Chapter IX
Attitudes and Experiences of Students in Higher Education Institutions towards their Peers with Disabilities

9.1 Introduction

The term ‘attitude’ has been defined in various ways over a period of time. An attitude, according to Traiandis (1971), involves what people think about, feel, and how they would like to act toward an object. Research studies show that attitudes, to some extent, can explain or predict an individual behaviour and attitude implies that it influences an individuals’ behaviour (Scarr and Zanden, 1984). In order to have better understanding of the role of attitudes of students and its impact on the motivation of peers with disabilities to actively participate in day-to-day activities, it is important to assess attitudes. As has been seen in the chapter on Review of Literature, there has been progress in the provision of support services to students with disabilities in higher education institutions around the world, as well as policies promoting equal opportunities for students with disabilities in education institutions. However, there is little research in the Indian context on understanding the attitudes and the experiences of students towards their peers with disabilities at the school, college or university levels. Therefore, the present study has attempted to explore this area and try to fill this gap, to generate new knowledge and helping university administrators to better cater for these students. This chapter presents a qualitative analysis of the attitudes and experiences of the students in higher education institutions towards their peers with disabilities and the factors that might have contributed to these attitudes and experiences. The qualitative analysis has been done on the basis of six focus group discussions. This chapter presents the selection and description of the students at the selected universities, and is followed by the analysis of the findings.

Selection and Description of Students
As stated earlier for this study, the researcher collected data from three universities. At each university, two focused group discussions were conducted. Each group
consisted of five to seven members. To get diverse results, the researcher collected data from two categories of respondents by using purposive and random sampling. By using purposive sampling, the researcher selected respondents for the first category which is presented here as Friends category such as Groups 1, 3, and 5. The main criterion for selecting the respondents for this category was that those students must be roommates or close friends of peers with disabilities at each university. Further, by using random sampling, the researcher selected the respondents for the second category which is presented here as Classmates category such as Groups 2, 4 and 6. For this category, the researcher selected students randomly from the same class of peers with disabilities at each university.

The sample of respondents for the focus groups comprised of 39 students selected from three universities. Of the 39 respondents, 15 (Group1= 8 + Group2= 7) were from Central University; 11 (Group3 = 5 + Group4 = 6) were from State University (a). The remaining 13 (Group5 = 6 + Group6 = 7) respondents were from State University (b). There were 14 (36%) females and 25 (64%) males. All focus groups were audio-recorded. The focus groups were set up in a discussion mode to facilitate dialogue and conversation among the respondents. Each group discussion was for approximately 30 minutes. A set of themes were developed which formed the basis for the discussion. Words and concepts that were conceptually similar were extracted and paraphrased as shown in Table 9.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>Understanding Disability</td>
<td>(a) Nature of Disability, and (b) Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>(a) Acceptance and support, and (b) Satisfaction with the experience they gained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td>Challenges Perceived by Students about peers with Disabilities</td>
<td>(a) Students understanding, (b) Friendships, (c) Dependency and (d) Support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>(a) Increasing awareness, (b) Adjusting social relations, and (c) Adequate support services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis of Findings of Focus Group Discussions

The analysis of focus group data is presented on the basis of the differences and common traits among the respondents’ viewpoints towards their peers with disabilities. The four broad categories of responses of focus group discussions that emerged from analysis were: (i) Understanding disability, (ii) Attitudes of students towards peers with disabilities, (iii) Challenges perceived by students to students with disabilities, and (iv) Suggestions regarding factors that can enhance the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

9.2. Understanding Disability

This section gives the basic understanding of disability and relation between respondents and peers with disabilities in this study. Respondents in all six focused groups understood disability as a physical phenomena in which they perceived that students with disabilities were affected by physical conditions such as blindness, limited mobility, hearing and speech problems, and mental disorders. Two themes emerged under this category, namely, (i) nature of disability and (ii) Interaction with peers with disabilities.

(i) Nature of disability

Most of the respondents in all six groups were found to have basic understanding of disability and its effects on their peers. They had come across only two types of students with disabilities in their respective universities. Therefore, during the group discussions with the respondents, references were made to their peers with physical disabilities, specifically, to students with mobility and visually impairment in their respective universities. The following quotes represent their understating of disability.

“Due to blindness, my friend is not able to perform certain activities as any normal person can do. He requires support from his fellow beings for most of his academic work.”

“Due to polio, the growth of my friends’ nerves has stopped. Without a wheelchair and crutches, it is a very big problem for him to perform his day-to-day activities.”

