ASSISTANT LECTURERS ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE TWO ENGLISH SPEAKING STATE UNIVERSITIES IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

This study investigated the attitude of Assistant Lecturers towards the education of students with disabilities in English-speaking Universities in Cameroon. A descriptive survey design was used to collect data from 125 Assistant Lecturers at the University of Bamenda and University of Buea. The study employed a descriptive survey design. Data was collected by adapting a tool (questionnaire) that was designed by Sniatecki, Perry and Snell in 2015. Data was analysed by measuring all indicators of the study on a four-point Likert scales with the response options of "strongly disagree" equalled one and "strongly agree" equalled four. The researcher presented data and provided the mean, median, standard deviation, and percentage agreement. Percentage agreements were calculated by adding strongly disagree and disagree to strongly agree and agree. The findings reveal that Assistant Lecturers generally hold positive attitudes towards the education of students with disabilities. However, factors such as lack of training and resources, as well as inadequate infrastructure, can hinder the effective inclusion of students with disabilities in Higher Institutions of Learning. The study therefore recommends that universities provide training and resources to support Assistant Lecturers in promoting Inclusive Education.

Keywords:

Assistant Lecturers, Attitude, Assistant Lecturers Attitude, Education, Education of Students with Disabilities, English-Speaking Universities.

Résumé

Cette étude a examiné l'attitude des assistants d'enseignement envers l'éducation des étudiants en situation de handicap dans les universités anglophones du Cameroun. Une enquête descriptive a été menée auprès de 125 assistants d'enseignement des universités de Bamenda et de Buéa. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide d'un questionnaire adapté, conçu par Sniatecki, Perry et Snell en 2015. L'analyse des données a été réalisée en

mesurant tous les indicateurs de l'étude sur une échelle de Likert à quatre points, allant de « tout à fait en désaccord » (1) à « tout à fait d'accord » (4). Les données ont été présentées sous forme de moyenne, médiane, écart-type et pourcentage d'accord. Ce dernier a été calculé en additionnant les réponses « tout à fait en désaccord » et « en désaccord » aux réponses « tout à fait d'accord » et « d'accord ». Les résultats montrent que les assistants d'enseignement ont généralement une attitude positive envers l'éducation des étudiants en situation de handicap. Cependant, des facteurs tels que le manque de formation et de ressources, ainsi que des infrastructures inadéquates, peuvent entraver l'inclusion effective des étudiants en situation de handicap dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. L'étude recommande donc que les universités fournissent une formation et des ressources aux assistants d'enseignement afin de les aider à promouvoir une éducation inclusive.

Mots-clés : Assistants d'enseignement, Attitude, Attitude des assistants d'enseignement, Éducation, Éducation des étudiants en situation de handicap, Universités anglophones.

Introduction

Students with disabilities are those who have a restriction or inability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being, mostly resulting from impairment (Barbotte & Chau, 2001). The Civil Rights legislations promoted the awareness of the human rights of people with disabilities and opened new options for inclusion in higher education. In Israel, several factors came into play to promote this trend: growing public awareness, increasing high school achievements of students with disabilities, economic considerations of the institutions and the expansion of the higher education system in Israel (Leyser et al, 2011).

The concept of attitude arises from attempts to account for observed regularities in the behaviour of individual peers (Hogg, 2018). The quality of one's attitudes is judged from observable, evaluative responses that are made. While one might consult one's inner experiences as evidence of one's own attitude. An attitude concerns something that really matters to us. Hence it is far more resistant to change than an opinion. Wood (2000) saw attitude as a relatively stable evaluation of a person, object, situation or issue. According to him, attitude has three components; cognitive, affective or emotional and behavioral components.

Assistant lecturer's attitudes towards students with disabilities are determined by several factors (Silva & Morgado, 2004). Educational preparation is seen as a powerful predictor of attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities, yet most assistant lecturers receive little training in teaching this population (Rust & Sinelnikov, 2010). Bouck (2005), saw that pre-service special education training is very important to all lecturers in every field in preparation of teaching students with disabilities. He explored pre-service special education training and the level of satisfaction special education teachers have with their programmes. He reported that, although they were varied responses to program satisfaction, there may be a connection between experience working with students with disabilities in teacher

preparation programmes and teachers' sense of effectiveness in teaching students with disabilities.

