



Competencies and Proficiencies in Special Education: The Case of Ethiopian Universities

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Abstract

This study explores and analyses the competencies and proficiencies of final-year university students studying special education in two public higher education institutions in Ethiopia. A total of fifty-five final-year students were purposefully sampled with the results that these students severely lacked the requisite competencies and proficiencies in areas and skills that are crucial for personal and professional advancement in higher education. The study also observes that the training of university students does not sufficiently incorporate practical experiences and effective exposure to the tools and methods that schools employ to provide robust special education services. The study, based on the analysis of knowledge of the Individual Education Plan, concludes that final-year students involved in this study lack the requisite competencies, experiences and proficiencies which are key skills necessary for special education teachers.

Résumé

Cette étude explore et analyse les compétences et les aptitudes des étudiants de dernière année en éducation spécialisée dans deux institutions publiques d'enseignement supérieur en Éthiopie. L'échantillonnage a été fait de manière délibérée pour avoir un total de cinquante-cinq étudiants de dernière année manquant sérieusement de compétences et de savoir-faire dans des domaines et des aptitudes qui sont cruciaux pour un avancement personnel et professionnel dans l'enseignement supérieur. L'étude observe également que la formation des étudiants universitaires n'intègre pas suffisamment d'expériences pratiques et d'exposition effective aux outils et méthodes utilisés par les écoles pour offrir des services cohérents en matière d'éducation spécialisée. Se fondant sur

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l'analyse de la connaissance du Plan d'enseignement individuel, l'étude conclut que les étudiants de dernière année impliqués dans ce travail ne possèdent pas les qualifications, les expériences et les aptitudes requises, qui sont des compétences clés nécessaires aux enseignants de l'éducation spécialisée.

Introduction

Ethiopia's higher education sector has been characterised by a remarkable expansion over the last decade. Education in general and higher education in particular are among the key priority sectors for public investment, attracting the highest spending allocation in the federal budget. In five years between 2015 and 2020 alone, the country established fifteen additional higher education institutions, now totaling over fifty. According to the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation No. 650 (2009) one of the objectives of higher education is to 'prepare knowledgeable, skilled, and attitudinally matured graduates in numbers with demand-based proportional balance of fields and disciplines so that the country shall become internationally competitive.' The Proclamation further intends to 'promote and enhance research focusing on knowledge and technology transfer consistent with the country's priority needs.' Furthermore, the Proclamation states that one of the objectives of higher education in Ethiopia is 'preparing and supplying qualified graduates in knowledge, skills, and attitudes on the basis of needs of the country.'

A Master Plan for Special Education in Ethiopia 2016–2025 (MoE 2016) stipulates that the Ethiopian government is dedicated to getting every child to school following the theory, principle and rules of inclusive education. In an internationally recognised policy for inclusion, students with special educational needs denote persons with disabilities, learning difficulties and behavioural problems, and also gifted and talented children.

According to the Ministry of Education (MoE 2017) special needs education is defined as 'the education of students with special needs in a way that addresses the students' individual differences and needs.' The document further discussed that the special education service follows different processes that involve an individual education programme with methodically supervised arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted resources, equipment and materials.

According to the MoE (2010) and Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) V (MoE 2015) there is no sufficient data on the number of either students or people with disabilities in Ethiopia. The World Health Organization (WHO), on its Child Health Dialogue, noted that 'up to 5% of children are either born with a disability or become disabled during their childhood. With an estimated school population ages 4 to 18, amounting

to more than 33.5 million, this implies an estimated 5 million children with special education needs' (WHO 2011).