“Due to her partial sight, she cannot read any book without glasses.”
“His legs are very weak and then he cannot carry his own body. He uses a wheelchair most of the time to go around the campus.”

“My friend does not have hands. He needs someone to support him for every activity. But he manages his work very well.”

(ii) Level of Interaction

All respondents in the six groups had direct interaction with students with disabilities in their universities. Although all respondents in all the groups had interacted with disabilities, the level of interaction varied from Friends Category to Classmates Category. Respondents from the Friends Category had more interaction with peers with disabilities than those in Classmates Category. Respondents from Friends Category were in regular interaction with peers with disabilities and used to help them in their day-to-day life, specially, pushing their wheelchairs, reading and recording material for them, having the books issued for them from the library. Some of them stated that they helped their peers with disabilities in academic and administrative work. Further discussion among the group led to the sharing of their personal experiences other than their academic work. Most of them felt that the level of interaction with peers with disabilities depended upon mutual understanding and relationship with students with disabilities. Some of them also underlined that the nature of impairment and their special needs also played an important role in terms of extent of assistant their peers with disabilities needed. The following quotes illustrate these points:

“I interact with my friend (a visually impaired student) more often since we stay in the same hostel and are from the same department. We both go to the classes and to the hostel together most of the time.”

“Even though I am not her classmate, initially I used to only record the material for her (visually impaired student) whenever she approached me. Later we became good friends. Besides spending time for academic purposes, we also spend most of the campus life together including attending social and cultural programmes.”

“I have a roommate who uses a wheelchair. Besides my roommate, I interact with many other peers with disabilities on my campus.”

“She (visually impaired student) is one my best friends on my campus. We meet often, study together, go for shopping and participate in university programmes.”
“My friend (a wheelchair user) does not interact much with others but he is very comfortable with me and we share problems and help each other.”

Several respondents from the Classmates Category knew someone with disabilities either in their classroom or outside the classroom in their university. Some respondents stated that even though they knew students with visual impairments in their class, they could not interact much with them as they were busy with so many other activities, including studies, sports, family. Some of the respondents also stated that they did not get much opportunity to interact with peers with disabilities. They perceived that some of the students with disabilities are very quiet and do not interact much with them. However, some respondents took the initiative to interact and discuss with their peers with disabilities. Similarly, some of the respondents felt that they would be able to team up with students with disabilities better if they came in direct contact with them. The following quotes illustrate these points.

“I would like to interact with my friend (visually impaired student) but actually I did not get an opportunity to talk to him because he does not talk much. Once the class gets over, he goes directly to the hostel. During the leisure time too, he does not come out of his room. He spends most of the time on the computer. One day, I asked him to let me know if he needs any help or any assistance. But I did not get a call from him.”

“I would like to help and interact with them but in my campus we do not have many students with visual impairments.”

“I treat him like any other person in the campus. But the interaction between him and me is quite limited as compared with those with other students. At the same time I do not face any problem with him. I think that it is mainly because I can see other friends at various places such as the library, the canteens, and sports club and outside the hostels in the campus but this is not the case with him. I can see him either in the classroom or in his room.”

“I have not been able to interact much with these students due to my own busy schedule.”

“I do not know many students with disabilities on the campus. I am also very busy with studies and family matters.”
Overall, it is understood that respondents in the groups had a basic understanding about their peers with disabilities and their problems. Across the groups most of their views were made with reference to only those students with severe disabilities such as those with visual impairments (both partially and total blindness) and wheelchair users. They believed that students with mild mobility impairments did not have many problems in higher education institutions. Similarly, it is also clear that, although they knew peers with disabilities in their campus, the level of interaction values between the respondents in Friends and Classmates Category.

9.3. Attitudes of Students towards Peers with Disabilities

As understood from the review of literature, attitude is defined as ‘a person’s belief or opinion that includes a positive or negative evaluation of some targets such as an object, a person, or an event which then predispose the individual to act in a particular way towards the target’ (Plotnik, 2005). Similarly, various researchers and scholars recognized that a positive attitude by people towards persons who have disability is important for a successful integration programme (Bricker, 1995; Head and Pirrie, 2007). Similarly, research studies indicate that students’ attitudes towards their peers with disabilities in their classroom could be a significant factor in defining the educational experiences and opportunities available to students with disabilities and involving them in mainstream society (Lipsky, 2005; Maras and Brown, 2000). Similarly, acceptance of students with disabilities in educational institutions is unlikely to happen when their peers have negative attitudes towards them (Antonak and Livneh, 2000). Thus, it is important to explore the underlying dimensions of attitudes so as to understand the educational experiences of students with disabilities in higher education institutions. Attitudes of students towards their peers with disabilities are discussed through two themes, namely, (i) Acceptance and support, and (ii) Satisfaction with the experience they gained

