

# A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADAPTATION PROBLEMS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Wang Xiuli<sup>1,2</sup>, and Kway Eng Hock<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,3</sup> Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, City University, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Teacher Education, Heze University, Heze, Shandong, China.

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Malaysia.

**ABSTRACT** – The emergence of inclusive education has altered the landscape of special education placements, dismantling segregation. This report performed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of three college students with disabilities using a qualitative research methodology. This study examined the obstacles and problems experienced by students with disabilities in higher education and hypothesize on the quality of integrated higher education. The research subject believed that the main difficulties experienced in the educational process include living environment, academic learning, and interpersonal communication. The findings of this research indicated that inclusive education is the most effective approach for accommodating students with disabilities, and universities should implement changes to ensure their full inclusion and participation.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 01/09/2023

Revised: 10/10/2023

Accepted: 15/11/2023

## KEYWORDS

*Qualitative Research  
Inclusive Education  
College Students with  
Disabilities Adaptation  
Challenges and  
Difficulties*

## INTRODUCTION

With the call of the civil rights movement for freedom and equality and the pursuit of the ideal of integrated education by the postmodernist trend, the mission to investigate the educational experiences of disadvantaged groups (including people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and low-income groups) in the field of higher education, to understand the quality of the educational process, and to seek the value of education has become an important issue in the study of Western higher education and higher integrated education (Moriña et al., 2020). Inclusive education in the West is anchored in a liberal and democratic political system that respects pluralistic ideals, and its growth is a thorough product of cultural changes in Western culture and the evolution of social theories and concepts. In China, integrated education is anchored in our distinctive ethics of altruism and socialist humanism, and it incorporates the ethical traits of "special care." Higher education based on China's social culture has its own growth features, but it also faces unique challenges. This study attempts to understand the main difficulties experienced by disabled college students in the inclusive education process through a qualitative research method of interviews.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

China Ministry of Education (2020) reported that the gross enrolment rate of higher education in China has reached 54.4% and is transitioning from the popularisation period to the universalisation era. As the largest disadvantaged group in China, however, the gross enrollment rate of higher education for students with disabilities is less than 2.8% of their peers, and the number of college students with disabilities accounts for only 1.6% of the total enrollment in higher education, which is far behind the mass higher education. Moreover, the articulation between basic education and higher education in the field of special education demonstrates a "fault line" phenomenon, and the number of students with disabilities at the higher education level in China lags significantly behind that of basic education (49.47% of special education students in general primary and secondary schools in 2020). Higher education for students with disabilities is still elitist (Deng & Poon McBrayer, 2012). Students with disabilities are still at an extreme disadvantage in terms of access to quality and equitable higher education opportunities. This study aims to identify the characteristics of challenges and responses encountered by college students with disabilities, understand the adverse effects of disabilities on the

inclusive education of disabled college students, and analyse the methods used by disabled college students to overcome these effects and adapt to university life.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Higher Integrated**

Globally speaking, the development process of higher integrated education in developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland is characterised by an early start, rapid development, perfect development, and the formation of a more mature system for ensuring higher integrated education. The reason for the mature development of higher integrated education in developed countries is the ideological basis of the concept of equal human rights, the material basis provided by the highly developed economy, and the legal basis formed by the enactment of laws. The U.S. attaches great importance to higher education for college students with disabilities, especially in the academic support and services for college students with disabilities, which have formed an institutionalised system and standardised process (Zhang, 2018). In particular, different programs are adopted for college students with different types of disabilities to better guarantee the equal right to education for each individual. In the United States, the concept of higher integrated education for college students with disabilities is "equality and diversity", and college students with disabilities are regarded as a part of a diversified society rather than being treated as a special group or disadvantaged group. In the U.K., we have gradually established an approach to support higher education with special needs assessment as the core and learning support and examination support as the guarantee (Pang, 2020).

### **College Students with Disabilities**

Disabled students encounter numerous challenges and barriers when pursuing higher education, which can vary depending on the type of disability they have. Existing research has predominantly centred on two types of disabilities, namely hearing impairments and visual impairments.

Firat (2021) indicates that students with visual impairments face significant barriers in their higher education experiences. Odame (2019) found that graduates with visual impairments encounter numerous challenges during their university studies, including inaccessible programs, lack of sufficient funding, inadequate teaching materials, physically inaccessible environments, negative attitudes from instructors, and overreliance on peers. Safder (2012) also found that students with hearing impairments face difficulties in the classroom, such as a lack of sign language interpretation and mismatched teaching styles from instructors. Additionally, students with visual impairments encounter barriers in higher education, including negative attitudes from peers and a lack of academic support (Firat, 2021).