The special education strategy (MoE 2006) and guidelines (MoE 2012) documents noted that lack of commitment on the part of implementers, absence of screening and assessment tools, limited capacity and limited awareness, limited budget and funding, and curriculum rigidity beset special education services from being fully functional. The country's 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) states that, all learners including those with Special Educational Needs (SENs), should study in consideration of their full potentials and needs. Within the framework of this policy, the Ethiopian government has designed and launched a twenty-year Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) to translate policy into action (MoE 2012). According to the first SEN program strategy (MoE 2006):

Although, Special Needs Education (SNE) program has been going on in the country for several years by various providers, it was conducted in fragmented and arbitrary manner. This was primarily due to the absence of a nationally governing strategy for the program. By way of addressing this problem, Ministry of Education (MoE) designed the first SNE Program Strategy in 2006 based on the country's Constitution and Education and Training Policy (ETP).

The 2006 special need education strategy is intended to attain the overall objective of building an inclusive education system which will provide quality, relevant and equitable education and training to all children, youth and adults with SENs and ultimately enable them to fully participate in the socio-economic development of the country.

Conceptual Frameworks

Producing a competent and proficient final-year student and future teacher needs to have applicable content and pedagogical knowledge, affective-motivational expertise and beliefs, decision-making and professional judgement skills, and usable and realistic language aptitudes (Klieme, Hartig and Rauch 2008; Glaesser 2019). Glaesser (2019) further stated that an individual teacher's knowledge and skills are acquired through instruction or experience with direct exposure in the field in question or both.

Guerriero, and Révai (2017: 261) describe professional competence as the 'ability to meet complex demands in a given context by mobilizing various psychosocial (cognitive, functional, personal and ethical) resources. In this sense competence is dynamic and process-oriented, and includes the capacity to use and adapt knowledge.' Moreover, Klieme, Hartig and Rauch (2008) also stated that:

In a modern industrial society, education and professional qualifications can no longer be described according to a rigid canon of knowledge in specific subjects passed on from generation to generation. Instead building competencies has been identified as the main objective of education.

Klieme, Hartig and Rauch (2008) further stated that to enhance the productivity of education and increase human educational resources, building competencies following its practicality and working on educators' proficiencies play crucial roles. This implies that building competencies and proficiencies have been identified as the main objectives of education at all levels. Performances that are based on competencies enrich the actual execution of tasks as in, for instance, teaching, as they boost the overall expertise of teachers. In educational trainings, it is important to acknowledge individuals' abilities, competencies, proficiencies, expertise and the relation between each one of these (Rychen and Salganik 2001). Moreover, Fauth, Decristan, Decker et al. (2019) stated that competencies, proficiencies and life skills have important theoretical and practical contributions in educational research, instruction and knowledge production. These educational concepts and ideas play significant roles in the reconceptualisation and operationalisation of educational objectives.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) stipulates diagnostic educational information about a student with learning disabilities for special education and regular teachers, school administrators, parents or guardians. An IEP is prepared with collaboration of the IEP team members who understand the student's disability and who analytically comprehend how this disability may influence the student's learning and ability to access the curriculum and the student's functional living skills. Based on the information obtained through different assessment tools, student portfolio, field observation and data generated from parents, IEP goals can be generated.

The IEP goals designate a plan of action to address individualised areas of need to aid the student in succeeding in the academic curriculum and developing appropriate functional living skills (Kurth and Mastergeorge 2010; Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey 2010). According to Kovač-Cerović, Jovanović and Pavlović-Babić (2016) the 'IEP has been promoted as a tool for enabling teachers to make adaptations to lesson planning and the curriculum in order to take account of the needs of individuals and to ensure that they gain access to learning alongside their peers.'

The IEP is the blueprint and procedure whereby teachers, support personnel and parents work jointly as a team to meet the needs of individual students who need a variety of accommodations, modifications and support

to make the curriculum accessible to students with special educational needs. An IEP is developed to guarantee that a child with an identified disability receives student specific instruction and related services. The educational plan on the IEP is implemented in testimony to the goals and objectives with reference to a student's current needs and skills, which are stated at the present level of performance (Boyd, Ng and Schryer 2015; Goepel 2009). An IEP is a legally mandated document developed based on data generated by a multidisciplinary team. Different assessments are used to generate data on the basis of which goals, benchmarks and services for each child eligible for the special education service are planned. An IEP, therefore, provides, a clear understanding of where the levels of the student in his/her academic, social, adaptive, organisational and other important skills are, which are essential to plan, as well as to implement, each lesson the students are participating in (Kurth and Mastergeorge 2010; Prunty 2011).