i) Support and Acceptance
All the respondents, across the groups, regardless of the type of the university or category or gender or they were from, expressed their acceptance and support to their peers with disabilities in their campus. A study conducted by Schaffe (1996) indicates
that obtaining education by being part of general education at institutions is important because students develop their identity in interaction with others. Other students in higher education institutions play a major role in their development and the acceptance of disabled students as the peer group is of important for both their academic as well as social development. Specifically, peer support and acceptance is one of the important factors, which helps in improving the quality of life of students with disabilities (Haring, 1991). In the current study, all respondents across all the groups accepted their peers with disabilities, built friendships, and showed a greater appreciation of diversity. Most believed that their peers with disabilities could do well in higher education and have as good career opportunities as any other student. They also discussed constrains these students face due to social and physical barriers that challenge and impede their access to classrooms, libraries, public places and job opportunities.

Many of them were supportive of their peers with disabilities and expressed their willingness to help them. They believed that helping their friends with disabilities at their universities and getting involved with them would be beneficial to their disabled friends and expressed positive feelings towards them. Further discussion led to the sharing of respondents’ personal experiences with their peers with disabilities in their universities. Some of the respondents reported that it was not good to show pity or kindness to their peers with disabilities but they should be treated like any other friend in their class. The following quotes illustrate these points.

“We all are very friendly. I know them and most of the time; I treat them as any other of my friends. That is why I would not show pity or sympathy.”
“I will not treat my peers with disabilities in a separate or different way.”
“Since I know their feelings and their nature, most of the time I would be careful before offering my help or assistance to them, because I would not want to make them feel bad or to hurt their pride or independence.”

i) Satisfaction with the Experience they gained

In the present study, for many of the respondents, it was the first time they had a friend with visual impairment. Some of them also even mentioned that they did not have any earlier contact with severe impairments. Some of them also said that they
had felt little uneasy while interacting with them for the first time. They also expressed great satisfaction with the experience they gained with students with disabilities, which tended to derive both from the experience of helping a needy friend and from the personal relationship that they had developed. The following quotes illustrate these points.

“Actually, I did not have any friends or contact with students with visual impairments either in or outside my family and also during my studies till coming here. He is the first friend with visual impairment that I have. Initially I was tensed and thinking about how he would manage all his studies and day-to-day activities.”

“In my educational life, it is the most significant experience for me.”

“I am happy because I can help him and give him good company. Initially, I was tensed, I am not sure how I can help him but we together managed to do things.”

Some of respondents felt that they themselves had benefited from being a friend of a peer with disabilities in their respective universities. Further, they also underlined that this feeling was linked to having met someone new, being exposed to a new area of human experience, coping successfully with various challenges in their day-to-day activities, and the opportunity to share their peers’ day-to-day work, giving company whenever they required, helping in their studies, assisting in academic and administrative activities, and recording and collecting material for them. The following quotes illustrate these points:

“My friend has total visual impairment. He does all his activities including scanning and editing all the material. I was inspired by his hard work and determination to fulfill his dream to be independent, as far studies are concerned.”

“My classmate is a ‘wheel chair user’. He is more confident and active than any of my other friends. He tries to put his best efforts to involve himself in most of the university events including studies, politics and cultural programmes. Last year, he worked as the chairman of the hostel committee. Other than this, I think he is also actively involved in the disability committee on my campus.”

“I think I made a good progress after becoming a friend of her. In order to assist her in studies, I had become thorough myself and explained most of the concepts to her. I think it helped me to progress in my career.”
“Sometimes it is very difficult for me to concentrate on my studies. Sometimes I feel like giving up. But after meeting my friend, a visual impaired person, who works a lot in spite of all his limitations, he manages to overcome all his difficulties in studies as well as life and makes so much effort. I take him as a role model. I taught myself to overcome my laziness and tell myself ‘why I cannot do this’ and be successful in whatever I do”.

