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Comparison of Perceptions of Inclusion Between University Instructors and Students with Disabilities in Ukraine

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Abstract

Ukraine is currently involved in a heated debate about inclusion at all levels of education. This debate has become part of the country's efforts to improve human rights. Prior to independence in 1991, students with disabilities in Ukraine who desired higher education were not permitted to attend universities. How instructors and students with disabilities perceive the process of integration is important for Ukraine's continued movement toward becoming an egalitarian society. This study examined the differences in attitude regarding inclusion and university life between university instructors and students with special needs attending Open International University of Human Development "UKRAINE," the only Ukrainian university that welcomes students with disabilities. Results revealed no significant differences in the attitudes of the two groups. However, when individual questions were analyzed, instructors and students differed in their perception of instructors' willingness to change locations of classes if they were unsuitable for students with physical disabilities, instructors' willingness to change their teaching style to communicate with students with disabilities, and instructors' ability to make students with disabilities feel accepted. Nonetheless, both instructors and students rated their experience with integrated university education as satisfactory.

Ukraine, the second largest country in Europe, is located in Eastern Europe, bordering Poland, Romania, Moldova and Russia. Since independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, the Ukrainian government has experienced resistance to governmental reforms and today struggles to improve the legislative framework for business, to increase productivity and to manage land privatization (Benardo, & Silber, 2005; Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2003).

Special Education in Ukraine

In 2004, 1.8% of all children in Ukraine were registered as having disabilities (Zasenko, 2004). The special education system in Ukraine is a network of

special schools, many of them operating as boarding schools for children with specific disabilities (Csanyi, 2004). These special schools offer children 6 to 12 years of schooling. Recently, schooling for children with some special needs such as blindness and hearing impairments have been extended to 13 years (Bondar, 2004). Families have come to rely on these special schools because they provide children specialized social and educational training (Bondar, 2004). Historically, children with disabilities who desired education after secondary school attended technical and vocational schools and colleges, some of which are boarding schools, or enrolled in special training courses designed for the disabled (System of the Education of Ukraine, 2001).

Inclusion

Attitude Changes Regarding Inclusion.

Integration or inclusion, teaching students with special needs with peers in regular education settings has gained some attention in the last decade in Ukraine (Bondar, 2004; Kolupayeva, 2004; Zasenکو, 2004). The attention has been primarily lead by movements for civil rights from international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1994) and the Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation Network (2006). Currently, the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation (2003) is managing a country-wide research project evaluating full and partial inclusion in 17 regions of the country. Despite this work, it is unlikely that Ukraine's Special Education system will be changed significantly in the next few years. At present, the country lacks governmental and community support for comprehensive integration (Zasenکو, 2004).

Inclusion in Higher Education. In Ukraine, higher education is viewed as a constituent of national education (Korsak, 1998). There are over 200 state-owned and non-governmental higher education establishments under the Ministry of Education and Science in Ukraine (System of the Education of Ukraine, 2001). Prior to independence, students with disabilities who desired higher education were not permitted to attend universities. Their only option was vocational education. Since 1999, students with disabilities have been able to attend Open International University of Human Development "UKRAINE."

Instructors Attitudes Toward Inclusion in Higher Education. Several studies have investigated the attitudes of instructors teaching students with disabilities in American colleges and universities (Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999; Burgstahler, Duolos, & Torcette, 2000; Scott, Weishaar, Park, & Jewell, 2004). Although instructors report more positive attitudes toward inclusion today than in the early 1970s, instructors still report tension regarding the fairness of providing additional support for students with disabilities (Burgstahler

et. al., 2000; Leyser, Vogel, Wyland, & Brulle, 1998). American universities have earnestly complied with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) since its passage in 1975. These universities have eliminated physical barriers to ensure accessibility, made adjustments in scheduling and locations, and offered a formal system of accommodations to students (Burgstahler, 2003; Sahlen & Lehmann, 2006; Thompson, 2004).