Research Question

As noted earlier, the study is intended to explore and analyse the extent of competencies and proficiencies of final-year university students studying special education in terms of the requisite skills necessary to qualify them as graduates. Guided by this objective, the research question is: 'What is the extent of competencies and proficiencies of university students studying special education?'

Research Methods

In this study quantitative data were generated using a survey collected from fifty-five final-year students at two public universities that offer special education programmes in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. These final-year students were targeted to explore the type of courses they studied, the practicum experiences they undertook during their university studies, and to assess their competencies and proficiencies in various requisite skills. The survey protocols included student life in the university, practical experiences and exposure during the course of their studies. Most of the survey participants also made written notes on the survey responses. This made the study richer as it provided an additional opportunity to get a glimpse of the views of the participants as regards the relevant questions.

To avoid possible ambiguity (Lefever, Dal and Matthiasdottir 2007) on any of the questions, respondents were brought together at a shared place all at the same time where each question was carefully explained to avoid misunderstanding and also address the cultural nuances and language hurdles. Each respondent was made to complete the survey questionnaire while in

that room, without interacting with anyone else but with an opportunity to ask for clarity on any of the questions. To ensure full comprehension and a high response rate, the survey questions were translated into the national language (Wood 2003). Students were also allowed to leave notes on the survey papers in a language of their preference if they wished to do so.

Results and Discussion

Exposure and Experience

This section focuses on the exposure and experience of respondent students in their final-year. Three separate but interrelated queries were used to generate data in these important aspects of prospective special education teachers. These queries were organised under:

1. exposure (work experiences, such as through practicum);
2. interest and future career; and
3. contact and guidance of advisors and supervisors.

The results and discussions are provided in subsequent sections.

Exposure and Working Experiences

The data indicate that the final-year students lack sufficient practical experience and exposure to evaluate, assess and plan lessons and teach students with learning disabilities. Only 40 per cent of the final-year students reported having some level of exposure necessary to make them effective special education teachers. These students stated that their exposure and experience are mainly limited to such aspects of disability as physical impairment. They said that they lack the experience of working with students that have mental or cognitive disabilities. This inadequate exposure translates as mere physical presence in the same premises with physically-impaired students, without considering their learning challenges and/or applying their knowledge/skills towards supporting the students to overcome their difficulties. They reported lack of familiarity with the measurement, assessment and teaching tools and resources that are key in providing appropriate interventions to students with learning disabilities.

As it is, being a successful special education teacher is a challenge, especially if the teachers lack practical working experiences as students in the university (Habibi, Mukinin, Riyanto et al. 2018). As discussed above, practicums are great ways for college and university students to acquire valuable work experience.

