ABSTRACT
This qualitative study attempts to explore the factors affecting the educational experiences of students with disabilities at Freie University (FU), Berlin, Germany. The main objective of the study is to understand the paradigm shift in German disability policy and its impact on the educational experience of students with disabilities. Secondly, to explore the factors that assist and hinder these students in pursuing higher education. For this study, the researcher collected data from the disability coordinator and five students with disabilities (three visually impaired and two mobility impaired) by using the snowball sampling method. Respondents described several factors that facilitated the creation of positive educational experiences and challenging situations faced by them during their course of study. An important finding of the study is that, the disability coordinator plays an important role in assisting and integrating students with disabilities in this university. But it was also found that some problems exist within the existing system. The implications for policy include a recommendation for a decentralised supporting system, full-time availability of a disability coordinator, and additional funding resources to resolve different issues. It suggests that further research is needed to understand how positive educational experiences of students with disabilities can lead to better social interaction and academic success in higher education for such students.

KEYWORDS: Students with disabilities, higher education, special needs, rights, support services

1. Persons with Disabilities in Germany: Introduction
According to the Federal Statistical Office, Germany had a total population of approximately 82.5 million people in 2005; of which 8.6 million had a disability. Of that population, 6.7 million persons were classified as severely disabled and 1.9 million were with less significant disabilities (See Federal Statistical Office, Population 2005). Also, 54 per cent of them were males. Official statistics about the prevalence of disability only register people with severe disabilities. Thus, there is no data available concerning the overall prevalence of disabilities.

1.1. Defining Disability
Disability is a phenomenon that is difficult to measure for a number of reasons. It is important to notice that people’s understanding and concept of what constitutes disability itself vary. The term “disability”, which is central to this study, has been defined by the relevant institutions of Germany in different ways. For example
Within the German school system the term ‘disability’ has been out of use since 1994. In that year, the term ‘disability’ was replaced ‘special educational need(s)’, in a declaration of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK; 1994).

On 1st July 2001, Book 9 of the Social Code introduced a new definition of disability and changed the terminology. Instead of ‘the Disabled’, now the terms ‘people with disabilities’ or ‘disabled people’ are used interchangeably in legislations and documents (See Social Code (SGB) Book 9 (IX)). This new definition is influenced by the concept of participation in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF). According to section 2 (1,1) of Book 9 of the Social Code, people with disabilities are defined as persons whose physical functions, mental capacities or psychological health are highly likely to deviate for more than six months from a condition which is typical for the respective age, and whose participation in major life activities is therefore restricted. It also states that, persons are accorded equal status with ‘severely disabled persons’, if they have a degree of disability less than 50 per cent, but of at least 30 per cent, and if they, because of their disability, are unable to find or retain suitable employment.

1.2. Paradigm shift in German Disability Policy
The idea that the state should be generally responsible for the welfare of its citizens with disabilities is comparatively new. In Germany it was recognised only at the end of the nineteenth century, with the introduction of Bismarck’s social security system. The function of German disability law developed continuously – interrupted by the periods of National Socialism, away from a mere material support for the war invalids to the social integration of all persons with disabilities. Consequently, German society’s ideal concept is no longer based on material provision for the persons with disabilities, but their equal and self-determined participation in social and working life.

Traditionally, the German welfare model is based on the medical model, which focuses on individualised cures, rehabilitation and treatment (Heyer, Katharina 2002). This model follows a different or separate-treatment doctrine, providing segregated settings for the different needs of persons with disabilities, such as special schools, nursing homes or sheltered workshops (Oliver, 1990). These social institutions were created in order to provide income and services for the people with disabilities, apart from the welfare institutions that serve the nondisabled. The assumption is that, special needs of people with disabilities are better served in separate settings, rather than making mainstreaming institutions accessible for them. In this model, the exclusion of people with disabilities is not seen as discriminatory, but as a natural outcome of their medical limitations. In fact, many policymakers see the welfare model as generous and desirable, and a sign of welfare progress (Waddington, 1994).

Later on, the civil rights model evolved as a critique of the social welfare model. Disability policy, under a rights model, focuses on ways to make social environments accessible and reform the existing social institutions to include people with disabilities (Heyer, Katharina, 2002). The basic assumption is that once contact with the persons with disabilities increases through neighbourhoods, workplace, integrated schools etc., discriminatory attitudes and the necessity for legal intervention would decrease. In policy terms, the rights model replaces parallel track with equal opportunity and anti-discrimination, and segregation with integration. The primary
enforcement tool is the law. Accordingly, people with disabilities are transformed from passive patients and welfare recipients to people with civil rights that are enforceable by law (Silvers, Wasserman, and Mahowald, 1998).

The much discussed paradigm shift in German transition from medical solutions to social change, from pity to power, and from charity to rights has now been acknowledged and the German government adopted the U.S. disability rights model. The enactment of Social Code Book IX (Rehabilitation and Participation of Disabled Persons) in 2001 was a significant step, and marked a change of paradigm in German disability law. The act aims “to promote the autonomy of the disabled and ensure their equal participation in society, and to avoid or counteract disadvantages.” This new orientation was the result of the 1994 amendment of the German constitution’s Article 3, which included the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of disability. Now we will see how the paradigm shift in disability policy affected the provision of support services for students with disabilities in German higher education institutions and its impact on their educational experiences.

