

Academic and Social Problems Faced by Visually Impaired Students during University Education

Yurdagül Günel

Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Education, Karadeniz Technical University
Trabzon, Turkey

Abstract

In rapidly developing universities in Turkey, although it is aimed to fulfil the support services for disabled students as required by the students and to best meet the needs of the students, it is seen that the needs of students with disabilities cannot be adequately met. Despite the fact that every university administration in higher education supports the creation of accessible university environment for disabled students, the problems of such students remain in practice. In this scope, it is observed that the needs of visually impaired students studying at a public university have not been met at expected level despite the efforts to this end. The aim of this study is to reveal the academic and social problems faced by visually impaired students who are studying at the "Faculty of Education" campus of the state university, to develop suggestions for solving these problems and to contribute to creation of accessible university environment. The study was carried out with "interviews" as a type of qualitative research methods. For data collection, a 'Semi-structured Interview Form' developed by researchers was used. Participants included 5 visually impaired students studying at the Faculty of Education of the state university. Voice recordings were taken at interviews and transcripts of each interviewer were made and the data were analyzed using the "Descriptive Analysis" method. Results showed that although the needs of visually impaired students are tried to be met, they face problems in the academic environment in arrangement of the examination setting and the examiner to give it. Also they reported that they are not informed about the social activities held in the university campus and lack of public transportation line within the campus.

Keywords: Higher Education, Visually Impaired Students, Barrier-free University, Measurement-Evaluation Practices

1. Introduction

The United Nations define disabled person as a person who cannot do the work that a normal person has to do in their personal or social life as a consequence of a hereditary or postnatal handicap in their physical or mental abilities (Koca, 2010). According to the World Report on Disability (2011), more than one billion people (according to 2010 estimates on the world's population) or approximately 15 percent of the world's population are estimated to be living with some kind of disability. In Turkey, according to the results of the 2011 Demographic and Housing Survey; 6.6% of the total population has at least one disability in 2011 (Turkish Statistical Institute News Bulletin, 2015, number: 18617) According to this research; the number of people experiencing difficulty in at least one function is thought to be 4 million 882 thousand 841. Disability includes mental, orthopaedic, ocular, audial and vocal types. According to the National Dissemination Centre for Children with Disabilities, (NICHCY), individuals with visual impairment are divided into four groups: those with low vision, partial vision, legal blindness and complete blindness according to the types of disability (Kızılaslan and Zorluoğlu, 2015).

Education is a constitutional right for everyone, whether or not any of them are disabled. Everyone has the right to equal education, whether they are disabled or not. However, students with disabilities have higher individual needs than their normal counterparts due to the nature of the disability. The more the needs are met, the higher the level of interest and motivation to learn might rise (Sarı, 2005). Visually impaired students among university students do not hold different physical, psychological, academic and social needs and expectations than their health peers. For this reason, no difference should be expected in the educational aims of visually impaired students. However, education and training environments need to be planned by considering the needs of visually impaired individuals (Binatlı Büyükkurt, 1994). Almost all of the learning takes place through the sense of sight and hearing. Individuals with healthy vision acquire about 85% of their knowledge through the sense of sight. Yet, this does not mean that visually impaired individuals will receive 85% less information than sighted people; rather, it means that that they use the other sense organs more effectively as they acquire knowledge (Özyürek, 1998). In this regard, it is important that education and training environments are arranged to meet the needs of visually impaired individuals so that visually impaired people can benefit from education and training activities to the maximum extent. The principle of "Equal Opportunity" in education should be provided for all students who are studying. Enjoyment by disabled students of the opportunities of healthy students at universities would help recognize the different needs that arise due to the limitations of disability and meeting of these needs would increase the quality of education and training.

This study aims to shed light onto the academic and social challenges faced by visually impaired

students at universities, leading to increased academic and social achievement of those individuals. Also we hope our suggestions will provide important and fundamental data for future research. Lastly, it is expected to contribute to the creation of the "Barrier-free Learning experience for future students with disabilities.

