

**An Exploration of Challenges Related to Inclusion of Students with Disabilities at a University of Technology in South Africa**

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**ABSTRACT** This study attempted to explore the challenges related to inclusion of students with disabilities at an institution of technology in South Africa with an intention to suggest recommendations for improvements. A purposive sample of 12 (5 females and 7 males) students with disabilities participated in the study. A semi-structured interview exploring the challenges related to inclusion of students with disabilities at the university was conducted with the participants. The findings revealed that the students with disabilities experienced a number of challenges related to the inclusion of students with disabilities at the university under study. Specially, the study revealed that the students with disability experienced challenges related to accessibility to the lecture rooms, library, halls/auditoriums, residents, administrative block and barriers to learning. The participants believed that the physical infrastructure in the university was not user-friendly for students with disabilities. Recommendations to improve the challenges related to inclusion of students with disabilities were made.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that Higher Education (HE) in South Africa has undergone a significant process of transformation after 1994, at the centre of this process remains the goal of increasing access and success for the most disadvantaged groups in the society, including students with disabilities (Nzimande 2010). Nzimande further states that in spite of the clear policy commitments with regard to prioritising access for and improving services to students with disabilities in South Africa, there is still a lack of commitment from some higher education institutions to ensure the right environment for learning for students with disabilities. This is a cause for concern as data in South Africa shows that high numbers of students who enter the higher education system do not graduate in the minimum time, and many discontinue their studies along the way (Nzimande 2010). This is supported by the Soudien report, which reveals that as far as disability is concerned, there seems to be a general recognition that there has been limited progress made in addressing the needs of the disabled, both in terms of the physical infrastructure, as well as educational support structures. The report further reveals that the lack of access for the disabled to higher education is indicated by the fact that in 2007, there were 4 325 disabled students in higher education, representing 0,6% of the total headcount enrolments for higher education. According to Sachs and Schreuer (n.d.), accessibility to education is important for people with disabilities as education is a predictor of gainful employment in meaningful occupations, opening opportunities for career development, hence for quality of life. This idea is echoed by Wehman (2006) who points out that widening access of students with disabilities in higher education would increase their chances of obtaining and maintaining employment; earning a higher income; and creating a means for lifelong independence and quality of life.

According to Eklinde and Wormnaes (n.d.), the right to education is universal and must be extended to adults with disabilities as it is enshrined in many organisations, including the World Declaration for Education for All (1990), the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disability (1993), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). The goal of Dakar Framework for Action is to achieve “education for all” by 2015. This organization believes that this goal could only be achieved when all nations recognise that the universal right to education extends to individuals with disabilities, and when all nations act upon their obligation to establish or reform public education systems that are accessible to, and meet the

needs of individuals with disability. It is against this background that the current paper sought to document the experiences of students with disabilities as well as barriers to access and participate in higher education activities.

The literature on students with disabilities at higher education has focussed on a number of factors that affect the academic performance of those students. Madriaga, Hanson, Heaton, Kay, Newitt and Walker (2010) conducted a study on challenges facing both disabled and non-disabled students' learning and assessment experiences. The results of their study revealed that there were some similar experiences between the disabled and non-disabled students. However, the findings further revealed that a greater proportion of disabled students mentioned that they had experienced difficulties in learning due to individual impairments compared to non-disabled students. For example, disabled students indicated greater difficulties than non-disabled students in taking notes, hearing the lecturer, reading course materials, access into buildings and having appropriate formatted hand-outs. Another study on the disabled students at higher education was conducted by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011). The focus of the study was on the voices of students with disabilities in Botswana. The findings revealed that there was an acute shortage of appropriate resources for students with disabilities; most of the buildings at the university were not accessible for individuals with mobility impairments; the halls of residences for students with disabilities were not suitable, for example, there were no assisted bathrooms, toilets, adjustable furniture; and support mechanism like the counselling centre was not well resourced in handling issues of disability. Concerned about high failure rate and the challenges related to inclusion of students with disabilities at a university of technology in South Africa, the researchers decided to embark on this study. The current study focused on what students with disabilities perceived as barriers to their academic achievement. The focus on students with disabilities was strategically. Conboy and Fronseca (2009) argue that one simple technique of improving academic success is listening to the students as they are primary consumers of the education process and uniquely positioned to understand the nature of higher education problems. Limited attention has been given to the voices of the disabled students at higher education. To the best knowledge of the researchers, few extensive studies have been conducted in South Africa focusing on challenges related to inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, with the exception of Matshedisho (2007) and Jjuuko (2013).