1.3. Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions in Germany
The Federal Republic of Germany is made up of 16 Landers, as a result of German unification through a Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic on October 3rd, 1990. Each Land has its own constitution and government. The Federal Constitution stipulated that the Landers have the right to legislate insofar as the Constitution does not confer legislative power on the Land. Educational legislation and administration of the educational system are primarily the responsibility of the Land. After the Constitutional reform in 2006, the federal level has only minimal influence on educational policies in Germany (OECD, 2003).

According to the recommendation of the Standing Conference of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Landers all educational institutions follow a code of practice which aim at improving the educational conditions of students with disabilities (KMK, 1982). These recommendations primarily seek to bring about the integration of students with disabilities in to the existing structures of higher education institutions, rather than suggesting segregate solutions such as “universities for students with disabilities” or courses of study designed especially and exclusively for students with disabilities (OECD, 2003).

According to the official statistics, approximately 292,000 German students and foreign students with a German education were enrolled in their first semester in the year 2005. Similarly the national Association for student’s affairs (Deutsches Studentenwerk, DSW) periodically conducts a survey on the social situation of students, including those with disabilities in higher education institutions in Germany. These samples are regarded as being representative, and data are based on anonymised information of the surveys about students. The latest survey was conducted in the summer semester 2000 (DSW/HIS; 2001). According to this survey, 2 per cent of all students consider themselves as having disabilities, and 13 per cent have chronic disease. Of the students with chronic disease, 8 per cent have chronic psychological disease, 17 per cent disease of the muscular-skeletal system and supporting tissues, and 52 per cent suffer from allergies and disease of the respiratory tract. The data given can only be taken as a basis for legitimising or improving further support services for students with disabilities in higher education institutions (DSW, 2001).
2. Review of Literature

Students with disabilities (SWDs) represent an emerging population in higher education institutions, whose perceptions and experiences of higher education are ultimately shaped by their socio-cultural experiences, and the existing environment and the availability of specific facilities, required by them, for pursuing their higher studies. The literature, included in this study, is based on the e-resources available in the library of the Freie University, Berlin. A great deal of research in the West has been conducted on diverse issues of students with disabilities in higher education institutions. This review is focused on the factors affecting positive and negative educational experiences of such students with disabilities in higher education institutions. But unfortunately it was found that there is a dearth of research studies in the German context. This section first examines the policies and support services provided by the higher education institutions for students with disabilities. The second part of this deals with their educational experiences in higher education institutions.

Studies by Hall (1998) and UNSECO (1999) indicate that most of the higher educational institutions now have institutional policies for students with disabilities. But the ways in which policy implementation is monitored vary greatly among institutions. Various forms of advice, guidance and support are now available to students with disabilities, but more could be done to increase public awareness on this issue. Keith, Weiss, Jeanne, and Repetto (1997), in a study indicate that post-secondary institutions are continuing to move toward providing necessary individualised support services to students with disabilities. After such students learn to take full advantage of these support services, they will improve their chances of receiving the training and education needed to be competitive in the job market.

Further Hall, Tinklin, and Teresa (1998) have found that the main challenges to higher educational institutions is to combine recognition of the individuality of students and their needs with policies and actions which are more than piecemeal attempts to resolve difficulties. A similar study, conducted by Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson (2005), has identified four issues for higher education institutions to address: a) pre-orientation support, b) staff’s commitment to facilitating a barrier-free curriculum, c) consultation with and empowerment of students with disabilities and, d) a commitment on the part of higher education institutions to develop support services for students and planning for their personal development. A UNSECO (1999) study also found that there was no uniformity in universities in terms of the financial and human resources to respond to this challenge. The researcher suggests that the first step towards providing equal access for all students is the will to address the diversity of needs of students and create a supportive environment accordingly. A similar study by Vickerman and Blundell (2010) found that students’ learning and teaching assessment was restrictive and this appeared to be due to the inappropriate learning resources, lack of modification of teaching by teachers, lack of discussion with students with disabilities regarding their problems, and needs related to learning and assessment strategies that significantly place them in a disadvantaged position in higher education. Bierwert (2002) opines that requesting for an accessible classroom was often stressful to the students with disabilities. In a similar study, West, Kregel, Getzel, Zhu, Ipsen and Martin (1993) study found that majority of the students indicated that they had encountered barriers to their education, which included a lack of understanding and cooperation from administrators, faculty, staff, and other students, adaptive aids and other accommodations and, inaccessibility of buildings and grounds.

Overall, the review of studies shows that there are several factors or barriers which affect the social and educational experience of students with disabilities in higher education institutions.
Despite the significant progress in legislations and policies for the students with disabilities in higher education institutions, many of them still face with various challenges completing their studies successfully.

3. Research Design and Methodology
The present study is exploratory in nature. This qualitative study was conducted with the disability coordinator and students with disabilities at Freie University, Germany. Qualitative research allows for a naturalistic approach to this study. Qualitative forms of investigation tend to be based on recognition of the importance of the subjective, experiential ‘life world’ of human beings, describing the experiences of people in-depth (Burns (2000), Patton, (1980) and Tylor (2000)). This study attempted to discover the higher educational opportunities available to students with disabilities including support services, legislations, rights, funding support from different organizations and its impact on their educational experiences.