Situating the Problem

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of inclusive education in Cameroon, students with disabilities in English-Speaking universities continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality education. One critical factor contributing to this challenge is the attitude of assistant lecturers towards the education of students with disabilities. Research suggest that assistant lecturers' attitudes can either facilitate of hinder the learning experiences of students with disabilities. While previous research has highlighted the importance of teacher attitudes in promoting inclusive education in Cameroon, there is no dearth of empirical evidence on the attitudes of assistant lecturers towards the education of students with disabilities in English-Speaking Universities in Cameroon. This knowledge gap hinders the development of effective strategies for promoting inclusive education and supporting students with disabilities in Higher Education Institutions.

The lack of understanding of assistant lecturers' attitude towards the education of students with disabilities in Higher Education Institutions has significantly affected the academic support students with disabilities received from their institutions. This has also made students with disabilities to face barriers in accessing education at this level which limits their opportunities for social and economic mobility.   By investigating the attitudes of assistant lecturers, this study aims to contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and practices that promotes inclusive education and support the academic success of students with disabilities in Higher Institutions of Learning.

Literature Review

Zinbardo, 1998 claimed that attitude could be explained as learned judgements about actions appropriate towards certain types of people or issues. Attitudes are relatively stable but they could be modified. According to Kegan, Havemann &Segal (1994), as individuals grow up, acquire strong beliefs and feelings or attitudes towards members of various ethnic groups, foreigners, rich people, poor people, males, females. Individuals develop strong attitudes towards political parties, disabled persons, national security and all other issues in the society. Attitude tend to influence us throughout life. People are very much against things of a negative attitude. The concept of attitude arises from attempts to account for observed regularities in the behaviour of individual persons. The quality of one's attitude is judged from the observable, evaluative responses that are made. While one might consult one's inner experiences as evidence of one's own attitudes. An attitude concerns something that really matters to us. Hence it is far more resistant to change than an opinion (Segal, 1994 .

According to them, attitude has three components; cognitive, affective or emotional and behavioural components. The first cognitive components constitute thoughts and beliefs about the attitudinal object. In other words, the cognitive component of attitude represents

a person's knowledge held with varying degrees of certainty about what is true or false, good or bad, desirable or undesirable. The second component of attitude; the emotional component makes up one's feelings towards the attitudinal objects. It is also called the affective component because under suitable conditions, the belief is capable of arousing effect of varying intensity centered on the object of the belief. The third component of attitude is the behavioural component it deals with how we are predisposed to act towards the attitudinal object. It is called the behavioural component because the belief being a response, predisposition of varying threshold must lead to some actions when it is suitably activated.

According to Baudi, 2000 attitude was portrayed as normally focusing on an object or a situation, which may either be concrete or abstract and that attitude would certainly lead to a preferential response. It is pertinent to say that attitude is an important antecedent of action. Attitude could be used to predict, control and modify human actions towards a person, object, issue, situation or abstract entity. Recognizing the importance of teacher attitudes to inclusion is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of inclusive education in schools and community. It has been reported that teachers who are more positive to inclusion have more controlled learning environments compared to teachers/lecturers with more negative attitudes to inclusion (Monsen & Federickson, 2004).

It is important to understand the vital roles of teachers in fostering inclusive classrooms and imperative that teachers/ lecturers themselves are supported by the education system through success to appropriate resources. Attitudes although drawn from cognitions, can pervasively impact teachers/lecturers affective and behavioural intentions. While lecturers' attitude towards students with disabilities may be a product of their broader value system, as well as symptomatic of the societal and work environment that one is subjected to, negative attitudes can be unfavorable for the students in their educational charge. Negative attitudes may engender views such as some students do not have the capacity to learn, lecturers do not need to teach students with varying needs, there is no time to individualize the curriculum.

It would be difficult to argue that any lecturer/teacher who holds these types of views is able to provide a nurturing and engaging learning environment for all students with disabilities, (Boyle, 2020). If negative attitudes to inclusion prevail, it can affect the perception of students with additional support needs as being able to be educated within a mainstreamed environment. According to UNICEF (2011) if children or young people with disabilities are 'othered', they can become marginalized which can lead to bullying and ultimately being socially ostracized. Negative attitudes after all have been learnt and can therefore be similarly unlearned. Positively changing prospective lecturers/teachers' attitude to inclusion during university training is an important preventive way of fostering progressive teaching (Boyle, 2014).