Nonetheless, attitudes that students with disabilities face from their professors may also limit academic accessibility and opportunity. In the United States, Babbit, Burbach, and Intcovich (1979) found that university students with disabilities believed that their instructors viewed them negatively. Ten years later, the National Science Foundation task force (1989) found that negative attitudes were still the single most significant barrier in universities for individuals with disabilities. The literature has examined instructors' attitudes and the factors that influence more positive impressions of students with disabilities in the United States (Burgstahler, 2003; Leyser, 1990). However, no research which has examined international university students' perceptions of inclusion, and no research has compared the attitudes of instructors and students in an Eastern European country. Thus, the purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions of instructors and students with disabilities regarding inclusion and university life in a university in Ukraine.

Method

Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were 80 students with disabilities attending Open International University of Human Development "Ukraine" in Kyiv, Ukraine and 39 instructors from the same university teaching in the colleges of Law and Business, Languages and Journalism, Social Technologies, and Economics. Respondents volunteered for participation in the study knowing their identity would remain confidential. Open

Table 1

Characteristics of Instructor Respondents

Characteristics	Percentage of Respondents (n=39)
Male	33.00%
Female	67.00%
Level of Education	
Ph.D./equivalent	56.52%
Masters	26.09%
Bachelors	17.39%
Years Teaching at University Level	
More than 10 years	55.82%
Less than 10 years	44.18%
Experience Teaching Students with Disabilities	58.00%

International University of Human Development “Ukraine” is a private, nonprofit university with approximately 25, 000 students, about 19% of whom are reported to have visual, hearing, health and physical disabilities. At this point, this is the only university in Ukraine admitting students with disabilities who meet admission requirements.

Of the thirty-nine instructors who participated in the study, about 56% had a Ph.D. or equivalent and about 56% had been teaching at the university level for more than 10 years (see Table 1). Thirty-three percent were male and 67% were female. The 80 student respondents were 45% male and 55% female (See Table 2). The largest disability reported by students was “health impairments.” Some of the conditions considered health impairments in Ukraine, such as mild asthma and mild visual impairment, would be correctable or would not be considered a disability in the United States.

Table 2

Characteristics of Student Respondents

Characteristics	Percentage of Respondents (n=80)
Male	45%
Female	55%
Undergraduate Student	92%
Graduate Student	8%
Motor/Physical Disabilities	25%
Health Disabilities	40%
Visual/Hearing Disabilities	35%

Procedures

Instructors and students completed a 19-question opinion survey. Respondents’ were informed that their responses would be anonymous. No time restrictions were given. Both instructors and students with disabilities completed the survey in the same room. Students with blindness or visual impairments had the survey read to them and their responses recorded. Students with hearing impairments had the survey signed to them with an Ukrainian version of American Sign Language (ASL). Students unable to write their responses on the survey form due to physical disabilities used a scribe.

Measures. A modified version of the Disability Awareness Inventory reported by Scott et al. (2004) and originally adapted from Baggett (1994) was given to participants. The new version was called The Student/Instructor Perceptions of University Life and Inclusion Survey (see Figure 1) and was translated into Ukrainian. Instructors’ and students’ surveys asked the same questions, but from the point of view of either an instructor or a student. For example, Question 6 on the students’ survey stated the following: “Faculty are willing to modify or alter testing procedures if it places a student with a disability at a disadvantage such as allowing tests to be given

from a tape or with enlarged print (see Figure 1).” The same question on the instructors’ survey stated: “The form of an exam should be modified or altered if the testing procedure puts a student with a disability at a disadvantage.” Respondents indicated their opinion by circling responses from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

In addition, instructors completed demographic questions such as the number of years teaching in higher education and whether they had taught students with disabilities during their career. Students’ demographic questions asked them to identify their year of study and disability category. Both groups answered five open-ended questions designed to gather qualitative information. Instructors’ questions asked about their experience teaching students with disabilities. Students’ questions asked about their impressions of attending an integrated university and their interaction with instructors and peers.

