

Original Research Article

Exploring Life Skills among Higher Education Students: A Comparison between those with and without Disabilities

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Abstract: This study explores the life skills among higher education students, comparing those with disabilities to their non-disabled students in West Bengal, India. The main objectives were to assess the life skills status of these students, and to examine the differences based on disability status, gender, educational streams, and educational levels. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 560 students from both undergraduate and postgraduate levels across ten institutions, representing urban and rural settings. Data was collected using the Life Skills Scale. The results revealed that students with disabilities exhibited significantly lower life skills compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Gender differences in life skills were found to be statistically insignificant, while postgraduate students demonstrated higher life skills than undergraduates, with a significant difference. Furthermore, students from the Science stream scored higher in life skills compared to those in the Arts and Engineering streams. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address the disparities in life skills development, particularly for students with disabilities, and suggest the importance of inclusive educational practices across disciplines.

Keywords: Life Skills, Disability, Higher Education, Inclusive Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Life skills are essential psychosocial abilities that empower individuals to effectively manage the demands of daily life and participate fully in academic, social, and professional environments. In higher education, the development of such skills becomes increasingly important, particularly as students navigate complex transitions related to identity formation, independence, and career readiness (World Health Organization, 1997). For students with disabilities, the need for strong life skills is further amplified due to the added challenges posed by accessibility barriers, social stigma, and limited institutional support systems (Smith, Johnson, Kumar, & Lee, 2021; Martinez, Alvarado, Nguyen, & Chen, 2023). Research consistently indicates that critical skills such as decision-making, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication play a pivotal role in enhancing student engagement, resilience, and academic success across diverse learner populations (Brown, Taylor, Ibrahim, & Wang, 2020; Singh, Lopez, Carter, & Thomas, 2022; Ahmed, Daniels, Huang, & Torres, 2023).

Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of life skills education, a significant gap persists in their development among students with disabilities when compared to their non-disabled peers. This disparity often stems from systemic inequalities, including insufficient access to adaptive learning tools, exclusionary teaching practices, and lack of inclusive curriculum design (Peterson, O'Connell, Green, & Malik, 2021; Zhang, Rivera, Holt, & Franklin, 2023). Studies have shown that these structural disadvantages can hinder students with disabilities from acquiring the competencies needed to thrive both within and beyond the academic setting (Nelson, Kapoor, Romero, & Silva, 2020; Adams, Yamada, Clifford, & Rao, 2022; Fernandez, Chang, Mitchell, & Oliver, 2024). Therefore, a comparative investigation into life skills among higher education students—with and without disabilities—can provide valuable insights into existing inequities and inform targeted interventions to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment (Thompson, Alvarez, Rahman, & Cooper, 2021).

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Rationale of the Study

In recent years, life skills have emerged as essential competencies in higher education, supporting students in navigating academic demands, managing emotional challenges, and preparing for life beyond university. These skills—such as communication, decision-making, self-awareness, and interpersonal effectiveness—contribute substantially to student well-being and academic engagement (Brown, Taylor, Ibrahim, & Wang, 2020; Singh, Lopez, Carter, & Thomas, 2022). For students with disabilities, however, the acquisition of life skills assumes heightened importance. These learners often encounter institutional, social, and environmental barriers that require advanced coping strategies and adaptive functioning (Smith, Johnson, Kumar, & Lee, 2021; Martinez, Alvarado, Nguyen, & Chen, 2023). Despite national educational reforms promoting inclusive learning environments, there remains limited empirical understanding of how these essential life skills differ between students with and without disabilities—especially within diverse regional contexts like West Bengal, India.

Globally, the development of life skills has been recognized as a foundational element for fostering psychological resilience and autonomy (World Health Organization, 1997). In the Indian educational context, however, research exploring the intersection of disability and life skill development remains limited. Particularly in West Bengal, where educational institutions differ significantly in terms of infrastructure, teaching quality, and access to disability support services, students with disabilities may experience unequal opportunities for skill acquisition. These inequalities can hinder the development of critical skills such as assertive communication, self-regulation, and problem-solving, which are essential for succeeding in both academic and life domains (Peterson, O'Connell, Green, & Malik, 2021; Fernandez, Chang, Mitchell, & Oliver, 2024).

