VI) commented that they had to face difficulties during the orientation with the building. The house tutors didn't fully agree with this compliment mentioning that the SWD mostly get orientation from their peers and they didn't ever request to the hall staff for this. In the observation it is found that half of the halls have at least one route that doesn't require the use of stairs. Half of the residential halls have barrier free access for the students with visual impairment.

Mobility barriers: Most of the male and female respondents shared that they have to face barriers mobilizing in the hall. The hall corridors and walkways are not obstacle-free and it creates problem while moving. Also, there is no special indicators to help them to find the direction. Respondent-10 said,

In the corridor many students keep their cycles and bikes. That's why I've to face problem while moving through the corridor. And there is no tactile sign to indicate the ways of canteen and toilet, in the stairs to go upper floor.

The house tutors also acknowledged this issue as a great barrier of the SWD and commented that most of the hall infrastructure are built without thinking of them. They also shared that the other students are mostly responsible to create obstacles in the corridor and hall pathways. Besides, the observation revealed that the hall pathways and corridors were not obstacle free.

Room facilities: The living rooms of the halls aren't fully accessible for the students with disability. Most of the male and female respondents in the interview shared common pattern of experiences in this issue. The room size is very small and it is not comfortable to live with a lot of roommates. Besides, it limits their movement and their privacy. Respondent-5 explained,

The room is designed for only 4 students. But 8 students live in here, so the size of the students comparing to the room size is double. The room is very noisy and it makes difficulty to study in the room properly.

The house tutors admitted that the room facilities are equal for every student in the hall and there is no special facility for the SWD in the room. They added that the hall authority always concerns about the room environment. In the observation it is found that most of the rooms are congested and overpopulated.

Washroom facilities: There is a very limited facilities in the washroom for them in their hall. Only a few male and female respondents said that they get special facilities in their washroom. There is no tactile sign in the washroom for the students with vision impairment. Some of the toilets have high commodes but the doors are not accessible to enter with wheelchair. The male respondents also commented that the washroom management is very poor and the toilets often get dirty. Respondent-9 said,

Only one toilet and one bathroom are special in this entire hall which is accessible for wheelchair users. So every day I have to wait to enter the toilet or bathroom because those are occupied by the general students.

Both of the house tutors in their interview shared that there is no special washroom in their hall. They explained that the SWD can use the general washroom like the others and they don't receive any objection from them. They added that the washrooms are unusable for the other students' deeds. In the observation it is found Only 2 halls from 8 halls have wheelchair accessible washrooms. The observation showed that the door of the washroom is easily reachable in 6 halls out of 8 observed halls. Only 3 halls have high commode in the toilet.

Acceptance in the room: Most of the respondents shared their bitter experience about their roommates as they didn't want them in their room. Some male respondents said that they have separated room only for the students with disability in their halls. The female respondents shared that they are living with their non-disabled peers in the room. Respondent-6 said,

At first the girls in my room didn't take me positively. They thought they have to do all of my works by themselves. That's why they didn't like me at first. But when they realized that I can do my works by myself, they started to be normal with me. But we have a gap between us.

The house tutors disagreed with the compliments of the students in this issue. They shared that the SWD mostly live in the room with their familiar faces. Besides, few female respondents shared that they had a good experience living with the roommates.

Canteen facilities: There is no special facility in the canteen for both of the male and female SWD. Some respondents also shared that the canteen staffs concern about them and they give them priority while serving the meal. Respondent- 6 explained,

There is no mentionable special facility in the canteen, but it is accessible for me. The staffs of the canteen give me priority. I don't have to wait for the seat in the canteen; they manage it within a short time.

The house tutors added that the hall authority provides the direction to the canteen to serve the SWD with care. In the observation it is found 6 halls don't have any special seating arrangement in the canteens for the SWD.

Academic facilities: Many male and female respondents commented that there is a very limited access in the reading room. As the students have to be silent in the reading room, the students with VI can't do their work in there. Respondent-3 explained it,

We have just one reading room for all of the students. We all have to be silent in that room so that everyone can concentrate in their study. But I can't be as I have to record the audio from the books and listen to them.