1 Strongly Disagree
2 Disagree
3 No opinion
4 Agree
5 Strongly Agree

1. Faculty make me feel comfortable when I discuss accommodations and/or my disability.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Faculty asks questions which communicate to me that they care about me and my performance in their class.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Faculty are as willing to answer my questions in class as they are any other student’s questions.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Faculty are willing to allow additional time for exams when it is requested.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Faculty are willing to change the location of a class to accommodate a student with a physical disability.	1	2	3	4	5

6. Faculty are willing to modify or alter testing procedures if it places a student with a disability at a disadvantage such as allowing tests to be given from a tape or enlarged.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Faculty are willing to allow special aids (e.g., tape recorder, assistive devices such as a braille) and services (e.g., sign language interpreter) for students with a disability in their classes.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Faculty are willing to modify their teaching style to ensure communication with students with disabilities.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Faculty make students with disabilities feel accepted.	1	2	3	4	5
10. University and departmental admissions requirements should be modified for students with disabilities.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Students with disabilities should experience the same privileges/experiences in university life as students without disabilities.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Students with disabilities should be successful in my discipline/major/field.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Practitioners and employers in my discipline/major/field recruit and hire persons with disabilities.	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 1. Students’ Perceptions of University Life and Inclusion Survey.

Research Design

A Fisher’s Exact Test was used to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between the two groups (instructors and students). Analysis of demographic information was reported in percentages. Responses to “open-ended” questions were tabulated.

Table 3

Survey Questions with Significant Differences Between Instructor and Student Perceptions

Perceptions*	Percentage %	
	Faculty	Student
Strongly Disagree	0.00	6.25
Disagree	4.55	30.00
No Opinion	11.36	27.50
Agree	63.64	21.25
Strongly Agree	20.45	15.00

*Question: Faculty are willing to change the locations of a class to accommodate a student with a physical disability ($p = 0.0001$).

Perceptions**	Percentage %	
	Faculty	Student
Strongly Disagree	2.27	6.25
Disagree	2.27	18.75
No Opinion	2.27	13.75
Agree	52.27	36.25
Strongly Agree	40.91	25.00

**Question: Faculty are willing to change their teaching style to ensure communication with students with disabilities ($p = 0.0029$).

Perceptions***	Percentage %	
	Faculty	Student
Strongly Disagree	0.00	5.13
Disagree	0.00	10.26
No Opinion	2.27	14.10
Agree	43.18	43.59
Strongly Agree	54.55	26.92

***Question: Faculty make students with disabilities feel accepted ($p = 0.0014$).

Results

No significant difference in the overall perceptions of university life and inclusion between instructors and students with disabilities in this university were found ($p = 0.5729$). However, when survey questions were analyzed individually, three questions revealed significant differences in

<p>College of Economics:</p> <p>“I would like additional help with the integrating process.”</p> <p>“I would like to have special courses for students with disabilities.”</p> <p>“I would like to have additional classes for students with disabilities to prepare them better for regular university classes.”</p>
<p>College of Law:</p> <p>“I would like to continue teaching students in integrated groups.”</p> <p>“I want to create special groups for students with disabilities.”</p> <p>“I want more speakers/lecturers with good experience of working with people with disabilities.”</p> <p>“They need special extra classes for students with disabilities to help them meet the demands of the academic program.”</p> <p>“I need special printed materials for students with disabilities.”</p> <p>“I would like the best students with disabilities to help us in the educational process by giving lectures and so on.”</p> <p>“We need a special library for students with disabilities.”</p>

Figure 2. Instructor Comments to Open-Ended Question: “What would you like to share about your perceptions regarding university students with disabilities and their inclusion into society?”

perceptions (see Table 3). The first question dealt with instructors’ willingness to change locations for students with physical disabilities ($p = 0.0001$). The second question dealt with instructors’ willingness to change their teaching style to communicate with students ($p = 0.0029$). The third question asked

whether instructors made students with disabilities feel accepted ($p = 0.0014$).

A majority of students reported that instructors made them feel comfortable discussing their disability (73%). Forty-six percent of the instructors indicated that they did not believe it was necessary for them to make students feel accepted. Students from the College of Economics reported the highest percentage that “strongly agreed” with this statement (93%).

Over half of the students reported they “strongly agreed” that they would be successful in their chosen field (56%), while 25% of the instructors reported feeling this way. Similarly, 42% of the students

College of Economics:

“I would like all people with disabilities to be able to have good conditions for studying at the university.”

“I would like to make studying at the university for students with disabilities as easy as possible.”

College of Law and Business:

“I would like to see the number of qualified sign-language interpreters increased.”