Students with disabilities may encounter increased challenges in college, especially related to organizing academic accommodations, communicating needs, and developing effective and meaningful social connections. Smedema (2021) found that the participants faced many challenges, including inaccessible programs, lack of adequate finances, lack of teaching and learning materials, inaccessible physical environments, negative attitudes toward lecturers, and overreliance on peers. Most students with disabilities feel that the reasonable accommodations provided to them are not sufficient to meet their academic and assessment needs during their time at the University.

Siddiqui (2021) found that teachers at schools often lack sufficient knowledge and inclusive awareness in the classroom. Al-Hmouz (2014) pointed out that most disabled students feel that the reasonable facilities provided by schools are inadequate to meet their needs for studying and assessments in higher education.

It is only when faced with dilemmas and challenges that appropriate measures should be taken to actively respond. Safder (2012) suggests that sign language interpreters are important in inclusive education. Teachers should be flexible in conducting assessments based on the needs of students with sensory impairments and the stated curriculum goals. To overcome the issues that occur in students with visual impairment, especially the issue of self-confidence and also the stigma of society is to improve society's understanding of the disabled. The mass media should play a key role in disseminating an understanding of the issues and challenges of the disabled, especially in terms of educational needs

(Amin et al., 2021). To provide counselling services to college students with disabilities, the university administration must play an effective role in supporting students with disabilities in higher education and safeguarding their rights and needs.

Kim (2020) argues that despite the risk of lower academic performance for disabled students upon entering college, universities can create an environment that fosters their intellectual confidence and academic abilities on an equal basis with their peers, allowing them to maximize their life skills, self-fulfilment, and personal quality of life. In providing counselling services for disabled students, university administrative departments must play an effective role in supporting disabled students in accessing higher education, ensuring their rights and needs are met.

As a whole, scholars in various countries have shown a trend of increasing attention to college students with disabilities year by year. With the development of integrated education, the research on college students with disabilities is also in-depth. However, when compiling the literature, we found that the attention to college students with disabilities in China is more scattered, and the research methods are more qualitative than quantitative in foreign literature, and more quantitative than qualitative research is used locally in China.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed purposive sampling in qualitative research non-probability sampling and created standardized sampling criteria for the selection of research participants.

1. The students in this class advised that the author become friends with multiple college students with disabilities, create connections with them to win their trust and cultivate long-lasting friendships.
2. Students with impairments who had formed trust and maintained touch with one another were evaluated. Three college students with impairments from Heze College, one with a physical disability (P1) and two with vision impairment were chosen for the study (V1 and V2).

### **Trustworthiness**

Credibility, reliability, transferability, and confirmability establish the trustworthiness of the research.

#### ***Credibility***

A detailed discourse description strategy will gather in-depth data to ensure that the writing process captures the voices of the participants and knows enough about their context and situation to address credibility issues.

#### ***Reliability***

Reliability is the ability to confirm the investigatory process through documentation with consistent and reliable practices. Reliability is the extent to which research processes are recorded and result in dependable and consistent findings (Hayashi et al., 2019). The author intends to increase the reliability of the study through reflective journaling and member checking.

#### ***Transferability***

Transferability is the capability to transfer research outcomes to other populations, settings, and contexts. The rich sample and rigorous interview procedures, as well as the scientific analysis, ensure the credibility of the study.

### **Confirmability**

The collection of results of the study and its analysis will be self-reflective and serve as a check for possible personal bias in the analysis process. Verifiability will be established through participant review and feedback of participant records through member examination of records and peer data.

### **Data Collection Method**

The author plans to collect data through semi-structured interviews.

### **Procedures**

The author interviewed the research subjects through one-on-one Internet phone calls, and each research subject was interviewed for no less than 30 minutes. The interviews were organized into text form and then coded and processed through Excel, and finally, the salient points were derived. See the appendix for an outline of the interview.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The outcomes of the one-on-one interviews will be transcripts including abundant textual data. Using Otter.ai, a web-based artificial intelligence transcription tool, audio recordings will be automatically converted into text. Otter.ai is an Internet-based online artificial intelligence transcription program. Individual interviewees should get their own transcripts for evaluation and possible revision.