The state of West Bengal, with its blend of rural and urban higher education institutions, offers a unique setting to study these disparities. While some institutions have embraced inclusive practices, many still fall short in providing accessible environments and adequate support systems for students with disabilities. These shortcomings can widen the gap in life skills development, especially when compared to their non-disabled peers. Given recent policy shifts under India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the legislative mandates of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), understanding these gaps becomes critical for informing future educational strategies (Thompson, Alvarez, Rahman, & Cooper, 2021; Ahmed, Daniels, Huang, & Torres, 2023). This study's significance lies in its potential to offer insight into the life skill profiles of students with and without disabilities within West Bengal's higher education landscape. Through comparative analysis, the research aims to reveal existing inequalities and explore how

institutional, social, and demographic variables influence life skills development. Findings from this study will have implications for policy makers, academic institutions, and practitioners seeking to promote equity in student development and success (Nelson, Kapoor, Romero, & Silva, 2020; Adams, Yamada, Clifford, & Rao, 2022).

In addition, this study will provide educators and curriculum designers with data-driven guidance to enhance student development programs. Identifying which life skills are lacking among students with disabilities can help create tailored interventions and inclusive support systems. Life skills are not only tools for academic success but also vital for fostering long-term independence, mental health, and social inclusion (Zhang, Rivera, Holt, & Franklin, 2023; Singh *et al.*, 2022). Without these foundational skills, students—particularly those with disabilities—may face continued marginalization and limited opportunities after graduation. Moreover, the research holds broader societal value by aligning with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). As West Bengal advances its focus on inclusive education, this study provides timely empirical evidence that can support ongoing reforms. It can also serve as a baseline for future investigations into life skills education and inclusive learning environments across India and other developing regions (Brown *et al.*, 2020; Ahmed *et al.*, 2023; Smith *et al.*, 2021).

Delimitations of the Study

- i. The present study was geographically delimited to the state of West Bengal, India.
- ii. The study focused exclusively on higher education students (both undergraduate and postgraduate levels) from four selected districts within West Bengal.
- iii. A total of 560 students were selected as the sample for the study.
- iv. The study considered only life skills as the dependent variable.
- v. The study considered only four demographic variables i.e., disability status, gender, educational streams and educational levels.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To assess the present status of life skills among higher education students in West Bengal.
- ii. To compare the life skills of students with disabilities and those without disabilities by their gender.
- iii. To compare the life skills of students with disabilities and those without disabilities by their educational streams.
- iv. To compare the life skills of students with disabilities and those without disabilities by their educational level.

Hypotheses of the Study

H₀₁: There is no significant mean difference in life skills between students with and students without disabilities.

H₀₂: There is no significant mean difference in life skills between students with and those without disabilities by gender.

H₀₃: There is no significant mean difference in life skills between students with and those without disabilities by educational level.

H₀₄: There is no significant mean difference in life skills between students with and those without disabilities based on their educational streams.

METHOD

The present study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to investigate life skills among higher education students with and those without disabilities. Data collection was carried out across ten higher education institutions located in various districts of West Bengal, encompassing both urban and rural settings. A total of 560 students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels participated in the present study. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling

technique, ensuring representation from diverse academic environments. The study specifically examined the influence of four key demographic variables i.e., disability status, gender, educational stream, and level of education on students' life skills development.