3.1. Objectives of the Study
1) To examine the extent legislation, organisational framework of higher education institutions to support students with disabilities in Germany.
2) To understanding the disability from the students’ perspective based on their experiences.
3) To identify the enabling and hindering factors affecting the educational experiences of such students in higher education institution.

3.2. Research questions
The following questions guided this study:
1. How do the students with disabilities understand their disability?
2. What factors assists the higher education institutions to support such students?
3. What are the factors which affect the educational experiences of such students in higher education?

3.3. Research Setting and Population
The researcher selected Freie University (FU), Berlin, Germany, to conduct this study. The researcher got this opportunity to visit the University provided by ‘Passage to India’ programme run by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) from October, 2010 to January, 2011. The population of the study was students with disabilities those who enrolled in the academic year 2010-2011 and the disability coordinator who was looking after the needs of these students at FU.

3.4. Data Sources and Methods
This study is based on both primary and secondary data. Due to lack of much research on students with disabilities in the German context as well as lack of much literature on this study in the English language, the researcher could not find much secondary data or adequate literature on the subject. The secondary data includes papers from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) Conference on Higher Education and Disability held in Grenoble in 1999, Educational reports of the German government, which was found in online, reports and official websites of Studentenwerk. The information in the published conference proceedings and reports were, therefore, encoded, entered and processed. For this study, primary data was
collected from the disability officer and five students with disabilities at Freie university; Berlin, Germany.

3.5. Sampling Method
For this study the researcher used the snowball sampling technique to collect data. Snowball sampling – also known as chain referral sampling – is considered a type of purposive sampling. This sampling is often used to find and recruit “hidden populations,” that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies (Natasha et al., 2005). It was very difficult to get details about students with disabilities from the disability office due to issues related to confidentiality. That’s why the researcher used snowball sampling. In this method, students with disabilities with whom contact has already been made used their social networks to refer the researcher to other students who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study. Due to short time available, the researcher could collect data from only five students with disabilities and the disability officer at FU, Germany.

3.6. Characteristics of the Participants
In this section, the characteristics of each respondent of the study (as given in Table 1) provide the background information for a better understanding of the context and the factor that influence the experiences of students with disabilities. For the purpose of confidentiality the names of the respondents have been changed.

Operational Definitions
Vision impairment: Visual impairments are divided into two groups based on severity. The groups are: total blindness and low vision/partially sighted. Students with visual impairment require specialised equipment and various learning resources (e.g., tapes, Braille, enlarged print books).

Mobility impairment: Students with mobility impairment are those who use wheelchairs, and aids such as canes, braces, and walkers. However, it is seen that the use of an aid may increase fatigue.

Assistive Technology: Assistive technologies in this study are those ones available to the students which would help them to maximise their ability to effectively meet the course requirements. Some of the adaptive resources and services include: adaptive computers, tape recorders, sound amplification systems, television enlarges, voice synthesisers, calculators or keyboards with large buttons, switches and technology assessment and evaluation devices.

3.7. Data Collection and Analysis
The researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect the data from the disability officer and the students. An interview guide was developed, based on the research questions of this study. The interview questions were focused mainly on policies, the university’s organisational framework and funding opportunities, provision of support services to students with disabilities, and the factors affecting the educational experiences of these students. Almost all of the discussions were open-ended to explore issues which respondents of the study considered to be important. The discussions of the study from the interviews were audio taped, video recorded. Data analysis is a process which involves working with the data, organising, arranging, synthesising this, looking for patterns, discovering what will be important and deciding what to write or what to tell others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The researcher compared the information for analysis and interpretation (Charmaz, 1994) and transcribed, coded and analysed the data.
through thematic analyses and according to how the common themes seemed to be emerging. Participation in this study was voluntary. The researcher explained to the participants at different stages the aims and objectives of the study and at each stage special care was taken to explain the nature of informed consent and their right to withdraw from the study.

3.8. Significance of the Study
This study attempted to understand the paradigm shift in German disability policy and its impact on the educational experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. The perspectives of these students and the disability coordinator at FU, Berlin provide the needed insight into the experiences of this group that will help shape the emerging policy, research, and practice at higher education institutions. Research on students with disabilities in higher education is very limited. The findings of this study should help bridge this gap and enable institutions of higher education to make the experiences of students with disabilities more positive and enriching.

3.9. Limitations of the Study
- A major limitation is the lack of availability of relevant literature in the German context, as well as in English language, since very few empirical studies have been undertaken in Germany.
- Getting information about the contact details of students with disabilities from this university was not easy. In addition, due to language problem, the researcher could not conduct many interviews for this study. Also, some of the respondents were not comfortable with English language.
- Due to the time limit of the study, as well objectives of the study, the researcher focused mainly on the factors which have an impact on their educational experiences at institutions of higher education.
- In addition, the sample of student participants may not fully represent the diverse types of disabilities in this university. Thus the results may vary across types of students with disabilities.

4. Findings of the Study
From the data gathered, four main categories of findings emerged. These include: (i) overview of the case study on Freie University, Germany, (ii) understanding of the disabilities from the student’s perspective, (iii) institutional commitment to support students with disabilities, and (iv) student’s positive and challenging educational experiences. These are discussed below.