The respondents with PD shared that they don't have to face any problem to get access in the reading room. All of the respondents with VI shared that there is no brail book, audio book and no special software in the cyber center of the hall library. Both of the house tutors commented that the hall libraries are not rich in its collection of resources and the SWD don't demand to them for the special resources. In the observation it is identified that the hall libraries are not completely disability oriented and the resources are limited.

Attitudes of the staff and authority: Almost all of the respondents are not satisfied with the behavior of the staffs. All of the respondents shared that the staffs and other authoritative persons of the hall aren't disability oriented. Respondent-10 explained,

When I first entered the hall, I got a huge shock to see that there are separated rooms for us! All of my life I never had to live separate from the others. But in hall the authority just excluded us from the others.

Both of the house tutors disagreed with the compliments of the students in this issue. The house tutors also acknowledged that the hall administration can't always take the immediate steps because of the administrative complexity. House tutor-1 said,

We give the direction to the hall staffs to manage the SWD in any helping needs. The staffs are very friendly. We never get any complain about them from any students. On the other hand, the staffs complain to us about the students misbehaves.

The house tutors added that the hall authority cannot always fulfill their demands because of the funding issues.

Impact on academic & daily life: Most of the respondents identified some issues related to their residential lives that effect on their academic performance. Some male respondents with VI expressed to the researcher that they can't study well in the room because there is no one in their room to help them. Respondent-6 said,

All of my roommates are like me. They can't help me with the recording. So, I have to find the student without disability to record the audio for me all the time.

The respondents shared that their mobility barrier plays as a vital barrier in the hall life. Respondent-4 stated that,

Sometimes I have to move with the fear of falling down as I don't use wheelchair. Because of this problem I don't want to go outside to meet with my friends.

The female respondents said that they don't feel comfortable to sleep with the others. Some of the respondents shared that they try to be used to with the situation they have.

There are some contradictions found in narratives between the of the students and the house tutors in some cases. The students generalized that the hall authority doesn't concern to their issue. On the other hand, the house tutors expressed that they are concerned and they always want to listen to the demands of the students. Instead, they encountered the students for not being aware of the existing facilities in the halls and they don't request for any demand. In this issue, it can be understood that there is a communication gap between the students and the hall authority in addressing the needs. As the students don't know about the facilities the halls can offer, they just get used to live without it, but they rarely demand for any kind of modification in the existing facilities. Therefore, the objections of the SWD against the hall authority for not concerning their needs are not found completely valid. In additions, the students' lack of knowledge and unwillingness to seek their needs impact on the further improvement of the residential facilities in the halls. However, ultimately the SWD face challenges in their residential lives in the halls because of these issues.

Discussion

The guideline made by the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (2010) provided the conceptual framework of the study that indicates a deep insight identifying the standard level of facilities for the students with disabilities in university. The findings from the study showed that there is a very limited facility in the residential halls for the students with disabilities. The university as well as the residential halls don't have any information in their

website concerning the services. Comparing to the model of accessibility, there is no disability student service (DSS) to provide services to the SWD in their campus life. The study found that the student size comparing to the residential arrangements in the halls are insufficient. In the model it is directed that the hall should have enough accommodation and if not, they have to mention it to the students as well as the residential facilities they have. But the findings explored there is no such informational services in the entire halls. Besides, Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson (2004) acknowledged in their study that some of the higher education institutions provide some special facilities for the SWD but those aren't sufficient for them.

Another study conducted by Wolanin and Steele (2004) showed that the accommodations are not sophisticated for the SWD sometime. This study also identified that the institutions do not agree with the students to modify any accommodation due to the student's requirement as they have the difference of thinking to implement any modification in the institution. At this point, it is identified in the study that some of the halls have ramp facilities, but those ramps weren't well constructed to make it comfortable and smooth for the wheelchair users. Some of the halls have lifts but those lifts aren't always open. It defined the unsophisticated administrative response to the demand of the students. In addition, the SWD have to live separated in the room from the students without disability. This clearly indicates the communication gap between the two stakeholders meeting the individual demands.