The aim of this study is to find out the academic and social problems faced by visually impaired students studying on the campus of the state university where the study was conducted, to bring recommendations for these problems and ultimately to contribute to the creation of barrier-free university settings. In the scope of the study, following sub-problems were investigated from the perspective of the visually impaired students in the study area:

Social Experiences of Visually Impaired Students during University Education

- 1. Could you give information about your accommodation facilities during your university education?**
 - a. What are the accommodation opportunities that the university offers you?
 - b. What are the problems you have faced in accommodation during your university?
- 2. Could you give information about your transportation facilities during your university education?**
 - a. What are the transportation opportunities that the university offers you?
 - b. How do you access to the building you study in (the place you live and other places you need)?
 - c. What problems do you face during access to places?
 - d. What are the solutions you developed to overcome such problems?
- 3. Could you give information about your access to the events and social activities organized throughout your university life?**
 - a. What are the problems you face in access to the events and social activities? What are the solutions you propose for these problems?

Social Experiences of Visually Impaired Students during University Education

- 1. Could you give information about your preparation for the courses you have taken?**
 - a. What are the problems you face while doing homework? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?
 - b. What are the problems you face while using the library? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?
- 2. Could you give information about how you follow-up your courses?**
 - a. What are the problems you face during classes? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?
- 3. Could you give information about implementation of midterm and final examinations for the courses you have taken?**
 - a. What are the problems you face during implementation of midterm and final examinations?
 - b. What are the problems you face regarding the examination setting? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study was carried out with qualitative research methods and interviews were used for collecting data. This method was preferred because it is the best method for unraveling deeply the opinions, thoughts, emotions and feelings of subjects (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2006). Study group was composed of five visually impaired students who were trained in a state university during the 2015-2016 academic year. The participants studied in Social Studies Teaching (1), Turkish Language Teaching (2) and Guidance-Psychological Counseling (2) departments. Two of the participants were females, and three were males.

2.2. Data Collection Tool and Collecting Data

As a start, literature review was carried out and a semi-structured interview form was developed by the researchers. The interview form consisted of six open-ended questions along with probes. Three of the questions were about social life and the other three were about academic experience of the participants. Voice recordings were obtained by interviewing the individuals.

2.3. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Descriptive analysis technique was used to analyze the data. The purpose of descriptive analysis is to introduce the raw data in a format which can be read and used by readers. In this analysis, direct citations are given to reflect the views of the individuals interviewed or observed (Altunışık, Coşkun, Yıldırım and Bayraktaroğlu, 2001, Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). The transcribed interview forms were then numbered in order (K:1, K:2, K:3...).

3. Results

This section is dedicated to discussion of the study results.

Findings about Social Experiences of Visually Impaired Students during University Education

1. Could you give information about your accommodation facilities during your university education?

1.1. What are the accommodation opportunities that the university offers you?

Only two of the participants stated that they stayed in a state dormitory provided by the Higher Education Scholarship and Dormitories Institution (KYK), while the other participants were living in a flat because they did not need the former one. One participant (K3) said that although s/he was staying in a dormitory for the first time, s/he did not have any difficulties because s/he had studied in a boarding middle school for the visually impaired. However, s/he remembers having difficulties in high school as s/he was in a boarding school for students with normal sight.

K3: *"We used to stay in the dorms together with those who have normal sight, so you may face some problems, you do not feel comfortable with them"*.

1.2. What are the problems you have faced in accommodation during your university?

One of the participants (K1) staying in the KYK facilities stated that s/he did not prefer going out except for classes.

K1: *"I can see better at night, anyway I am an evening education student. But I am always accompanied with someone and I meet someone who knows me in front of the building who takes me upstairs. The dormitory is near but I can not come alone because I'm afraid of dogs. There are many dogs in the garden of the university."*

2. Could you give information about your transportation facilities during your university education?

2.1. What are the transportation opportunities that the university offers you?

All of the five participants stated that their university did not provide a private transportation for them so they came to the university with their own means.

2.2. How do you access to the building you study in (the place you live and other places you need)?

One of the participants (K1) stated that s/he was staying at the KYK dorm and went on foot. One of the participants (K4) does not live in town so comes and goes by bus every day, and two participants (K3, K5) live in the city center. K5 comes and goes to school with her/his father every day. The last one (K2) does not live in a far area and s/he has vision loss of 71%, so s/he can walk to school in the daytime. However, s/he cannot see well in the evening so s/he cannot get home without company of a mate after class. K3 stated the faculty building is not so big, so s/he could manage to find her/his way to the classroom because gradually it got easier to move around.