Studies of assistant lecturers' attitudes toward the education and inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools have produced varied results. Some researchers' have reported negative attitudes (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003) while (Smith & Smith, 2000) have emphasized positive attitudes towards inclusion. In general researchers have asserted that the way lecturers deal with students with disabilities in their classroom is of utmost importance (Zonipu-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006), and attitudes can help shape the students with disabilities and willingness to allow differences in the classroom, positively and effectively influence and widely affect both the attitudes of their colleagues, of parents and children without disabilities as well as the success of inclusion (Koster et al, 2009).

It is essential for assistant lecturers to be aware of their attitudes and how they may affect students with disabilities. According to (Bouck, 2005), to effectively support students with disabilities, assistant lecturers must receive appropriate training and professional development. This may include workshops on disability awareness, strategies for inclusive teaching and the use of assistive technologies. By investing in the professional development of assistant lecturers, educational institutions can ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed. Also, collaboration among all members of the educational team, including assistant lecturers, is essential for the successful education of students with disabilities. By working together and sharing expertise, professionals can develop comprehensive and effective support plans that address each student's unique needs (Fazio, 2000). They play a crucial role in the education of students, particularly those with disabilities. They are responsible for supporting them. This includes ensuring that students with disabilities have accesses to the same level of education as their peers, providing additional support when necessary and working closely with other professionals to ensure that students' needs are met.
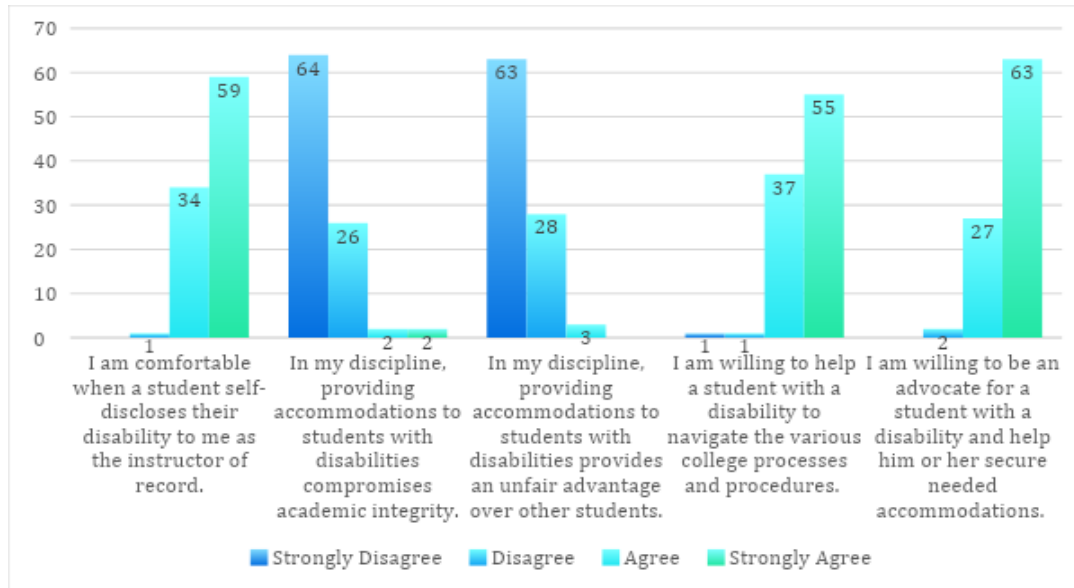
Method

Quantitative research method was employed for this study. Through this method, numbers were gathered by the researcher to explain the data gotten from the field. The design used for this study was the survey research design. This design was employed to address the research questions. This design was also used in order to obtain systematic and generalizable findings that can be replicated in the future by others. The type of survey design used in this study was the descriptive survey design. This design was used because it provided a rich and detailed account that helped in understanding, categorizing, and interpreting assistant lecturers' perception of the education of students with disabilities in the English-Speaking State Universities in Cameroon.