In this study, it is identified that the room facilities for the SWD in the residential halls aren't sufficient. Johnson (2006) found that providing accessible environment in the institution campus is restricted by the architectural and budgetary constraints. It also explored that architectural barrier is unavoidable sometimes as the building structure and the accommodation services weren't designed for the students with disabilities to provide them accessibility in the building. Another study conducted by Marshak, Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss & Dugan (2010) explored that adjusting to any unfamiliar institution environment is a challenge for the students with disabilities as they don't have any kind of orientation in the campus environment. The present study showed that the other students in the room don't accept the SWD as their roommate in many cases. Besides, they face lack of privacy as they have to share their bed and the other furniture in the room.

Ahmad (2016) explored that the students with disabilities feel excluded in the campus environment because they face inaccessibility in anywhere in the institution. This study identified that the students continue to face many physical barriers to educational services such as lack of ramps or elevator, heavy doors, inaccessible washrooms and inaccessible transportation in campus surroundings. There are some detailed factors identified in the present study that aren't found in the previous study; the washrooms aren't sufficient for the students living in the hall because the halls are actually overloaded with the students. Besides, it can be interpreted that the hall authority is very weak of managing the facility they provide for the students living in the hall.

Muzemil (2018) examined that the inaccessibility in physical environment in campus adversely effects on the success and full participation of students with disabilities in their education. The present study found that most of the residential halls don't have appropriate environment for academic success. It can be identified as unique and different situation that varied from the past research findings. The barriers limit the student's daily living activities. The mobility barrier limits the daily movement around the hall as well as the other activities including getting the meal from the canteens, using washrooms and living in the room comfortably. Gilson & Dymond (2012) had similar findings in their study showing that the students face challenges in their daily life activities because of the residential limitation in the campus environment. This study found that the dormitories don't have sufficient numbers of lift and enough space to move; also, there aren't enough ramps. Wright & Meyer (2017) also explored that the mobility barriers effects on the daily living activities of the students in their academic lives.

While comparing the findings from the present study and the previous one, it can be understandable to identify the challenges the students face in their daily life activities. As the present study is different from the previous studies, it can be a reason for identifying some new factors that make challenges in the residential lives of the SWD in the residential halls of Dhaka University.

The major limitation of this study is, it may not reflect the challenges faced by the SWD in all higher education institutions in Bangladesh. Because this study only focused on the residential students of Dhaka University and it is not rational to make a generalization about the challenges of residential lives of the SWD in higher education institutions in Bangladesh. As the study only focused on the residential SWD of Dhaka University, it couldn't provide the information of residential living challenges of non-resident SWD of Dhaka University as well as all of the other higher education institutions.

Recommendations & Conclusion

The study emerged some recommendations for the University of Dhaka case with the aim of improving the residential lives of the SWD. Firstly, the residential building should be modified to make it disability oriented where the infrastructural needs of the SWD would be addressed. Besides, the new residential buildings are needed. Secondly, there should have a policy regarding seat distribution for the SWD and establish authoritative figure who would look after the seating arrangement and other facilities for the SWD. Besides, the respective personnel would connect between the hall authority and the students to meet the needs and demands accordingly. Thirdly, there should have disability orientation & awareness program for the hall staffs and the resident students. Fourthly, the academic facilities in the hall should be enriched with variety of resources and technologies. Though the study only focused the residential lives of the SWD of University of Dhaka, the study also proposes some recommendation for the higher education institutes of Bangladesh. In this regard, the infrastructural facilities should be modified or initiated with the consideration of the needs of the SWD in the institutes. Besides,

proper maintenance and monitoring is needed to look after the needs of the residential SWD. Also, the universities should make the policies for residential accommodation for the SWD and establish a responsive wing to look after their needs and demands. Moreover, the universities should arrange disability awareness campaign to sensitize the personnel which may allow the SWD to enjoy the inclusive environment in their university residential life.

This study has attempted to describe and identify the challenges of residential lives of SWD in Dhaka University. After interpreting the experiences and the observation it can be concluded that the students with disabilities face many challenges in their residential lives and there is a clear gap between the SWD and the hall authorities which is significant while meeting the needs. As the context of the study is different from the context of previously conducted researches, it provided some unique insights of the challenges the residential SWD face in their campus lives. Finally, it can be concluded that these challenges identified from the research will help the stakeholders to take the proper steps to eliminate the challenges and ensure inclusiveness in higher education institutions of Bangladesh.

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