College of Languages and Journalism:

“Students with disabilities need more scholarships so they can go to university.”

“There is a need to increase the number of sign-language interpreters.”

“Students with disabilities would profit from exchange programs to other universities in other countries.”

“A person with a disability is not a person who is helpless and cannot help him or herself.”

College of Social Technologies:

“I want to help people and let them know what can be done.”

“I believe I will find a job and feed my family.”

“I am just like everyone but I have poor vision. I want to make a difference.”

Figure 3. Student Comments to Open-Ended Question: “What would you like to share about your future inclusion into society?”

reported that they “strongly agreed” that employers would hire them in their field. Eighteen percent of the instructors reported feeling that way.

Instructors’ and students’ responses to open-ended questions, organized by college, are presented in Tables 5 and 6. Instructors from the College of Social Technologies and the College of Languages and Journalism did not complete any open-ended questions. Only thirty-six percent of all instructor and student respondents answered the open-ended questions. Figure 2 lists faculty impressions about students with disabilities and the students’ inclusion into Ukrainian society. Comments suggested that instructors were ambivalent about integrated classes for students with disabilities and desired additional support. Figure 3 lists students’ comments about their future integration into Ukrainian society. Students’ comments also tended to focus on a desire for additional resources.

Table 4

Instructors’ Responses to Demographic/Opinion Questions based on College in the Open International University of Human Development “UKRAINE”

	Question	
	Have you taught a student with a disability before?	How would you rate your experience teaching students with disabilities?
College of Economics	56%	100% “very satisfactory”
College of Law and Business	30%	14% “very satisfactory” 66% “satisfactory” 20% no response
College of Languages and Journalism	No responses	No responses
College of Social Technologies	No responses	No responses

Instructors from the College of Economics identified themselves as teaching courses in Business, Economics, Engineering, and Mathematics. Over one-half of the instructors from this college who answered demographic questions reported they had previously taught students with disabilities (see Table 4). All of these instructors rated their inclusion experience as “very satisfactory.” Instructors from the College of Law indicated they taught classes in Law Education, International Business, and International Law. Approximately one-third of these respondents reported they had taught students with disabilities before. Sixty-six percent rated their experience as “satisfactory” (see Table 7). Both instructors (88%) and students (85%) rated their experience with integrated university education as satisfactory.

Discussion

In 1995, Ukraine ratified the European Convention for Human Rights granting social protection to those with disabilities. The law provided some financial support, reduced rates on public transportation, and encouraged employment. However, the law did not extend to equality in education, including higher education. Although this law is comprehensive by international standards, it is unevenly enforced and penalties for not complying with the law are rarely issued. For example, according to Ukrainian law, all businesses must fill 4% of their workforce with individuals with disabilities. However, in practice, many employers either completely ignore the law or only hire individuals with mild health disabilities, such as asthma (Vilkos, 2005).

As a nation, Ukraine appears to have a real desire to change its cultural views and practices toward individuals with disabilities. It has partnered with several international nongovernmental organizations to advocate for and protect children with disabilities (Open Society Institute and Soros Foundations Network, 2006). It participated in the 2003 European Year of People with Disabilities that was dedicated to promoting the positive contributions of persons with disabilities and in reducing discrimination

(Division of International Special Education and Services, 2004). However, no unified commitment from the central government regarding inclusive education or comprehensive societal integration has been issued. As illustrated by the results of this study, social change seems to be occurring below the level of the central governmental as individuals, individual businesses, schools and universities take the task of integration and disability rights forward with their own individual initiatives.

For the students with disabilities who participated in this study, attendance at Open International University of Human Development “UKRAINE” was their first encounter with peers without disabilities. For students without disabilities, this university provided them their first interaction with peers with disabilities. Integration occurs in classes, and in formal and informal social activities. The same is true for instructors. The first time most of the instructors in this study interacted with students with disabilities was when a student entered their class. Considering this, it is impressive that the results revealed that both instructors and students with disabilities were satisfied with their experience in an integrated university.