4.1. Case Study of Freie University, Germany
Freie University Berlin, the research site of this study, was founded by students and scholars on December 4, 1948, with support of America allies and Berlin politicians. It is a leading research institution and one of the nine German universities that has been successful in all three funding lines in the Federal and State Excellence Initiative, thereby receiving additional funding for its institutional development strategy (See Freie University Berlin at a Glance, 2008). It is located in the leafy residential district of Dahlem in south-western Berlin. The University has over 130 partnerships with academic institutions worldwide. About 600 foreign scholars contribute to the diversity in research and teaching. Of its approximately 34,000 students in over 100 subject areas, 16 percent are foreign students.
4.2. Legal, and Organisational Framework of FU

According to the recommendation of the Standing Conference of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Lander, all institutions of higher education have to cater to the special needs of students with disabilities (SWD) in such a way that they are not disadvantaged in their studies, and are provided opportunities to make optimum use of all the institution facilities (KMK, 1982). In practice however, the role of higher education institutions, affiliated institutions such as the national or local associations for student affairs (Studentenwerke), and the coordinators of disability affairs is restricted to striving for barrier-free campuses, to supplying certain forms of counselling, support and equipment for higher education, and to guiding students having disabilities. The disability officer is appointed by the university administration. He is working in this university for last twenty years on part time basis. His duty is to provide support services to these students in the university, including counselling the students, giving information about the support services available to them and resolving their problems related to accessibility, learning resources and other issues within the university.

4.2.1. Role and Responsibilities of the Coordinator of Disability Affairs at FU, Berlin

This coordinator is regarded as head of a university orientation services for students with disabilities. The role and responsibilities of this coordinator are many. We will see the role and responsibilities of disability coordinator in his words:

- I counsel students with disabilities by mail, phone and also through personal contact. I make all arrangements and provide counselling and support services to students. I also coordinate with the concerned teaching faculty, university management and give advice to the construction department in case they plan new buildings, or modifications to the existing buildings or adaptations to old buildings like adopting ramps, elevators, lifts, automatic doors, toilets and parking places for persons with disabilities.
- Protecting the rights of students with disabilities and implements the policies formulated on an establishment-wide basis. In order to fulfil these duties, I make the university community, including university management, teaching and non-teaching staff, aware of the special needs of students.
- I work together with the university management, teaching community and studentenwerk (an organization which is supported by the German government) in order to get financial, personal and technical assistance for students with disabilities for pursuing their studies.
- I also address the concerns expressed by the students and the teaching community. This may concern any point from the architectural improvements to the modification of examination regulations or the provision of technical or assistive devices.

Overall, it can be seen that the disability coordinator engages in the process of introducing the students to the norms, policies, and expectations of the campus environment to facilitate their academic and social success. His duty is to protect the right of these students as per the laid down guidelines. These policies and procedures are implemented by the disability coordinator, as guided by the mission statements of the disability office, which describe the university’s commitment towards providing equal educational opportunities for these students in higher education. Therefore, the office of coordinator of disability affairs at the Freie University is committed to academic integration of students with disabilities with the mainstream education system.
4.3. Understanding and Defining Disability from the Student’s’ Perspective

In this section, the researcher has attempted to provide an understanding of the concept of disability from the students’ perspective, based on their experiences or their own understanding. Understanding their disability, needs and problems appears to be essential for the empowerment of such students. Respondents of the study believed that it is better to inform the disability coordinator and their teachers about their impairments and specific needs at the beginning of their studies. They also believe that their impairments not only impact their educational experiences, but also their social relations, and psychological experiences. However, the degree of self-understanding about their disability varied among the respondents. Some of them described their disability based on the degree of impairment, whereas a few of them described that their nature of disability depends on the availability of support services and role played by the university, which affect their day-to-day educational experiences. The following are the respondent’s responses:

I am a totally blind person. I cannot see anything, read myself, and I always need my friends or personal assistants help or some assistive devices for my academic activities. I could not do all the activities which are considered as normal for others.  
(Bent, totally visual impaired)

My visual impairment is making me to lag behind my friends as far as studies are concerned. But in order to succeed in my studies, I need good support and have to face so many problems like spending much time for scanning, editing or asking friends for collecting material and also for recording it on the tape-recorder. All these problems are just because of my disability.

(Ivos, partially sighted)

The major challenge for me is to make the necessary adjustments in order to survive in this critical environment which is created for individuals without disabilities. Regarding my disability it depends on the role of the university management system in providing support services and adjustments as per my needs which would enable me to access the all educational facilities.

(Urs, mobility impairment)

Initially when my sight was reducing I felt my life won’t go smoothly any more. But the availability of support services at school as well as in this university, make to feel that still I am independent. I am now no longer anxious about my eye sight and studies.

(Nika, partially sighted)

Even though people treat me as disabled, I do most of my things without depending on others, except a few things due to some limitations of the body. I do believe that everyone is having some limitations or the other. So I don’t like to be considered myself as disabled.

(John, mobility impairment)

Overall, the understanding of the term disability varied among the students. For some respondents disability was based on their impairment which affects their educational experiences. For some respondents it was understood within the context of norms of mainstreaming society or the environment with which he/she lives. But all the respondents in this
study highlighted that their supporting system in Berlin and within the university management has played a major role in shaping their educational experiences.

4.4. Factors affecting the Educational Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Educational experiences and success of the students with disabilities not only depends on the availability, as well as accessibility of facilities and support services, but also on challenging situations at higher education institutions. This section is focused on each of these factors, in order to demonstrate how they impact the higher education of these students.