2.3. What problems do you face during access to places?

Again all participants (5) stated that they are having problems when they were alone while they were waiting for a bus or a van. It is particularly difficult for them to decide if the bus is there. They noted that they cannot understand if the bus is there due to the lack of an audible warning system at bus stops. One participant (K4) said that s/he was able to detect at least the obstacles on the road thanks to the white canes s/he uses. S/he added that she travels from and to Beşikdüzü district daily and receives help from people at bus stops.

K5: *"Professor, we could have been given special training, they call orientation training, when we started university. The surrounding could have been introduced to us or we could have been accompanied by someone us until we could adjust. Also training could have been given on using a white cane and the surrounding could have been arranged accordingly."*

2.4. What are the solutions you developed to overcome such problems?

All of the participants used their orientation skills and memorized answers to questions such as "Where should I turn?" or "How many steps should I take to reach to the cafeteria?" to find their way within the building. They stated that it was necessary to lay a sliver for the visually impaired from the bus stop to the campus, even extending them into the buildings.

(K4) : *"I access to places within the campus by using a cane. For example, I have never gone from block C to the cafeteria in my own company. If you tell me that the interview is over, I can not go from here to the cafeteria. There is no road guide for this. You'll have to take me or you or I have to call a friend"*.

"There are yellow lines, professor, which are hospitals. I demand them everywhere on the campus. In particular, I have difficulty in finding the classroom, so classrooms must be indicated with embossed items on top of the stairs and classroom numbers could be written with embossed letters on classroom doors."

(K5); *"Normally I need to use a white cane, but I do not use because the physical conditions in the faculty are not suitable; roads, sidewalks and stairs are very bad. There is nothing written in the Braille Alphabet. There are no guides on the way, so we can not move alone, we are absolutely dependent on others. For example, I can not go by myself if I want to go to the cafeteria. The stairs are so disproportionate that I could fall if I walked alone."*

The participants (100 %) think that they need to follow edges to find their way, which means that lines and bumps and guides must be placed on the edges. They can not find the door and even bump into the wall because

they can not follow the edge. They suggested that an audible warning system should be available at bus stops for notice. Moreover, announcement should be made by an audible warning system before each stop on busses. They added that the campus is very rugged at the extent that the pavements are dismantled in some places, and that there are no special clues for visually impaired students.

3. Could you give information about your access to the events and social activities organized throughout your university life?

3.1. What are the problems you face in access to the events and social activities?

All of the interviewees pointed out that they are generally not informed of events or activities since they are visually announced. They will know only if their friends let them know or teachers announce such events in the class. They added that even if they are aware of activities and social events, they cannot participate without help of someone who can take them up there.

K4; *“Frankly, when I hear news of social activities, I let a friend know asking to go together. In addition, professor, I don't have many friends so I wouldn't like to go and sit there alone. Most of the time, my classmates do not even join me in the cafeteria, this is another social problem.”*

3.2. What are the solutions you propose for these problems?

On this issue, the participants proposed that announcements about activities and social activities can be sent to the phones of visually impaired students via SMS by university administration, emphasizing the developments in technology. Another recommendation was that a button could be placed next to the screens used for announcements in the entrances of the buildings so that they can press to be updated about events. K4 said *“Regular events and social activities can be announced on the faculty web page.”*

Findings about Academic Experiences of Visually Impaired Students during University Education

1. Could you give information about your preparation for the courses you have taken?

1.1. What are the problems you face while doing homework? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?

All participants stated that they had problems with research, they need to go to the library as they are not able to find out everything online. K2 with visual disability of 71 % said;

“I'm listening to the course, I'm trying to take notes in class. At home, I have the textbook read by my mother or father. I can read too, but I'm losing a lot of time. I can read a five-minute passage in thirty minutes. It is a very hard thing to be dependent on someone else to study.”

1.2. What are the problems you face while using the library? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?

It was stated by participants (100 %) that they are not able to go to the library to do their assignment alone, especially the staff working in the library do not help them in this matter. The lack of a voice reading system on the computers in the faculty library leads them to dependence on someone else's help, so they refuse to go to the library. They suggested installation of a voice reading program on at least a few of the library computers to help them do research and homework. As an example, they mentioned the model for visually impaired individuals introduced by Boğaziçi University and suggested setting up of a similar system in their library.