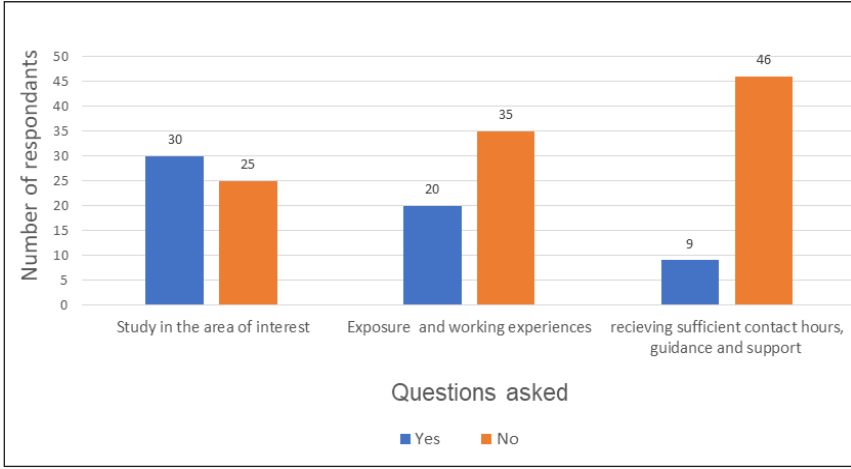


Figure 1: Final-year students’ experiences

Figure 1 indicates that more than half of the respondents lacked exposure or working experience with students of special educational needs. Yet, the hands-on work experience that university students are exposed to is irreplaceable and may not be acquired from an ordinary lecture-room setting. Practical experience has a great advantage for university students as it enhances their readiness and promptness in the field of special education (Ylagan et al. 2013).

Study in the Area of Interest

Of the final-year students 45.5 per cent said that special education is not the career of their choice nor were they assigned the department of their choice. Yet, only 54.5 per cent of the students said that they like to be teachers of students of special educational needs. Studying a discipline based on a student’s interest heightens professional commitment, encourages active involvement, and enhances favourable impact. Furthermore, special education teachers who are enthusiastic about their profession are typically willing to learn more. This interest gives them a much more satisfying professional life as a special education teacher and helps them go the extra mile to make the service a more effective one (Athey 2008).

After graduation, students who are interned in the areas of their studies are more likely to feel confident about being special education teachers. When people do what they like to do most, they become more productive. Reed and Stoltz (2010) further stated that when people are doing work that they enjoy doing, they will not be misanthropic, easily irritable, and impatient.

People will want to be around them because of their proactiveness and cheerful personality. Students lack of option of choosing disciplines/fields of studies on the basis of interest has direct implications for the profession.

Receiving Sufficient Contact, Guidance and Support

While 83.6 per cent of the students said that they were provided with neither enough contact time, guidance nor support from their advisors, only 16.4 per cent said that they have received some tangible support. Yet, in this educational journey, advisors are important assets for students as resource persons, referral agents, student advocates, and friends while pursuing this educational goal (Donnelly 2009). Academic advisors help, guide and instruct students as they navigate their career path. They also monitor the academic progress as well as performance of students throughout their stay in the higher education institutions. Thus, academic advisors play major roles in the development and timely graduation of students in higher education institutions. Therefore, advisors and lecturers must be able to create sufficient contact hours with their students so that they receive adequate guidance, counselling and necessary support of different kinds to make the students' stay in the universities as productive as possible.

Knowledge of Assessment Tools

This section focuses on assessment skills of students and interrogates whether special needs students have acquired sufficient practical experience in assessing school-bound students with special educational needs. As indicated in Figures 2 and 3, 53.4 per cent of the final-year students lack sufficient practical exposure and experience in assessing the different skills indicated. As the data show more than half of the students were completely unfamiliar with the assessment tools. Furthermore, students said that they have no idea what the assessments are for; why teachers and administrators need to utilise them; how parents, specialists and regular teachers benefit from them, and what advantage students with disabilities may accrue from these assessments.

And yet, the very first task a team performs when it encounters a student with a learning disability is to offer different types of assessments for various academic and social skills (Salvia et al. 2012). These assessments help teachers, specialists, administrators and parents identify the levels of each student with special educational needs for appropriate skills.

The students were also asked if they have sufficient exposure to the different assessment tools and also if they use them to assess students with

learning disabilities for different skill sets. These skill sets include decoding skills, reading fluency, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, mathematical reasoning, mathematical calculation, adaptive, social and motor skills – as indicated in Figure 2.