The institutional sample of this study was made up of the two (2) English Speaking State Universities (University of Bamenda (Uba) and University of Buea (UB) in Cameroon with eleven (11) establishments selected for the study. The human sample was one hundred and twenty-five (125) assistant lecturers selected from eleven establishments in the two English-Speaking State Universities in Cameroon.

Findings

Figure 1:

Assistant Lecturers' attitude towards the education of students with disabilities in the two English-Speaking State Universities in Cameroon

The first five statements in the series related to assistant lecturers' comfort level when students self-disclosed their disability status to them as university teachers. The first statement provided for rating was, "I am comfortable when a student discloses their disability to me as a teacher." On average most participants answered between a three, which is agreed, and a four, strongly agree, yielding an average of (M = 3.61). The median was reported as strongly in agreement, which was four. The standard deviation score (SD = .510) indicates a broader range of variability of answers. The percentage agreement is 98%, which revealed a strong consensus among participants.

The next item in the series dealt with accommodations for students with disabilities and academic integrity issues. The level of agreement with the statement, "In my discipline, providing accommodations to students with disabilities comprises academic integrity" was rated by respondents. The mean response of (M = 1.38) indicated most participants selected ratings between strongly disagree (one) and disagree (two), with the median being strongly disagree (one). The standard deviation score (SD = .641) and the percentage agreement was 42%, indicating most participants did not feel giving accommodations to students with a disability was compromising academic integrity.

Next, respondents were asked to express their attitudes about whether they thought students with disabilities were given unfair advantages. The statement provided for rating was: "In my discipline, providing accommodations to students with disabilities provides an unfair advantage over other students." The mean response of (M = 1.36) indicated participant ratings between strongly disagree (one) and disagree (two), and the median

was reported as strongly disagreed (one). The standard deviation score (*SD* = .545) and the percentage agreement was 3%. Only a very small percentage of respondents felt accommodations created an unfair advantage.

This data showed strong disagreement with the notion that providing accommodations to students with disabilities provides an unfair advantage over other students. Next, participants were asked to express their willingness to help a student with a disability navigate various college processes and procedures. The statement rated was: "I am willing to help a student with a disability to navigate the various college processes and procedures." As depicted in Table 7, the mean response of (*M* = 3.55) indicated participant ratings between strongly agree (four) and agree (three), with the median reported as strongly agree (four). The standard deviation score was (*SD* = .579), and 97% of participants indicated they felt comfortable helping when a student with a disability.

Respondents were asked about their willingness to advocate for a student with a disability and help him or her secure needed accommodations. The statement was: "I am willing to be an advocate for a student with a disability and help him or her secure needed accommodations." As depicted in Figure 4, the mean response of (*M* = 3.66) indicated participant ratings between strongly agree (four) and agree (three), and the median was reported as strongly agree (four). The standard deviation was (*SD* = .519), and the percentage of agreement indicated that 97% of participants were willing to advocate for a student with a disability.

Finally, the last set of five attitude questions related to specific disability categories. Participants were asked to respond to statements made about each of the thirteen disability categories. For example, respondents were asked to respond to statements such as: "I would like more information about students with specific disabilities" and "I believe students with specific disabilities could be successful at the college level" for each disability category.

Table 1:
Attitudes Towards Specific Disability Categories N= 100

Disability Category	Mean score	Median	Standard Deviation	Percent Agreement
Traumatic Brain Injury	3.38	3.4	.423	91
Autism	3.51	3.6	.395	93
Intellectual Disability	3.38	3.4	.436	86
Other Health Impairments	3.49	3.6	.372	96
Hearing Impairments	3.54	3.6	.350	97
Visual Impairments	3.53	3.6	.350	98
Speech or Language	3.51	3.6	.394	94
Emotional Disturbance	3.46	3.6	.415	96
Orthopedic Impairments	3.52	3.6	.378	94

In Table 1 above, the disability categories are presented along with the mean scores, median, standard deviation of the responses, percent of agree and strongly agree, and missing responses. The researcher chose to focus the following discussion on the three disability categories with the highest percent agreement and the three disability categories with the lowest percent agreement, although all data are presented in (Table 1 above). The ranking was based on the highest and lowest percent agreement of responses by assistant lecturers; these data indicated positive attitudes towards these disability categories. Although all responses were positive in nature, there was a difference in the attitudes of assistant lecturers' beliefs about which type of disabilities would most affect the success of students in higher education. There was a 12% difference between the highest percent and the lowest percent agreement. In addition, focusing on the percent agreement data rather than descriptive statistics is more easily understood. The discussion below focuses on the top three and bottom three disability categories in terms of percent of agreement with statements.