2. Could you give information about how you follow-up your courses?

2.1. What are the problems you face during classes? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?

As reported by all participants, the most frequently faced problem is that lecturers teach the lesson by referring to Powerpoint slides, focusing on normal learners' status. Since visually impaired students cannot see the reflected information, they can only hear verbal expressions. They added that unless the instructor gives them the slides, it is very difficult for them to follow the lesson. They think that they will be able to keep up with class if they are given the course slides before. As another problem, they said that course instructors sometimes write notes on the board while teaching but not repeat them by saying, which causes them to miss the lesson. They think that if any material written during the lesson is expressed verbally, they can solve most of the problems in this subject. Other suggestions were as following:

- Lecture notes should be given in Word format to visually impaired students so that they can prepare better by means of the voice reading (reading aloud) software installed on their computer.
- The students could put their lecture notes in soft copy and an archive could be created with these notes for further reference.
- Volunteer students might record sections of coursebooks by reading aloud.

3. Could you give information about implementation of midterm and final examinations for the courses you have taken?

3.1. What are the problems you face during implementation of midterm and final examinations?

All participants stated that they had problems during the exams. In particular, K1, K3 and K4 pointed out

that they had challenges in computer lessons and English lessons, and even K1 and K4 had to take computer lesson again because they failed the previous year. Again, all of them said that they did not face any problems during examinations and course instructors were flexible about duration of the examinations.

K1; *"I'm taking the computer lesson again unfortunately, but I haven't succeeded in passing it for 2 years. It has to do with instructors. It is a course loaded with visual items. You have to talk to the lecturer. I talked once and tried to express myself. The first exam is an applied one. But, those instructors come from the main campus and I can not find the same instructor every time. I asked the instructor kindly to give a written exam, but s/he refused it. In this course, especially visually impaired students need to be provided a convenience"*.

In relation with English examinations, the students said that they have difficulty in understanding what the examiner reads when the English exam is assigned to a person who does not speak English or has a bad pronunciation (K1, K3, K4). Another important challenge is that the examiner or examination place are not set up in advance sometimes. In this case, they have to find the examiner. Because the exam place is not arranged earlier, the test starts late, which affects their motivation negatively and increases the level of anxiety. Sometimes they even took the examination in the tea room because of the lack of space (K4, K5, K2). They said that if the test papers can be printed in the Braille Alphabet, at least those who can read the alphabet can do the exams on their own (K5, K1).

K4; *"Professor, thanks to the students enrolled in community service course used to implement the exams sometimes. But when they were not available, I had to arrange all. I used to go to the department secretary and explain that I need someone to read the exam for me. For example, in the English exam, the teacher behaved as if I was taking the university entrance exam so I was very nervous. But I arranged someone from outside school to do the exam; I just called my friend asked them to come and do the exam"*.

3.2. *What are the problems you face regarding the examination setting? What would you recommend as solutions for these problems?*

It was often stated that examinations were held in the instructor's office or a redundant classroom, but they happened to take the exams in the department secretary's office or even in the waiting or tea room (K1, K4, K5, K2).

K1; *"If you talk to advisors in the department, they can appoint the examiner two weeks ahead. In some cases, the same person gives the test for one whole year. I don't have any problems then but I do when the examiner is replaced. Some of them read really fast. I am sometimes embarrassed to make them repeatedly read aloud. As for the place, it is sometimes in lecturers' offices, sometimes in the waiting room but since there are so many passers-by, I get distracted."*

K4; *Normally, professor, faculty deanship is supposed to arrange both the examiner and the exam place. At least the head of department should make this arrangement."*

4. Conclusion

Research findings indicate that visually impaired students have both social and academic problems in the university and that these problems are similar. For example, when they first arrived at the university, they had adaptation problems. In addition, when they entered their departments, administrators and some lecturers did not know the fact. In social aspect, they face many social problems such as inadequate planning of the physical environment on campus, transportation, and not being able to be informed about social-cultural activities and attend them. At the same time they are faced with academic problems. For instance, they sometimes cannot have someone to read aloud the lecture notes, obtain lesson materials and keep up with classes requiring visual skills. During examinations, they face difficulties arising from those who read aloud the questions for them; besides, and examiners are replaced in each exam. They are confronted with pronunciation problems due to the examiners. A similar problem encountered by visually impaired students during the examination was mentioned in the study of Karabay (2016). In his unpublished dissertation *"Comparing the effects of the live-reader with computer-aided reading on test achievement of students with visual impairment"*, Karabay (2016) argues that in country-wide tests students with visual impairment face difficulties in relation with the reader and encoder support provided for them. They include inability of the reader to read clearly and smoothly due to bad diction and inability to pronounce the terms correctly if they are from different branches. Likewise, one of the most important difficulties is reported as inability of visually impaired students to use the library in their faculty because of the absence of tools such as embossed materials of magnifying glasses. According to the visually impaired students, problems such as lack of a system that prints embossed letters lack of an audio library system in the library make it difficult for them to study by listening. This seems to be parallel to the findings of Sari (2005). In his study *"Problems of Physically Handicapped and Visually Impaired Students at Selçuk University and Contemporary Solution Proposals"*, Sari (2005) states that visually impaired students are not able to benefit from the library because the library lacks tools arranged considering their disability and embossed documents. Visually impaired students who managed to study at university need more varied and versatile knowledge than