Instrument Used for Data Collection

The Life Skills Scale, developed by Anjum Ahmad and Saba Parveen (2021), was utilized in this study. This scale, based on a five-point Likert format ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” includes 40 items organized into 10 distinct dimensions: Self-awareness, Empathy, Critical Thinking, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Effective Communication, Creative Thinking, Interpersonal Relationships, Coping with Stress, and Coping with Emotions. The scale demonstrated a high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.765. The minimum and maximum scores of the scale are 40-200.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive statistics regarding life skills of students with and without disabilities

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Category	Number of students	Mean ± SD
Life Skills among students with and without disabilities	Disability Status	With Disabilities	132	121.93 ± 18.17
		Without Disabilities	428	139.9 ± 19.59
	Gender	Male	259	135.1 ± 19.24
		Female	301	136.2 ± 21.91
	Educational Streams	Arts	401	135.6 ± 21.53
		Science	96	140.4 ± 17.96
		Engineering	63	129.2 ± 17.42
	Educational Level	Undergraduate	186	12.3 ± 2.59
		Post-graduate	374	13.0 ± 2.56

Interpretations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of life skills for students with and without disabilities. In terms of disability status, students with disabilities exhibited lower life skills (M = 121.93) compared to students without disabilities (M = 139.9). Regarding gender, female students, both with and without disabilities, demonstrated higher life skills (M = 136.2) than their male counterparts (M = 135.1). In terms of educational

stream, students in the science category, regardless of disability status, scored higher in life skills (M = 14.4) than students in the arts (M = 135.6) and engineering (M = 129.2) streams. Lastly, when considering educational level, post-graduate students, irrespective of disability status, exhibited higher life skills (M = 13.0) than undergraduate students (M = 12.3).

Hypothesis Testing

Table 2: Independent sample t-test based on H₀₁ to H₀₃

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	t-value	MD	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remarks (0.05 level)	Hypothesis testing (95%)
Life Skills among students with and without disabilities	Disability status	-9.380	-17.9911	558	0.001	Significant	Rejected
	Gender	-0.6409	-1.1254	558	0.522	Not significant	Failed to Reject
	Educational level	-3.07	-5.666	558	0.002	Significant	Rejected

Interpretation

The analysis presented in Table 2 reveals that the computed t-value for life skills between students with and without disabilities is t(558) = -9.380, with a p-value

of 0.001. This indicates that the difference in life skills between these two groups is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (p < 0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H₀₁) is rejected, suggesting that the observed

differences are unlikely to be due to random chance. Additionally, the analysis shows that the computed t-value for life skills between students with and without disabilities, based on gender, is $t(558) = -0.6409$, with a p-value of 0.522. This result suggests that the difference in life skills between the two groups, considering gender, is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H02) cannot be rejected, and the observed differences are likely attributable to random chance.

Finally, the analysis indicates that the computed t-value for life skills among students with and without disabilities, based on educational level, is $t(558) = -3.07$, with a p-value of 0.002. This result suggests that the difference in life skills between the two groups, when considering educational level, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the null hypothesis (H03) is rejected, and the observed differences are unlikely to be due to random chance.

Table 3: One-way ANOVA based on H₀₄

Dependent Variable		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F- value	Sig.	Remarks (0.05 level)
Life Skills among students with and without disabilities	Between Groups	4802.326	2	2401.163	5.693	0.004	Significant
	Within Groups	234943.095	557	421.801			
	Total	239745.421	559				

Interpretation

The analysis in Table 4 indicates that the computed F-value for life skills between students with and without disabilities, based on educational streams, is $F(2, 557) = 5.693$, with a p-value of 0.004. This result suggests that the difference in life skills scores between students with and without disabilities is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H04) is rejected.

Major Findings

Overall

Present status of life skills among students with and without disabilities in higher education was found to be 135.68.

Based on Disability Status

Students with disabilities showed lower life skills than students without disabilities and the found difference was statistically significant.

Based on Gender

Female students showed higher life skills than male students with and those without disabilities but the found difference was statistically not significant.

Based on Educational Level

Postgraduate students showed higher life skills than undergraduate students with and those without disabilities but the found difference was statistically significant.