## **RESULTS**

Using the convenience sample technique, three college students with disabilities were interviewed for this study, and semi-structured interviews were performed via Tencent meetings and voice-over WeChat. The following table outlines their essential information.

**Table 1.** Basic Data of the Interviewee

Interviewee	Type of Disability	Degree of Disability	Pre-college Placement Setting
P1	Disabled	Grade 3	General School
V2	Visually disabled	Grade 2 of low vision	The mostly ordinary school (Only one week in blind school)
V1	Visually disabled	Grade 1 of low vision	The mostly blind school in regular school)

After interview data were coded, four major components emerged: living environment, academic learning, interpersonal communications, and integration advantages.

In this study, the student's handicap status contrasted with the college environment's obstacles, and in this instance, college students with disabilities were both optimistic and wanted the institution to make adjustments.

**Table 2.** Explanation of Themes

Themes	Explanation of Themes
Living Environment	Participants spoke about the challenges they encountered in the living environment during the integration process in higher education.
Academic Learning	Academic learning difficulties are common among participants with visual impairments. Participants with physical disabilities adapted well in this regard.
Interpersonal communications	Participants spoke of their generally good interpersonal relationships, with only a small number of people unable to understand them.
Integration benefits	Participants who had experienced integration mentioned the benefits of an integrated environment during the interview process.

## **Living Environment**

The first challenge is that students with impairments experience living environment obstacles. We learned through the interviews that some of the obstacles in the physical environment are directly connected to the severity of the kids' disabilities. P1 remembered that when he initially arrived at the university, he was allocated to a dormitory with a bed down the table, but he was physically challenged and had leg difficulties, so he had to be relocated to a different dormitory building. The difficulty was that he couldn't live with his classmates of the same major, which was problematic for the physically impaired student because the course schedules of different majors at the university were different and compelled him to tackle challenges alone. P1 also indicated that he is slower than his contemporaries in many facets of his everyday life. V2 stated that there are insufficient streetlights in certain campus locations and that he must use a flashlight, which makes others appear odd. Because he cannot see the edge of the step, he regularly slips down the stairs. V1 encountered the same problem.

## **Academic Learning**

Unless the disability is in the arm, students with physical disabilities have little difficulty learning academically. VI students have academic difficulties, such as being unable to see the blackboard or read teaching materials, and even books with small print are difficult for them to read. Some teachers are also stingy with teaching materials, and V1 expressed her confusion about why some teachers are hesitant to share teaching materials. Physical education classes, for example, are not accessible to both the physically and visually impaired. They don't have the resources to run or do strenuous exercises. V2 is a preschool education major with a curriculum that includes skills classes like art and music. V2 is a preschool education major with a curriculum that includes classes in art, calligraphy, and dance. With his low vision, this is all difficult for him.

## **Interpersonal Communication**

Regarding interpersonal interactions, students with impairments are, on average, quite tolerant. P1 asserts that he has many nice pals. After discovering that she was blind, V1 told how her roommates took care of her. "When I was walking, if a car came by, even though it was far away, my housemates would pull me to their side out of fear that I might go." Clearly, some kids do not comprehend them. V2 remarked that he had no choice but to pretend not to hear his classmates' rumours about him. Currently, there is no especially effective treatment. Some students misunderstood V1's explanation and believed she was altering the speed of the same row of kids; thus, they lodged a complaint with the sports committee.

During the interview, the three subjects were joyful and self-assured, and V1 remarked that the university had forced her to mature and become independent. All of them wished that the institution would spend more on accessibility, such as by adding yellow strips on the stairs and handrails in the toilets.

## **Integration Benefits**

Both children who had attended segregated schools emphasised the contrasts between segregated and regular schools in their interviews. According to V2, the greatest distinction between segregated and integrated schools is the method of thinking. In a special education school, everyone is safeguarded and confronts fewer obstacles. Many aspects of integrated education, such as interpersonal interactions and academics, are far more complex than in special education. V1 remarked that she dislikes how teachers at the school for the blind continuously remind students of their poor eyesight. She mentioned that college is a wonderfully freeing place where you can make all of your own decisions. After college, everyone's choices are different, their families are different, their families are different, their thoughts are different, and she is no longer unique. She concluded by stating that this is likely what integration is all about.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

When faced with challenges in their living environment, students with disabilities adjust themselves to the environment. P1 said he wakes up earlier than others to clean up his bed and said he is already physically challenged, so if he is not optimistic, he will not be able to do it, and he usually faces these challenges with optimism. V2 and V1 are both VIs, and they both were likely to fall, but they are both optimistic, and their optimism can be felt during the interview. She mentioned becoming disoriented when she was unfamiliar with the school environment.