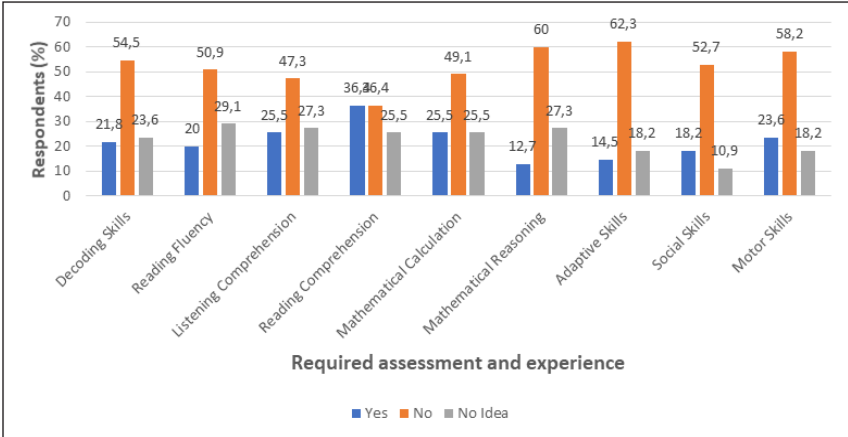


Figure 2: Specific assessment knowledge/skills

Almost a quarter of the respondents said that they have no idea what these assessments are all about, let alone the skills to use them as instructional tools. Of the respondents 23.6 per cent indicated their unfamiliarity with these assessment tools by admitting that they had never heard of their existence pointing out on the survey that they had ‘no idea about the assessment’. Two also made notes on the survey stating: ‘I don’t know if all these skills have their own assessments and have never seen them practically’, and ‘When I hear about assessment tools, I thought of mechanical and technological equipment like a tape-recorder, cassette or DVD, but I have no idea that assessment tools for these important skills exist.’¹

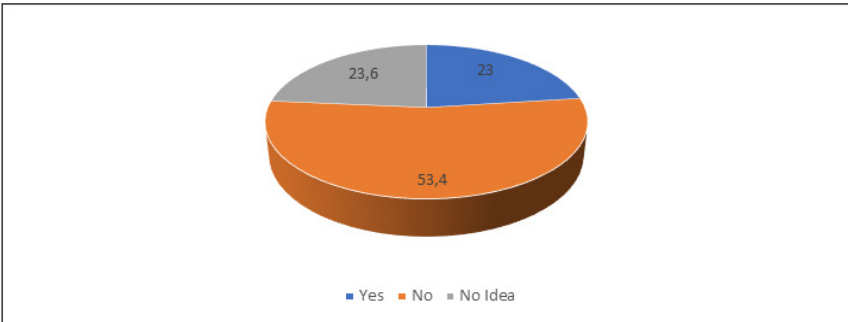


Figure 3: Overall assessment knowledge/skills

On the other hand, 23 per cent of respondents said that they were familiar with these assessments or have read some information about them. Yet, many of them indicated that they lack practical experience and exposure to these assessments. One of the respondents noted: 'I read some information about these assessment tools and heard information in the lecture hall, but I haven't seen them practically with my own eyes.' These two blocs of respondents when combined account for a greater than three-quarter (77 per cent) who may be unable to utilise these assessments in their future work as special education teachers due to lack of knowledge, experience and exposure.

After eligibility processes are completed, special education students have to be assessed for skills considered to be important in their day-to-day school as well as social life (Macy and Hoyt-Gonzales 2007). Academic skills, especially in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics, as mentioned above, take on a more functional role to exploit real world experiences (Schulz 2008). Likewise, as Ditterline, Banner, Oakland et al. (2008) argued, adaptive and social skills equally help students to successfully survive in society as its valuable members. Work habit skills and organisational skills help individuals to effectively plan their life and help them to be accepted in a group or society (Salvia et al. 2012). Yet, data from students' assessment on students' performance is used to make an early call for a pre-referral intervention or response-to-intervention approach (*ibid.*). Once students begin to receive special education services, data collection should continue to guide the whole teaching-learning process. Continuous assessment, therefore, is an effective tool to help teachers and students to better comprehend, appreciate, track, and fuel readiness, performance and student growth (Hayford 2008).