4.4.1. Support Services to Students with Disabilities

Support services for students with disabilities is multi-faceted, involving issues of availability of resources and its accessibility, training of academic tutors and staff, awareness about diversity and areas of special needs, effective referral services, as well as emotional and pastoral support for students with disabilities to disclose disability and minimise the sense of stigma (Allard, W. G., Dodd, J. M. and Peralez, E. 1987; Tinklin and Hall 1999). There were several support services for these students at Freie University. The university prescribed a set of procedures, in order to integrate these students and improve their educational experiences. According to the disability coordinator:

Once students with disabilities have been selected for a particular programme at the university, they are required to submit medical proof document, which states that person has disability as per social code IX. These students can also discuss their needs and problems at the disability office, in order to get services. From the data, it was found that the key areas of concern for the participants included: counselling, academic, personal and financial services.

Counselling Services

Some of the respondents reported that counselling services is important for them to access to all kinds of support services from the beginning to end of the course. Robert, a respondent had this to say:

I had problems when I joined here to find out where I will get support. I obtained so many applications to get help but it is very difficult to meet so many people and tell everything from the beginning to each and every person. I don’t know whom to contact, how to contact and where to contact. Since, the campus is very big one and there are so many departments, it was very difficult for me to find out. Finally, I met the coordinator of disability affairs, who assessed my needs and informed me about the various kinds of support services that could meet my special needs and requirements.

Similarly, another student, Urs stated that the disability coordinator played an important role in solving his problems. He said:

In my case, I can’t meet the disability officer every time. But I consult him through email and phone. When I joined here and discussed my problems, he sent me a list of places, including, class rooms, academic places which are accessible to me in the entire campus. He also suggested to me how to access academic buildings and informed me about the location of stair cases, ramps, and lifts and toilet facilities in the campus.
It was also found that students discuss their needs and problems including: (i) effective use of support services available at the campus, (ii) teaching and learning resources including technical, personal assistance and (iii) available financial resources.

**Academic Support Services**

Academic support services are a very important source of support which helps students with disabilities succeed academically by ensuring that the students recognise their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. Moisey (2004) categorise academic support services in to four areas. These are

- Course accommodations (e.g. changes to the content, extended contract time),
- Examination accommodations such as additional time and assistance at the time of examination, arranging separate room during examination time,
- External support services such as note-taker, interpreter, and
- Assistive devices like software’s screen reader, text-to-speech, speech-to-text.

In this study, the researcher found different types of academic support services. These are discussed below:

**Personal assistants**

It was found that provision of personal assistant was considered as most important service. For four students (out of five interviews), this support was a significant source of support. All the respondents in this study reported that they are getting the services of personal assistants for their studies. These personal assistants were arranged by the disability coordinator and financed by the studentenwerk. As the Disability Coordinator put it:

Law says that all students with disabilities will get personal assistants as per their special needs. In most of the cases we arrange students/personal assistants from their class with the intention that same classmates only can knows better about their needs and render more help to these students along with their work.

All the respondents believe that these personal assistants were greatly impacting their educational experiences. Nika a student said:

I am getting personal assistant from the university. She is my friend, and classmate and is helping me in my studies by scanning and collecting material from library, writing notes for me. She reads and writes for me and also helps me if I need something related to my studies. Since I am getting support from the university, I can follow lectures much better. It makes it easy to study well. Otherwise, I would have to spend lot of time for collecting and scanning material.

According to Urs:

I am getting 10 hours personal assistance for my studies at the campus. He helps me to carry my books, writing notes and collecting material from library and opening the building doors.

From an analysis of the students narrative it was also understood that these personal assistants help them in pushing wheelchairs, and moving up and down the ramps on the campus. Since all buildings do not have adopted automatic doors, it will be very difficult for many students to get in and out of the classrooms and other places. Interestingly, these findings show even though most of the buildings and class rooms are accessible to these students, they could not complete
their studies successfully without their personal assistants. This support made their life at the campus easier. They also felt comfortable knowing that there is always a person, who can assist them in their studies, and in accessing academic buildings, cafeteria, leisure centres, etc.

**Alternative Testing and Testing Place:**
All students with visually impairment responded that taking an alternative test or modifications in testing and taking an alternative room as a quiet room where allowing a scribe to write exams for them, was a very crucial support for them. They were also allowed extra time during the examination. These students inform the disability officer prior to their exams. Then, the disability officer talks to the concerned teacher and makes all preparation for students to write exams as per their special needs. Denims, a respondent, had this to say:

Last time, my professor allowed me write exams in word document file as I requested the disability office. I am very comfortable with writing exams with technical assistance. Speech software’s helps me to write exams. It worked well. I didn’t ask for anyone’s helps to write my exams and even I finished my exam without asking for extra time. Therefore, I believe that this kind of support makes me feel that I am independent.

Bent, another respondent, said:

Getting extra time during the exams is very helpful to me. Sometimes the students who are assisting me to write exams are not good at speed writing. For me also it is very difficult to explain and tell fast. Most of the time I takes extra time not only during exams time but also for assignment submissions. Taking extra time makes me feel better and do well in my studies.