Overall, the study findings show that all the respondents were positive in their perceptions and attitudes towards their peers with disabilities in higher education institutions. In the discussions, they commented only on the experience they gained by being a friend and how they treated and supported their peers with disabilities. In all the six focus groups, respondents did not make a single insulting remark about peers with disabilities, their appearance and any abusive behaviour. Research studies show that without proper students support and acceptance peers with disabilities are deprived of opportunities to learn adaptive modes of social conduct and make academic progress (Parker and Asher, 1987; Mead, 1934). In addition, dropping out of the course, poor performance in studies, feeling of loneliness are all associated with lack of peer acceptance and support (Parker and Asher, 1987). But in the current study, the researcher found that students supported their peers with disabilities without showing any negative attitudes or feelings towards them. This study also found that those who had first time contact with disabled students felt tensed. This study indicated that socializing with a personal friend or more contact with a peer with disability made them more aware and enabled them to take a more sympathetic position towards those with disabilities. It helped them to develop a personal philosophy towards integration. Thus, it can be concluded that the attitudes of students towards their peers with disabilities in higher education institutions were positive. This is perhaps due to the fact that all the respondents were in the formative stage of their life and the opportunity to receive higher education also influenced egalitarian attitudes. Therefore, we can conclude that the respondents in all the groups were generally positive in their comments about associating with peers with disabilities in higher education institutions.
9.4. Challenges Perceived by Students to Peers with Disabilities

Increasing access to higher education for students with disabilities all over the world is the principal focus area of recent legislative, research, and university reform efforts (Lipsky and Gartner, 1996). Nevertheless, the participation of students with severe disabilities in everyday academic activities remains low. In general, these students have less interaction with their peer groups and remain isolated from academic and social activities (Katsiyannis, Zhang and Archwamety, 2002). These studies suggest that social and academic participation of students with disabilities should be encouraged. These suggestions represent the viewpoints of university administrators, teachers and researchers. Some of the studies have collected data from students without disabilities regarding their views on the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education institutions.

Studies have mainly focused on the attitudes of students towards their peers with disabilities (Krajewski and Flaherty, 2000; Hendrick et al, 1996). But there is lack of research on students understanding of the challenges perceived by their peers with disabilities while participating in academic and social activities in higher education institutions. In the current study, the researcher found that students in all six focus groups perceived that the experience of students with disabilities affected their social and academic participation in higher education institutions. From the discussions in the focus groups, four themes emerged: (i) Students understanding, (ii) Friendships, and (iii) Dependency, and (iv) Support services.

(i) Students’ understanding

The findings show that respondents in Friends Category were well aware of the strengths, needs and problems of their peers with disabilities than as compared to those in Classmates Category. About half the respondents in Classmates Category stated that they were unclear about or had very limited knowledge about the problems and needs of their peers with disabilities. In contrast, in case of respondents in Friends Category, the high level of interaction with their peers with disabilities confirmed better understanding/knowledge of special needs and problems. For instance, some of
the respondents were able to rate the challenges faced by their peers in their campus in terms of both physical and academic barriers.

Similarly, it was also found that understanding the special needs of students with disabilities, accepting and helping them was based on the relatively extreme difference between them and disabled students. Research studies also showed that acceptance of peers with disabilities and assisting them was predicted to relate inversely with severity of disability (Burton and Hirshoren, 1979; Voeltz, 1984). Similarly, in the current study, as discussed in the previous section, it was not surprising to note that respondents in all six focus groups discussed mainly the problems and the needs pertaining to students with total visual impairments, partial sight and total immobility or wheelchair users. Here it needs to be remembered that as shown in the data in Chapter 5 (students), the enrollment number of students with visual impairment was very low in both the State Universities (a and b) as compared to Central University.

Some of the respondents reported that it was difficult to identify their peers with disabilities specially those who have problems such as minor physical or invisible disabilities. They expressed their willingness to help these students but they found it difficult to assist them as some of peers with disabilities are hard to identify. Another concern expressed by respondents in two focus groups (2 and 4) was that they were not comfortable in interacting with their peers, especially, students with disabilities due to lack of knowledge about their disabilities. This is perhaps due to the fact that, as found in Amsel and Fichten (1988), those students who had previous contact with students with disabilities were more at ease interacting with their peers than those who had no previous contact, thus underlining the importance of close or personal contact and understanding between students with and without disabilities.

In contrast, some of the respondents expressed a clearer understanding of the disability conditions and the needs of their peers. Respondents in focus groups (1, 3 and 5) were aware of the problems their friends were undergoing and were able to explain the reasons for their disability. The level of contact and close personal experience of these respondents with their peers with disabilities appeared to have
resulted in informal sharing of information about their special needs and problems. This right information and good understanding of their problems and special needs enabled them to help their peers with disabilities. One of the respondents stated: “My friend had a visual impairment problem. He would do most of the work himself. I assisted him in getting material and reference books for scanning”. “I have a roommate with visual impairment. I admire his courage and determination to undertake doctoral studies. I feel privileged to be able to assist him in his studies.”