Therefore, it is necessary to discuss these skills as they play a significant role in shaping the personality as well as academic success of students with disabilities. To effectively focus on the constraints in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour frequently experienced by individuals with learning disabilities, teachers need to provide direct instruction to various skill areas in addition to modifying curricula to meet the student's academic level and learning style. Multiple research has delineated that learning these skills has both social and academic advantages in creating opportunities to successfully participate in day-to-day school life, appreciate the learning processes and freely participate in everyday life in society.

In summary, the great majority of students surveyed for this study indicated that they lack practical exposure and experience of the different assessments that schools are supposed to employ to identify the type and level of services that students with special educational needs should be provided with.

Knowledge of the Individual Education Plan

According to Shah, Kunnavakkam and Msall (2013) ‘An IEP is a legally mandated document developed by a multidisciplinary team; it describes the special education services to which a child is entitled after an individualized evaluation has been completed and the child has been found eligible for services.’ They further state that ‘examples of services incorporated in an IEP include classroom academic support, placement in a special education classroom, or therapies such as speech, occupational, and physical.’ It is thus practically impossible to provide special education services without an IEP and it is crucial that final-year students are endowed with the competency and proficiencies in the whole process of the IEP.

An IEP has different sections and is prepared in such a way that any teacher, school or district personnel can readily revise or adapt the IEP document to teach the student with a learning disability. Drasgow, Yell and Robinson (2001), Bergin and Logan (2013), and Gartin and Murdick (2005) stated that these different IEP sections provide personal as well as academic information about the student.

In this section, four separate and important concepts in the process of the IEP were used to generate data from the surveyed students. This section, therefore, is dedicated to explore the final-year students’ exposure and experiences in the areas of the eligibility process, forming and leading the IEP team, preparing the IEP, and the IEP implementation process. The IEP implementation process consists of practically executing the IEP, following its progress, amending the IEP whenever it is necessary and even totally changing the IEP when needed.

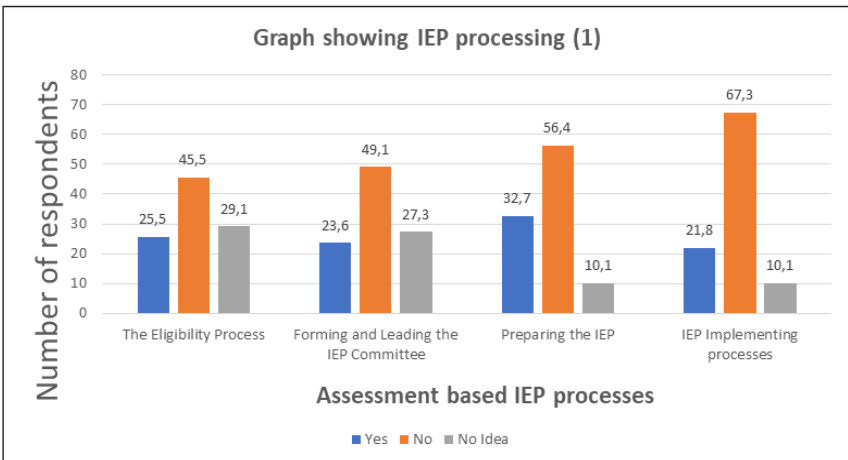


Figure 4: IEP processing of respective parts (1)

Figures 4 and 5 indicate that the large majority, 74.1 per cent, of the participants stated that they lack sufficient exposure, practical experience and expertise in handling IEP processes. Of this majority, 54.8 per cent of them said that they didn't know what it takes to prepare an IEP, nor what it takes to implement and revise it. The remaining 19.3 per cent said that they have 'no idea' what an IEP is all about and what it stands for. Only a quarter of the respondents said that they understood the theoretical part of an IEP, though they didn't participate in real and practical IEP preparation and implementation activities. One student on the survey question noted that 'I don't have the confidence to go out and implement an IEP process in a school.' Therefore, the data indicated that the majority of the students lack sufficient knowledge, competency and proficiency that are required for effective teaching in special education.