All students felt the availability of these kind of academic supports is a very important factor which positively impacts their educational experiences. During the course of their academic life, they had positive experience with the staff in the library. A common experience shared by many students was that they were very helpful. Bent’s comments are representative of the group’s experiences. He noted:

Whenever I go to the library, the staff help me in searching, issuing and returning books, and making photocopies. They also help me in accessing assistive devices within the library, and guiding me around the site.

At the same time, students with visual impairment also mentioned that they had positive experience with the teaching faculty. They also reported that teachers give useful material in advance; they put material in black board (a website which contains details of the course, material, lecturers and presentations) in advance. The following statement by Robert represents this experience.

During the beginning of the course, I went to my teacher after the class with the letter given by the disability officer, which mentions the special needs and requirements in the class and facilities I was supposed to get. That day onwards, he/she is aware of my needs and allows to me take extra time, arranges alternative place for exams and allows me to write exam in computer with speech software.

**Assistive Technology**
Assistive technology is one of the ways to help students with disabilities compensate for their difficulties and support them in a number of academic areas. The provision of assistive
technology changes the educational experiences of these students in higher education (Anderson-Inman, 1999; Burgstahler, 2002; Goldberg & O’Neil, 2000). Assistive technology helps students in reading, writing, note-taking, assignments, or writing tests, scanning and saving material. In fact, it has increasingly become apparent that the advantages of the use of the new information technology and assistive devices improve the physical and learning capabilities of these students than the students without disabilities. The disability officer noted:

“There are many types of assistive devices including scanners, computers, printers, Braille, etc, available for students with disabilities in this campus. We are having a separate learning centre for students with visual impairments. It is also known as blind support service. We are also having this kind of centre or special rooms, with all assistive devices, in all libraries in this campus”.

Bent noted:
Before coming to this campus, I used the Braille machine and normal paper for my studies. But due to the amount of text and things you have to write with this machine, this is not very easy and helpful. You would have to use a lot of paper. I would say you would have whole room full of papers but you do not the location of the particular text or material. You need to check each and every paper. I think computer technology makes it very easy to write, scan and organise material.

Financial Support
Students, whose parents do not have enough financial strength get financial assistance in all Germany Universities for their studies. Nearly 20 to 25 per cent students get this fellowship. Students with disabilities get it for longer period of time. In case they could not finish their course due to their disability, their fellowship will be extended. Students with disabilities need more financial support for their studies in order to get support like scribes, writers, and personal assistants. According to the disability officer at FU:

As per the law and University guidelines students with disabilities are often eligible to apply for financial assistance or disabled students allowance (DSA). This assistance depends on type of disability and their needs. This assistance helps them to procure their assistive devices or equipments or to employ readers or scribes and personal assistants. This assistance is funded by the Studentenwerk as per their contract with the university management and the Government.

Respondents in this study stated that disability coordinator helped them in getting information about the financial resources and application procedures. The application process involves the assessment of the needs of students and its approval from the disability coordinator. Those who received financial aid through the recommendation of the disability coordinator purchased assistive devices including scanner, computers, and speech software’s. This support reduced the amount of work they have to put for Braille writing. Now they need not to depend on others for recording material and it also helped them to save time and become independent at least as per the studies are concerned.

Accessibility and Transport
The issues of accessibility and physical barriers continue to exist in higher education institutions for students with disabilities. It includes: lack of access to buildings, classrooms and other
places on the campuses. A study 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. Paul’s (1998) study indicates that students who use wheelchairs struggle with inaccessible classrooms and restrooms. A study by West et al, (1993) also shows that barriers identified by students with disabilities were inaccessible buildings and classrooms, and lack of other accommodations.

In the current study, findings show that access for these students specifically for mobility impaired, wheel chair users, improved in Freie University, since the Senate passed guidelines in 1992 for making a more disabled-friendly city. The goal of the guidelines is to foster and encourage the equal participation of all disabled and non-disabled residents and visitors in the city’s diverse social, economic and cultural life. As a result most of the buildings including public and private offices, educational institutions, railways stations, and other transport facilities, have been made user-friendly and accessible to all.

Here, the role of coordinator disability affairs plays an important role in suggesting to the university management and planning section to provide a friendly environment for students with disabilities. The disability officer noted one of his experiences:

Few years ago, we had discussions about wheelchair users in the chemistry department. Because it was question of accessibility how student with wheelchair can work in laboratory in chemistry department. Then we had some discussions with the concerned student, his teachers, university management, our law department and the university security department. We worked together to find a solution. Finally, we found out the solution from the law says that we have to support each student with disability. The law department also said that it is not a question if the student can study but how he can study and it is not a question of support, but how we support him. Finally, we made some accessible environment and some equipment like modifications in the laboratory, which would make the wheel chair user do his work himself while sitting in the wheelchair itself and we allowed him to continue his study. He does not have to compulsorily work alone. He will get some assistance from his fellow students and his personal assistant. Finally, we succeeded in this case. We became the first laboratory where wheelchair students also can study these kind of courses. Two years back, I think he completed his course and right now one more new student with wheelchair has enrolled in the same department. Now it is much easier for him and also for us because in first case we have done and provided all facilities and accessibility to the laboratory.

The study by Brown, and Schneid (1992) also suggests that for a student with disability to have a successful and positive educational experience in higher education, two issues need to be addressed. These are: availability of specialised services to “maximise the students’ ability to participate fully in the chosen course of studies” and “the campus must be physically accessible”.