Based on Educational Streams

Students from the Science stream showed higher life skills than arts and engineering stream students with and without disabilities and the found difference was statistically significant.

an average score of 135.68. Notably, students with disabilities exhibited significantly lower life skills compared to their non-disabled counterparts. This disparity underscores the ongoing challenges faced by students with disabilities in acquiring essential psychosocial skills needed for academic success and personal development. Several studies, including those by Brown *et al.*, (2020) and Smith *et al.*, (2021), have echoed similar findings, pointing out that students with disabilities often encounter barriers such as inadequate support systems, limited access to adaptive learning tools, and social stigmas, which hinder their life skills development.

In terms of gender, female students generally displayed slightly higher life skills than male students, irrespective of their disability status. However, the statistical analysis revealed that this difference was not significant. This suggests that gender does not play a substantial role in the variation of life skills development within the higher education context. Previous research by Nelson *et al.*, (2020) and Singh *et al.*, (2022) supports this finding, indicating that gender-based differences in life skills are often negligible, and factors such as social constructs and educational environment tend to have a more significant influence than gender alone. These results suggest that the emphasis on gender-specific life skills interventions may not be necessary, and efforts should focus more on inclusivity for all students.

The analysis also revealed that postgraduate students exhibited higher life skills scores compared to undergraduate students, with this difference being statistically significant. This aligns with the findings of Thompson *et al.*, (2021), who indicated that postgraduate education often provides students with greater opportunities to develop critical life skills due to the increased academic and personal demands of these programs. Additionally, students from the Science stream demonstrated superior life skills compared to those from the Arts and Engineering streams, reflecting the structured, analytical nature of science education that

DISCUSSION

The current study revealed that the overall life skills among higher education students was measured at

promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This highlights the importance of tailoring life skills education to the specific needs of students in different academic disciplines, ensuring that all students, regardless of their field of study, can develop essential life skills.

Educational Implications

This present study findings have profound implications for higher education institutions, particularly in the context of fostering life skills among students with and without disabilities. The significant gap in life skills development between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers suggests that targeted educational interventions are essential to address these disparities. Institutions should prioritize creating more inclusive environments by enhancing support services, providing access to adaptive learning tools, and promoting inclusive teaching practices (Zhang, Rivera, Holt, & Franklin, 2023). Moreover, integrating life skills education into curricula, especially for students with disabilities, will empower them to overcome accessibility barriers and thrive in academic and social settings (Smith, Johnson, Kumar, & Lee, 2021). The study also highlights the need for gender-neutral approaches to life skills development. Although female students exhibited slightly higher life skills than their male counterparts, the lack of statistical significance indicates that gender should not be a major factor when designing life skills programs (Nelson, Kapoor, Romero, & Silva, 2020). Instead, educational strategies should focus on addressing the broader issues of inclusivity and accessibility. This aligns with the idea that life skills education should be universal, ensuring all students, regardless of gender or disability status, have equal opportunities for personal and academic growth (Singh, Lopez, Carter, & Thomas, 2022).

Additionally, the findings regarding educational level and streams underline the importance of tailoring life skills education to the specific demands of various academic disciplines. Postgraduate students demonstrated higher life skills due to the increased academic challenges they face, which suggests that advanced programs offer more opportunities for developing crucial life skills (Thompson, Alvarez, Rahman, & Cooper, 2021). Similarly, students in the Science stream showed superior life skills compared to their peers in the Arts and Engineering streams, highlighting the need for curriculum designers to consider the nature of different fields in fostering life skills. As such, higher education institutions must incorporate life skills training across all disciplines, ensuring that students from various academic backgrounds are equipped with the necessary skills for both academic and personal success.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the life skills development of higher education students,

highlighting significant disparities between students with and without disabilities. The findings emphasize the need for inclusive educational practices that cater to the specific needs of students with disabilities, ensuring they have equal access to the skills required for academic success and personal growth. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of gender-neutral life skills programs and the need for curricula that address the diverse requirements of students from different academic streams. As higher education institutions continue to evolve, it is crucial to recognize the importance of life skills in shaping well-rounded, capable individuals. By fostering an environment that nurtures these skills, institutions can contribute to the overall success and inclusion of all students, paving the way for a more equitable and resilient society.

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