The highest percent of agreement regarding specific types of disabilities was regarding Visual Impairment, with 98% agreement among graduate assistant lecturers' responses and a mean response of (M = 3.53). This indicated that most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three). Also, the median was reported as 3.6, and the standard deviation score was (SD = .350). This standard deviation is a close representation of the mean because it is tightly distributed by the mean. The disability category of Hearing Impaired had the second- highest percent agreement at 97% among assistant lecturers' responses. The mean response of (M = 3.54), indicates that most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three). Also, the median was reported as 3.6, and the standard deviation score was (SD = .350) indicating the agreement was tightly distributed by the mean. The categories of Other Health Impairments and Emotional Disturbance both had an agreement of 96% among respondents and had the same median of 3.6, yielding the third- highest ranking. However, each consisted of different means and standard deviations. The mean score for Other Health Impairment was (M= 3.49) which indicated most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three), and the standard deviation was reported at (SD = .372), which indicated the agreement was tightly distributed by the mean. The mean score for Emotional Disturbance was (M = 3.46), which indicated most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three). The standard deviation was reported at (SD = .415), which indicated the agreement was loosely distributed by the mean.

Furthermore, the disability categories with the least percentage agreement were as follows: Intellectual Disability, followed by Autism, and Traumatic Brain Injury. The category with the least percent agreement was Intellectual Disability, with 86% agreement from respondents, and the mean response of (M = 3.38) indicated most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three). The median score was reported as 3.4, and the standard deviation score was (SD = .436), which indicated the agreement was loosely distributed by the mean. The percentage of agreement for Autism was 91% among assistant

lecturers' responses, with the mean response of (M = 3.51), indicating most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three). The median score was reported as 3.6, and the standard deviation score was (SD = .395), which indicated the agreement was tightly distributed by the mean. The percent agreement was higher for Traumatic Brain Injury with 93% among assistant lecturers' responses, and the mean response of (M = 3.38) indicated most participant ratings were between strongly agree (four) and agree (three). The median score was reported at 3.4, and the standard deviation score was (SD = .423), which indicated the agreement was loosely distributed by the mean. The mean ranged from (M = 3.52) to (M = 3.38), with just a small difference between the top and bottom means. The overall data on attitudes of assistant lecturers towards students with disabilities from the two English-Speaking State Universities in Cameroon was positive. The statements were averaged from the responses to create a summary of the data for research question one.

Statements one, four, and five were framed as positive and supportive of students with a disability. The average mean response for these statements was 3.6. The mean indicates respondents chose ratings between agree and strongly agree in support of students with a disability. For statements framed in the negative, the average mean response was 1.37. This means respondents rated strongly disagree and disagree for statements that did not support students with a disability, with a tendency towards a strong disagreement of negative attitudes. As far as disability categories, in general, assistant lecturers expressed positive attitudes towards students with disabilities across categories of disability. There was a 12% percent difference between the top highest percent agreement and the lowest percent agreement.

Discussion

The study addressed assistant lecturers' attitudes toward students with disabilities. In alignment with the social model of disability (Oliver, 2004), it explored the educational barrier of negative attitudes toward students with disabilities. Austin and Peña (2017), and Wynants and Dennis (2017) looked at faculty attitudes towards students with disabilities using surveys. Similarly, this study sought to uncover the attitudes of assistant lecturers. Findings from this study indicate that assistant lecturers felt comfortable when a student self-disclosed a disability, and most respondents shared they believed giving students' accommodations would not affect the integrity of the class.

They felt that providing accommodations to students with disabilities did not create an unfair advantage and they were willing to help a student with a disability navigate various university processes and procedures. These responses reveal that overall, assistant lecturers who participated in this study had positive attitudes towards students with disabilities in higher education and agreed that students with disabilities need their accommodations. Further, respondents were asked how willing they were to advocate for students with disabilities and help them secure needed accommodations. The majority strongly agreed to be advocates for students with disabilities.