Figure 5 displays the average percentage of respondents who indicated their exposures in the four IEP areas as laid out in Figure 4. The chart indicates a large majority as lacking the requisite skills.

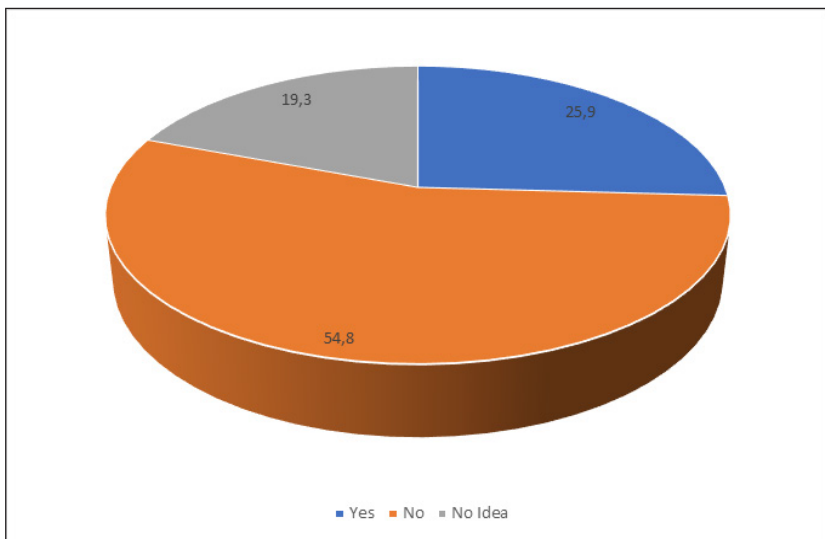


Figure 5: Average IEP processing

In a written response one student admitted that 'I even don't understand the difference between individual education programme and inclusive education.' Another student said that 'I have never prepared an Individual Education Plan based on data collected by myself using a real case.' A female student in an informal conversation following the survey said:

I didn't choose to join this department willingly. I wanted to be an accountant. I wanted to work in a bank. But once I was assigned, I accepted it just because

I have a cousin who has Down's Syndrome. I thought I can help him using the knowledge I have learned in this department. But unfortunately, I don't even understand what IEP is or how it is prepared. I am even embarrassed in front of my family. I don't even have a practical knowledge to help my own family member. I am always embarrassed when they ask me practical questions on how to help him with reading, writing, maths, etc.

In summary, the vast majority of the final-year students who participated in this study indicated that they were unable to go out into relevant schools to assess them, prepare an IEP, follow its implementation, and revise it as appropriate. The data indicated that these study participants lacked practical competencies in IEP processes and were ill-prepared as special education teachers.

Conclusion

The data generated from the final-year university students indicate poor practical experience of these students studying special education in the two universities. The data also indicated lack of sufficient contacts with and guidelines from their supervisors.

More than 45 per cent of the surveyed students reported that they study a field which they would not wish to have a career in. And yet, a creative and motivated cohort of teachers with a career in sight is paramount in producing effective, competent, proficient and productive teachers. A dissonance between personal interest and professional trajectory is evidently pervasive. In addition, the majority of the students (53.4 per cent) lack sufficient practical exposure and experiences in the different types of assessment skills necessary for students with learning disabilities. And thus, it is challenging to provide appropriate special education services if assessment tools are not available at every stage.

The twenty-first century classes are filled with diverse student populations and teachers are expected to serve all these students by catering to a variety of learning needs, styles and levels (Boyd et al. 2006). Accordingly, teachers need to be well equipped with up-to-date knowledge, teaching strategies, as well as subject-specific content areas (Ford 2013). The special nature of special education makes it all the more important to ensure an elevated level of language proficiency, academic competency, and knowledge of assessment prior to graduation as special education teachers.

Note

1. These and subsequent quotations are translations.

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