Notably, respondents from Classmates Category were not given appropriate information; they speculated about the conditions of their peers with disabilities. Those who had interacted with friends with disabilities at a personal level were more likely to articulate a better understanding of specific conditions and the strengths of people with disabilities. Similarly, research studies reported that increased contact between students with and without disabilities would result in recognition of their inherent similarities and differences, which presumably generated increased acceptance of students with disabilities (Christoplos and Renz, 1969; Wang and Birch, 1984). Thus, the findings of the study suggested that students’ understanding/awareness, information and close contact had an impact on the development of good friendly relations and helping each other.

(ii) Friendships
Another concern expressed by respondents in all six focus groups was that making friendships was one of the major challenges for students with disabilities, which influenced their social and academic participation in their respective universities. In this study, considerable difference existed between Friends and Classmates Categories in terms of whether respondents had any friendship with students with disabilities and whether students with disabilities had friends in general. As observed in the previous section, Friends Category respondents had good interaction with peers with disabilities. In contrast, even though Classmates Category respondents attended the same classes, they did not interact often with peers with disabilities like they did with their other friends. Many of them did not interact or meet their peers with disabilities once they come out of the class. When Classmates category respondents were asked if they knew any students with disabilities in their own classes, the typical response was:
‘Yes, I had students with disabilities in my class. I knew them.’

Further discussions showed that friendship between many of the respondents from Classmates Category with their peers with disabilities did not exist. They were just a part of their class. They also stated that their peers with disabilities had very few friends but that these were other students with disabilities on their campus.

A few respondents, however, from all the six groups made several remarks that most their peers with disabilities did not interact much with students other than a few selected students. They believed that the difficulties expressed by peers with disabilities in social relations and interaction were perhaps due to the fact that they lacked social skills. Respondents also emphasized the problems and the attitudes of a few of the peers with disabilities. They believed that due to lack of much interaction and good number of friends’ circles affecting social and academic participation of their peers with disabilities. Some of the respondents noted:

“Except with me and few other friends, he does not mingle with anyone in the campus. He even does not go out with any other person in his own class.”

“Besides his class, he spends most of his time either in the computer center or the hostel room alone.”

“She (a student with visual impairment) is very silent in class. She does not even participate in class discussions. She tries to avoid meeting her own classmates.”

“Generally whenever I go to attend any cultural programme, I ask him. Unless I force him he will not come and mingle with other students in the campus. But every time forcing or requesting him is not my business. He should change his attitude and come out of his room. Then only can he enjoy his real educational life on the campus both socially and academically.”

“Every time I have to record or study for him which is not easy for me. I have to concentrate on my studies too. But, if he could talk and take assistance of any of his classmates, that is good for him as well for me. It helps him academically as well as socially.”
(iii) Dependency

Another important concern expressed by all the groups in this study was dependency of peers with disabilities. The respondents stated that majority of students with visual impairments had trouble coping with their studies. Most of the time, peers with disabilities had to depend on one or the other person for recording or discussing material/concepts, coming and going to classes, the hostel and other important places in the campus for day-to-day work. The respondents from Group 1 and 2 highlighted the role of assistive technology and its importance in the lives of students with visual impairments. They stated that assistive technology helped their peers with disabilities to be independent at least as far as their studies were concerned. For instance, the students with visual impairments could read, and do their individual assignments; they did not require any one else. As has been shown in Chapter four, the usage of assistive technology led to academic progress, wide opportunities to study independently. In the words of one student:

“My friend (visually impaired) is doing his Masters in Mass Communication. He has a computer with all assistive devices including a scanner, speech software’s. He does most his assignments on his own with the help of Jaws and Kuzewell. He just asks us get him the hard or soft copy of material or source needed. We have more individual assignments, presentations than exams. He does well very in his studies.”

This quote is not applicable to all students with visual impairments in this study. Especially respondents from State Universities (focus Groups 3, 4, 5 and 6) stated that their peers with visual impairments were still using recording devices, taking help from their friends. One of the respondents stated:

“She comes only before exams and requests me to discuss whatever I am reading. Some times because of this, I could not study/prepare well for my exams.”

In short, these students are just dependent on other students for their studies due to lack of any of assistive devices in their universities.