Next, related to attitudes toward students with disabilities, assistant lecturers were asked about students with specific categories of disability. Respondents expressed the most positive attitudes regarding students with Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment and Other Health Impairment, and the least favorable attitudes toward students with Intellectual Disability, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Autism.

In alignment with the social model of disability (Oliver, 2004), this study also explored the educational barrier of negative attitudes toward students with disabilities. The social model of disability is applicable in higher education as this model highlights negative societal attitudes that hinder inclusivity (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017). Higher education can be seen as a microcosm of society in which those outside the norm are treated as "others" (Goodley, 2016). Often in higher education, students with disabilities are not given accommodations with fidelity, and the environment is at times, unwelcoming.

Responses from assistant lecturers showed they had positive attitudes about trying to limit any environmental, cultural, and educational barriers for students with disabilities. Oliver and Barnes (2012) discussed the limitation of creating barriers for people with disabilities to social inclusion by limiting people's attitudes in this case. They refute the notion that a person with a disability needs to be "fixed," rather they contend that the environment needs to be welcoming for all individuals. Edou and Shey, (2025) in their model are clear with their call to remove cultural barriers from the school system for the benefit of all. Oliver (2004) stated that the cultural environment in our society depicts impairments as unattractive or unwanted. Additionally, the cultural environment perceives the impairment as a tragedy. Thus, individuals do not know how to interact with a person with a disability.

In this study, participant responses are consistent with some previous studies which found that higher education faculty had positive attitudes towards students with disabilities (Wynants & Dennis, 2017). On the contrary, studies such as Becker and Palladino (2016) and Sniatecki et al. (2015) indicated faculty had negative attitudes toward students with disabilities, and possessed limited knowledge. The trend in each of the studies is the amount of knowledge of students with disabilities correlates with attitudes, whether positive or negative. Becker and Palladino (2016) and Sniatecki et al. (2015) collected data from professors in academia, however in this present study, participants were assistant lecturers.

Responses regarding attitudes towards students with disabilities from assistant lecturers in this study were more favorable than those reported in the literature from surveys of faculty members. Assistant lecturers reported feeling comfortable when a student self- disclosed that they had a disability and were willing to help them navigate the various university processes and procedures. In addition, they were willing to advocate for a student with a disability to secure needed accommodations. This contrasts with findings by Murray et al. (2008) who surveyed faculty and found they did not invite students to self-disclose if they had a disability.

In addition, respondents in the current study seemed to understand that accommodations were based on the principle of equity. For example, they did not believe that providing accommodations to a student with a disability would compromise academic integrity or that providing accommodations would create an unfair advantage over other students. This contrasts with findings from two studies where faculty felt students with disabilities were more challenging to work with, and that they tend to get an unfair advantage (Black et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2018). However, Lomdardi et al. (2013) found that instructors were willing to provide significant accommodations for students with disabilities but lacked sufficient knowledge of students with disabilities, which led to a stronger negative association of provision of accommodations.

Although the attitudes expressed by respondents toward students with disabilities across categories were positive, there was some variability depending on the disability category.

Students with Visual Impairments were viewed the most positively, and students with Intellectual Disability the least. The researcher found this data interesting because of the nature of the disability type, one being visible and the other being generally invisible. Dirth and Branscombe (2017) stated that the social model of disability is the catalyst for supporting a larger community of diverse physical and mental abilities to push aside the traditional narratives of disability as tragic, inferior, or incapable of contributing to the community. According to Zeedyk et al. (2019), respondents indicated they had limited knowledge about invisible disabilities versus visible disabilities. Assistant lecturers may be more willing to work with a student who has a visible disability versus one that is invisible, although further study of this topic is needed to explore why this may be the case.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the findings reflect a positive shift in attitudes among assistant lecturers toward students with disabilities. The study also indicates that both students and faculty could benefit from inclusion practices that promote deeper interactions with students with disabilities, which could, through direct experience, increase knowledge and understanding of disabilities. This also speaks to the formation of teachers' attitudes through their college education curricula, which prepares them for the classroom.

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