Many of the instructors and students appeared surprised by a survey that was interested in their opinions, and asked many questions about how the information would be used before they were willing to complete the survey. Approximately 30% of the surveys from both instructors and students had omitted responses. This, and the low rate of instructor and student responses to the open-ended questions, may be attributable to a holdover from Soviet rule. There seemed to be a pervasive concern about reprisals and a strong need for reassurance that individual identities would not be revealed. This observation should be considered when future research is developed which is opinion-driven.

Despite the fact that Open International University of Human Development “UKRAINE” has been educating students with disabilities since 1999, accommodations have been provided informally, on a case-by-case basis. American universities have offered accommodations to students with

disabilities for over 35 years. However, the concept of “reasonable accommodations” (Author, 2004) in primary, secondary or higher education settings is new to most Ukrainian educators. A reasonable accommodation makes it possible for a student with a disability to participate fully in an education program, and makes it possible for the instructor to fairly evaluate the student’s understanding of material without interference from the student’s disability (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2004). In essence, survey questions asked students how well instructors provided accommodations and instructors’ questions asked if they believed that certain accommodations should be offered. The supports and adaptations instructors provided were informal and inconsistent if one used the American definition of the term. Understanding the informal way of integrating university students in Ukraine, it is impressive that no differences were found in the perceptions or attitudes of instructors and the students they taught.

The few differences that were noted in survey responses when individual questions were analyzed may be explained by the case-by-case manner in which accommodations were provided as well as limitations of the university studied. Although instructors reported they were willing to change their communication styles to ensure communication with students with disabilities, students at this university did not agree with instructors’ perceptions. Similarly, although instructors reported that they were willing to change the location of a class if it were unsuitable for a student with a physical disability, the majority of students reported that they did not see this in practice. In reality, none of the multiple campuses of Open International University of Human Development “UKRAINE” were accessible which mirrors Ukrainian society. That is, sidewalks, businesses, and public transportation continue to be inaccessible. This is a situation that will need to be addressed if Ukraine continues to express an interest in including its citizens with disabilities.

In general, the students in this study were more optimistic about being successful in their chosen field than were instructors. This could be because

instructors had more maturity and appreciation for the depths of discrimination students may have to face when they graduated. In general, public attitudes toward differences in Ukraine are negative and isolating (Vilkos, 2005). Instructors and students from the College of Languages and Journalism were the most optimistic about employment after graduation. This could be because many of the students were enrolled in the English Language Translation degree program. Since translation may be handled outside formal business settings, it may be that students and instructors believed that students would not be subjected to the same levels of discrimination that students enrolled in other, more visible careers would have to encounter.

Students in the College of Economics reported that instructors made them feel more comfortable discussing their disability than instructors in the College of Law. This might be attributed to the fact that all the instructors in the College of Economics reported having “very successful” teaching experiences with students with disabilities, while instructors in the other college may have had fewer contacts with students or may have had less rewarding experiences. To advance inclusion in higher education settings, training must be provided for instructors so they are better able to meet the individual needs of students. After this study was concluded, formal training in inclusive practices was offered to instructors and students who volunteered. Instructors participated in seminars that defined accommodations, discussed appropriate accommodations for students with different disabilities, confidentiality and procedures for improving learning in integrated groups. Students received training in the accommodations instructors would be able to provide, learned procedures for requesting accommodations, and discussed self-advocacy (Raver, in press). It is clear from the results of this study that administrators, instructors, and students at the Ukrainian university were committed to moving Ukraine toward its goal of an egalitarian society, one small step at a time.

Limitations of the Study

It is not possible to generalize the results of this study due to the sample size, the fact that instructor and student respondents were volunteers, and that only one university was studied. More research probing public opinion about integration and instructor-student relationships is needed in Ukraine and internationally.

Conclusions

No differences were found in the perceptions of inclusion and university life between instructors and students with disabilities in the Ukrainian university studied. However, instructors and students differed in their perception of instructors' willingness to change locations of classes if they were unsuitable for students, instructors' willingness to change their teaching style to communicate with students with disabilities, and instructors' ability to make students with disabilities feel accepted. Open-ended responses revealed that instructors and students in the College of Languages and Journalism were the most optimistic about being employed in their field following graduation. Both instructors and students with disabilities described their experience with integrated university education as satisfactory.

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