In the current study, students with mobility impairment may rely on wheel chairs, or electrical motor cars for transport to go to their universities. Urs uses a electrical motor car to move around at the university. If his classes are in different places in academic building (huge building FU), he drives from one place to another including classrooms, computer centres, restaurants, and libraries. He can access the buildings with his motor car, because they have ramps, lift facility along with staircases. Urs noted:
Most of the places in my academic building are accessible to me. I even got special parking facilities for my motor car in all the places I visit. However, once I visit entire my academic buildings, there are so many doors to get through. Unfortunately all doors are not automatic doors or electronic doors. Since I have problems with legs and hands, I do face some problems I cannot open any door in order to get my motor car gets through. So, at the beginning of my course, the disability coordinator arranged one student from my class as my personal assistant. Since our both classes and time tables are the same, he knows when and where I need his help to get inside or help in pushing in difficult places. Other than this, I am getting transport service, which is founded by the Government social aided fund. I get this service to reach my campus. This bus service has been specially arranged for persons with disabilities in Berlin. All these facilities makes it much easier for me to get around and outside the campus.

4.4.2. Challenges Faced by Students with Disabilities at FU
While all the participants had positive educational experiences, they also faced some challenging situations at the university. Despite so much progress and provision of support services students with disabilities are still facing many barriers which affect their educational experiences in higher education. It is evident from the experiences shared by such students, and the disability coordinator at FU. Most of the challenges they discussed in detail in this section include: (i) management issues based on the disability (ii) not having dormitory or hostel facilities within the campus, (iii) Physical environment and accessibility (iv) lacking financial opportunities, and (v) attitudes of teachers and peer group.

Management Issues Based on Disability
Many respondents opined that support at the university increased but problems and difficulties also increased as well. Some of the respondents commented that more and more management work has to be done in order to resolve all these problems. One student, Nika reported that she had problems with existing management system. According to her:

Support services at the university are not centralised. This campus is very huge with so many institutions but service centre for students with disabilities was located only in one place. If I need to get support for my exams, I have to get a letter every time from the disability coordinator for my exam preparations and have to submit that letter to my department. In case, I need to write exam next time I have start everything from the beginning like informing the law institution and disability centre. It takes so much time and effort to go here and there. There should be more improvement management wise in this university. It should be more decentralised and better organised.

According to the disability coordinator, says that due to some problems within the system, it was not possible to provide complete support services to students with disabilities in this university. He explained:
First and most important point is that, I am working here on part time basis only. I work only twenty hours per week in this campus. Within this short time, it is impossible for me to do counselling and assessing the students and discussing their problems, looking after their needs, contacting huge number of teaching community about student’s problems, having discussions with university management, studentenwerk, teaching community etc.
It was understood that due to part-time job and less number of working hours at FU, the disability coordinator cannot ensure that all students receive appropriate support across the university. Institutional failures in this area can seriously affect the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

**Physical Environment and Accessibility**

Many students with disabilities found that the university to be a challenging environment. Freie University put efforts to integrate students with disabilities by enabling them to participate in educational activities with different support services. Today, most of the buildings in FU are accessible and are being equipped with ramps, lift facilities, etc. But still there are some buildings and departments that remain inaccessible, because there is no way to adapt them or these adaptations require more funds. Urs opined that most of the buildings are accessible, having special parking facilities in most of the places in campus. He also noted:

I use a motor car to get in and around the campus. In the academic building, most of the places including libraries, computer centres, restaurants, are not having or adopted automatic or electronic doors in the campus. This is very big problem to me to get inside and outside from any of these places.

Some participants with visual impairment reported that it is very difficult to survive in the university. Since it is very huge campus, non-availability of hostel facilities within or near the campus makes it difficult for them to attend classes, going for library, and restaurants in the campus. Bent noted:

Even though I took mobility training before coming here and having a personal assistant, my initial days of the course were very horrible to me. We cannot expect the personal assistants to be with us for most of the time. Sometimes in some places in the campus, till I reach the destination I don’t know whether I have reached the right place or not. But somehow, I am managing everything and have the belief that I will complete my studies successfully.

All the respondents in the study are staying neither inside the campus, nor in their homes. Since, FU is not providing dormitory or hostel facilities within the campus, often students with disabilities have a difficult time to reach the campus. Even though, they have special transport services, it is very difficult for them to come to campus every day. The worst thing was that the special bus comes for them as per the university time schedule. But, in case they wish to spend more time in the library or within the campus, it won’t be possible. Thus, it also hinders maintaining friendships and social relations within the campus.

**Paucity of Financial Resources**

Financial resources are an important factor to integrate students with disabilities in any education institution with all support services. The more an institution spends money for friendly environment, which include adaptations, ramps, lifts, and assistive devices and technical and personal assistance, the less negative experience students will have. The disability officer reported that there were some financial problems in supporting and fulfilling the special needs of all types of students with disabilities. He noted:

We are having much problem with sign language interpreters. We are getting financial resources from Berlin government, some part comes from the university management, and another part comes from the Studentenwerk. In order to solve this problem, we had some discussions with
sign language interpreters, university management and the studentenwerk. As a result of the
discussion, we are planning to renew the contract with studentenwerk in the coming year in order
to meet the expenses for sign interpreters.