Both the instructor and the student must be changed for academic learning to occur. Students with impairments get alternative coursework or individualised training from university instructors. V1 states that she particularly appreciates her calligraphy instructor because she provides one-on-one teaching, while her painting instructor allows her to sketch something she can master despite her inability to discriminate between transition hues. Additionally, students with impairments adapt to their education. V1 will often sit in the front row during the next session if the teacher of the previous class did not give instructional materials. She also utilises a cell phone for long-distance vision assistance and a visual aid for close-up vision.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Integrated Education is The Optimal Placement Method.**

College students with impairments can integrate into mainstream society and get an equal education in an integrated setting. Ordinary students learn to accept impaired kids in an integrated setting, develop mutually beneficial relationships, and form lasting friendships. V1, the student questioned, remarked that college had altered her. In the integrated setting, she must handle a variety of challenges on her own, including interpersonal and intellectual obstacles. All of these factors foster her maturation and independence, which is precisely what integrated education entails. Colleges and universities should make adjustments to accommodate disabled students.

### **Universities Should Implement Changes to Ensure Their Full Inclusion and Participation**

All of the respondents agreed that the building of barrier-free facilities at the school was imperfect, and they wished that the school would invest more in the barrier-free environment's construction, such as adding yellow bars to the stairs and handrails to the toilets. In addition to the hardware changes, some teachers and students do not understand and accept students with disabilities, requiring the school to strengthen publicity and popularisation, establish corresponding courses and hold corresponding activities to promote mutual understanding and play a role in bridging the gap between students with disabilities and regular teachers and students.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We would like to thank City University Malaysia for the financial assistance through research grants with CTY202200212.

## **REFERENCES**

- Al-Hmouz, H. . (2014). Experiences of students with disabilities in a public university in Jordan. *International Journal of Special Education*, 29(1), 25-32.
- Amin, A. S., Sarnon, N., Akhir, N. M., Zakaria, S. M., & Badri, R. N. F. R. Z. (2021). Main Challenges of Students with Visual Impairment in Higher Education Institutions. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(1), 734-747.
- Deng, M., & Poon-Mcbrayer, K. F. . (2012). Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China. *British Journal of Special Education*, 39(3), 117–122.

- Frat, T. . (2021). Experiences of students with visual impairments in higher education: barriers and facilitators. *British Journal of Special Education*(3).
- Hayashi Jr, P., Abib, G., & Hoppen, N. (2019). Validity in qualitative research: A processual approach. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(1), 98–112.
- Moriña, A., Sandoval, M., & Carnerero, F. (2020). Higher education inclusivity: When the disability enriches the university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(6), 1202-1216.
- Odame, L., Opoku, M. P., Nketsia, W., & Nanor, B. (2021). University experiences of graduates with visual impairments in Ghana. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 68(3), 332-346.
- Safder, M., Akhtar, M., Fatima, G., & Malik, M. (2012). Problems faced by students with hearing impairment in inclusive education at the university level. *Journal of Research and Reflections in Education*. Vol, 6.
- Siddiqui, G. K. , Mumtaz, S. N. , & Shafiq, F. . (2021). Learners with special needs: problems faced by students and teachers at university level. *Sustainable Business and Society in Emerging Economies*, 3.
- Smedema, S. M. , Lee, D. , & Bhattarai, M. . (2021). An examination of the relationship of core self-evaluations and life satisfaction in college students with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*(2), 003435522199356.
- Zhang, M. . (2018). Academic support service for disabled college students in the United States and Its enlightenment. *Modern Special Education*.
- Pang Wen (2020). The Support System of Inclusive Higher Education for College Students with Disabilities in the UK and Its Enlightenment to China. *Chinese Journal of Special Education*(9): 6.
- China's Ministry of Education. (2020). National Education Development Statistics Bulletin in 2020

## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Interview (30-60 minutes)**

Okay, now I will ask you a series of questions about your practice of university life.

1. What difficulties and challenges have you encountered in college?
2. What will you do in the face of these difficulties and challenges?
3. Why did you do this?
4. What changes do you want the school to make?
5. How are your interpersonal relationships in college?