(iv) Support Services

Respondents, in focus Groups 1 and 2, from the Central University, were very articulate about the support services available to their peers with disabilities at their university. Similarly, these respondents were happy with the support services
available for their orthopedically and visually impaired peers. They also reported that
students with visual impairments have been provided with adequate support services
on their campus. They have assistive devices in the learning centre, the library and the
computer centre; these students are also eligible to get financial assistance other than
fellowship, reader as well as scribe allowances. The following quote illustrate the
respondents’ knowledge about the availability of support services to their peers with
disabilities in their university.

“My friend who is visually impaired has all types of assistive devices including a
computer, softwares, and recorders.”

“Other than technical assistance, she gets reader allowances per semester. With this
money, she can pay to the readers who help her in reading, scanning and recording
material.”

“With this available technical support, my friend is independent as far as studies are
concerned. It makes them more confident and helps in their academic as well career
progress.”

Similarly, an exploratory study conducted by Moisey (2004) also indicates
that students with disabilities who received more services had more success in terms
of course completion. Further, respondents in the current study also stressed that needs of
students with visual impairments were better served that those of orthopedically
impaired students. Both the groups also highlighted and discussed the problems of
students with orthopedically impairment who faced physical barriers due to lack of
access to most of the academic and administrative buildings including classrooms,
computer centres, library, sports and leisure places. The following quote illustrate
these points.

“It is not easy for him to access classroom buildings since none of the academic
buildings have an easy access.”

Similarly, respondents from both the State Universities (Groups 3, 4 5 and 6)
expressed dissatisfaction over the availability of support services for their peers with
disabilities in their respective universities. Most of the respondents opined that their
peers with disabilities were not provided with appropriate physical, as well as
academic, support services including access to classrooms, computer centres, assistive
devices and financial support, to pursue higher education successfully. For example, one respondent remarked that classroom accessibility affected students’ ability to participate fully in academic classes. The following quotes illustrate these points.

My friend who is a ‘wheel chair user’ had to climb staircases everyday two to four times and come to class. While climbing steps, he faces many struggles and gets tired.

“They do not have easy access to any of the buildings in my campus including classrooms, computer centres”.

“He (mobility impaired student) faces many problems of attending the class without any university transport support or due to not having his own vehicle because the distance between the classrooms to the hostel room is very far in my campus.”

“Students with visual impairments in my campus still depend on their friends during exams for recoding their materials due to lack of proper financial support and assistive devices.”

Similarly, research studies show that barriers identified by students with disabilities were: inaccessible buildings and classrooms, and lack of other accommodation (Paul, 2000; and West et al, (1993). Another study conducted by Shevlin, Kenny, and Mcneela (2004) reported that students with disabilities experience variable access within higher education institutions and physical access remains a serious obstacle to full participation. In contrast, some of the respondents from these groups (3, 4, 5 and 6) were happy with the availability of support services for orthopedically impaired in their respective university. For instance, a few of the respondents from Groups 3 and 4 highlighted that their university arranged separate vehicles for their peers with disabilities along with elderly persons, ladies. Similarly, respondents from Groups 5 and 6 reported that their university constructed a hostel which is fully accessible. This hostel is very friendly with ramps and railing system.

9.5. Suggestions for Improving their Peers Educational in Higher Educational Institutions

Respondents from all the Groups made a few suggestions for improving educational experiences of their peers with disabilities.

“Students should have a basic understanding about the special needs of their peers and problems faced by them and the support services available to them.”
“University management should also organize disability related workshops or conferences at least once in a year.”

“University management should provide information about students with disabilities and they should utilize students’ services.”

“Students with disabilities should have more interactions and build up their own friendship circles in their campuses. Having more friends among students and peers with disabilities increase their participation in social and academic activities.”

“The University should provide basic infrastructure and a friendly environment”.

“These students should be provided with all kinds of support services including financial, academic and physical services.”

6.6. Conclusion

This study has attempted to understand the attitudes and experiences of students with their peers with disabilities in higher education institutions. The focus group discussions showed that all the respondents had positive attitudes towards their peers with disabilities. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that those who had greater contact with peers with disability were more aware of their needs and challenges which enabled them to take on a more sympathetic position towards those with disabilities. Further, it also suggests that friendship and social interaction between students and their peers with disabilities help both of them to participate in academic and social activities. These findings also underline the inherent limitations in the current piecemeal institutional response in the provision of support services to students with disabilities in higher education institutions. Therefore, a comprehensive access service, that addresses the needs of all these students which is an integral part of the institution, is required.