other visually impaired people in the community. Libraries in universities must offer a variety of services to meet the information needs of visually impaired students. These users, like other students, need access to information resources and access to library services during their education (Aydın, 2012) although their number is not so big compared to other students. In the context of such services, the needs of visually impaired students must also be met in the same way as opportunities are provided for other students.

Furthermore, those students face a number of psycho-social problems such as the fact that some of the administrative and teaching staff in their departments do not have an idea about them resulting in negative attitudes towards such students; difficulties the students have in making friendships; difficulty in getting their way around because of the environmental planning ignoring their existence on the campus; problems with dormitory life; and their lacking of opportunity to attend social and cultural events.

5. Suggestions

The study reveals that university students with disabilities suffer from both academic and social and cultural barriers. To overcome such barriers, we suggest taking measures such as following. Special means of transportation could be made available to students with disabilities for easy access within the university. For midterm and final examinations, heads of departments could appoint examiners in advance for visually impaired students. The predetermined examiners could be informed well ahead about special conditions during the test. Also for visually impaired students; social and cultural activities should be announced and they could be kept updated regularly through radio and television in the university. Lastly, visually impaired students can be trained about the library layout and settlement, resources, services provided, and catalogs and database, and an information leaflet can also be developed specifically for their use.

References

- Altunışık, R., R. Coşkun, E. Yıldırım ve S. Bayraktaroğlu (2001), *Sosyal Bilimlerde Araştırma Yöntemleri*, Adapazarı: Sakarya.
- Aydın, A., (2012). Görme Engelli Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Bilgi Erişim Sorunları Üzerine Yapılmış Bir Araştırma. *Bilgi Dünyası*, 13 (1) 93-116.
- Binatlı Büyükkurt, G.B (1994) Sosyal Beceriler Ve Program Dışı Etkinlikler Bağlamında Görme Engelli Yükseköğrenim Gençliği Ve Bu Gençliğin Üniversitelerde Karşılaştığı Sorunlar "Bir Durum Saptaması" [Online] Erişim Tarihi: 12 Şubat 2017. egitimvebilim.ted.org.tr/index.php/EB/article/download/5911/2046.
- Karabay, E., (2016). *Canlı okuyucu ve bilgisayar destekli okumanın görme engelli öğrencilerin test başarıları üzerindeki etkilerinin karşılaştırılması*. Yayınlanmamış doktora tezi. Ankara Üniversitesi Eğitim Bilimleri Enstitüsü, Ölçme ve Değerlendirme Anabilim Dalı. Ankara.
- Kızılaslan, A., Ve Zorluoğlu, S. L. (2015). Görme Engelli Bireylerin Geleceğe Yönelik Kaygıları. *Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, Yıl: 3, Sayı: 16, , S. 357-368
- Koca, C. (2010). *Engelsiz Şehir Planlaması Bilgilendirme Raporu*. Dünya Engelliler Vakfı.
- Özyürek, M., (1998) *Özel Eğitim, Bölüm 9, Görme Engelliler (s:128-151)*. (Ed) Eripek, S. Anadolu Üniversitesi Açıköğretim Fakültesi İlköğretim Öğretmenliği Lisans Tamamlama Programı.
- Sarı, H. (2005). Selçuk üniversitesinde öğrenim gören bedensel engelli ve görme engelli öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları sorunlar ve çözümüne yönelik çağdaş öneriler. *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 13, 335-355.
- Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, (2015). *Dünya Nüfus Günü*. Sayı:18617
- Yıldırım, A. & Şimşek, H. (2005). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri* (5.baskı). Ankara: Seçkin Yayıncılık.