**Attitudes of Teachers and Peer Group**
Attitudes play an important role in the success or failure of students with disabilities in higher
education institutions. Attitudes of teachers, peer groups, non-teaching staff, and the
administration, as well as student services coordinator, can all have a profound effect on the
social and educational experiences of students with disabilities in higher education institutions
(Nathanson, 1979), since general educator’s willingness to include these students in regular
education classes is critical to the success of inclusion. A number of studies have stressed the
importance of understanding teacher’s’ attitudes, their awareness about the needs and problems
of students with disabilities in higher education (Wilson, 2001; Perry, Ivy, Conner and Shelar,
2008; and Cook and Semmel, 1999).

In the current study, all respondents did not report any negative experience with teachers. In
contrast, the experience of disability coordinator was opposite. Many times he found it difficult
to work together with university teachers. We have more than five hundred. He noted:
If student comes here and gives me some document regarding disability and says about his/her
problems or needs, I will explain in my letter to the particular teacher the situation of the students
and their needs and availability of some provision to them. Ninety per cent of teachers agree and
they provide all kind of support including extra time, alternative place.

Rest of the teachers won’t agree with me and says that is not the fair to grant extra facilities to
some people and not for all. This is due to their lack of understanding about the disabilities and
their special needs. We were also failed in some cases like invisible disabilities like students with
some psychological problems need some support like extra time or extensions but teachers didn’t
agree in a few cases. Since some disabilities are not visible, it is very difficult to convince
teachers to support students. Teachers say that these students do not have any problems and if
they want disability certificate they get it easily. So they didn’t believe some students with
invisible disabilities.

In a similar way, these students encountered some negative attitudes from their peer group. Nika
noted:
Sometimes I had come a crossed misunderstanding among a few of my friends who say that I am
using all disability benefits, without having any disability.

Copeland, Hughes, Carter, Guth, Presley, Williams, and Fowler (2004), in a study, reported that
peer support programme helped them understand more about students with disabilities and
improved their attitudes towards them. Overall, the findings of the study indicate that peer
support programme helped the respondents of the study effectively address the challenges related
to the inclusion of students with disabilities and promoted their access to general education.

**5. Discussions and Conclusion**
This section is designed to presents a discussion about the facilitating and hindering factors,
influencing the educational experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. The
findings of the study show that understanding of the term disability varied among the students in
this study. For some participants, disability was based on their impairment which affects their
The educational experiences of students with disabilities are influenced by various factors. This finding is supported by the work of Olney and Brockelman (2003) in many ways. They suggest that disability is not transient; one is disabled according to the situation, not as a constant state of being. This is supported by respondents of the current study, many of whom have reported that they felt disabled within the context of norms of the mainstream society or the environment with which they live. Some of them describe disability where they don’t have teaching and learning support services. Secondly, it was found that the positive educational experiences of participants depend more on the efficiency and functioning of the disability coordinator. Overall, we understood from their educational experiences that they were integrated into the higher education and the support services needed to facilitate their academic performance. This finding of the study supported by the study by Tinto (1975), which suggests that the greater the degree of student integration into the academic system of the university, the more likely the students with disabilities will persist to complete their studies successfully. Other research studies, like Keith, Weiss, Jeanne, and Repetto (1997); UNESCO (1999); and Hall (1998) arrive at a similar conclusion. In this study, the following support services or factors facilitated the positive educational experiences for students with disabilities at the university: (i) Services of Disability Officer, (ii) availability of support services, (iii) university coordination with other agencies like Studentenwerk, and (iv) attitudes of faculty and peers towards the students with disabilities.

Another key conclusion is, while all the participants had positive educational experiences, they also had to face a number of challenging situations at the university. This is evident from the experiences shared by students with disabilities, and the disability coordinator at FU. Findings from this study and studies conducted by McBroom, 1997; Wagner, 1993; Marder & D’Amico, 1992 clearly show that the significant increase in the number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions over the past two decades is accompanied by an equal concern for the academic failure of a number of these students. These researchers contend that many factors could possibly contribute challenging situations for students with disabilities at higher education. It is important for policy makers to understand those challenging situations that affect the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

6. Implications for Policy

This study has sought to provide policy makers an insight into the factors affecting the educational experiences of students with disabilities in higher education and, they need to respond in several ways to enhance the conditions of this category of students. One major area of policy is focused upon the management issues within the existing system, which are important to address the challenges faced by students with disabilities. First of all, the university management should review the current policy and make changes in the existing system. Support for students with disabilities should be decentralised in entire campus. Instead of having a single support cell in one place, there should be more advocacy and support centres or networks which could help students with disabilities. The second important point for policy makers is that the persons who are employed as disability officers, or coordinators, should be a full-time employees. In order to properly understand the problems of students with disabilities and improve their educational experience, it is better if they are employed on the basis of certain qualifications like their knowledge, awareness and work and educational background related to disability issues. Another implication is that, policy should provide additional funding resources in order to meet requirements of all types of special needs like sign language interpreters, to buy new assistive
devices or equipments, to create adaptations or friendly environment in laboratories and install automatic doors in all the places. One final implication for policy makers is that, there should be additional funding for training of persons to help students technically and provide in-service training to create awareness among the teachers about the needs and problems of students with disabilities.

Future researchers can draw from this study to develop studies like how the experiences of these five students relate to the larger population, and also how these experiences can lead to better social interaction and academic success. There is a significant need for further research on academic success of students with disabilities in higher education institutions.

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