## **GOALS OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this study was to explore the challenges related to inclusion of students with disabilities at a higher education institution with an intention to suggest recommendations for improvements.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study is qualitative in nature. According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), qualitative research methodology offers a platform for understanding the plight of students with disability. Therefore, a qualitative research design was felt relevant for this study as it was interested in hearing the voices of students with disabilities.

### **Participants**

The researchers made an effort to obtain a balanced sample of participants, including students with different forms of mobility disabilities, different age group and gender, and studying in diverse courses. The participants were drawn from the faculties of Education, Business Management Sciences and Law, Health Sciences and Science, Engineering and Technology. Their ages ranged between 20 and 34 years. The sample was made up of 12 students. Seven were males and 5 were females. The participants were selected purposefully from a list of the disabled students that was used for the previous study that involved all the disabled students at the university. Among the participants, five of them were wheelchair-users, four were walking frame users, two were partial sighted and one was partially deaf.

### **Instrument**

In order to allow the voices of people with disabilities to be heard, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants. The general issues to be investigated were formulated in the interview guide. A framework of themes to be explored included the following: challenges with accessibility to facilities at the university (e.g. lecture rooms, library, halls, residences, administrative building) and barriers to learning.

### **Procedure**

A non-threatening environment that ensures and strengthens confidentiality was arranged by the researchers. Each interview took about one hour. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews with the permission of the interviewees. Ethical issues regarding anonymity,

confidentiality and access to the research findings were discussed with the participants who gave an informed consent prior to data collection. The participants were further informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the study.

### **Data analysis**

The data was content analysed. According to Silverman (2004), content analysis produces a relatively systematic comprehensive summary of data. Recurrent instances were systematically identified and grouped together.

## **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to explore and report on the experiences of students with disabilities in one of the higher education institutions in South Africa. The analysis of the data collected revealed that there were a number of challenges related to the inclusion of students with disabilities at the university under study. The following challenges presented according to themes were identified:

### **Challenges with accessibility to lecture rooms at the university**

Students with disabilities were asked to share their experiences on the accessibility of the lecture rooms. Their responses showed their dissatisfaction with the manner in which the lecture rooms were structured. They pointed out that the lecture rooms were not user friendly or accommodative to students with disabilities. The following extracts support the above explanation:

Student A.

*“There are too many steps in the lecture rooms. They cause a problem for me since my feet get very tired and painful. Another issue is that, since there are steps even inside the lecture rooms, I find it difficult to sit close to the lecturer. Most of the time I am forced to sit at the back and this interferes with my poor vision. In that situation, I find it difficult to see the projected notes”*

On the same issue, student B said the following:

*“One day I missed steps and fell down in the lecture rooms. Honestly, we are suffering in this institution and nobody seems to care. The situations we find ourselves in make it difficult for us to compete with the normal students”.*

### **Challenges with accessibility to the library**

On the issue of the accessibility of the library the students expressed similar concerns. They complained about the long distance they have to travel to the library. Another concern was an issue of steps and long queues when borrowing books. They also expressed concern about the books that were only available in the system but physically were not there. The following are the verbal quotes from the students with regard to the accessibility of the library:

Student D

*“The other libraries are too far and by the time you get there you are too tired. Another thing that frustrates me is to stand for long periods of time when borrowing books and when searching for information. Sometimes when I get the books I am too exhausted or I just give up. Steps in the library make it difficult for me to gain access into the library, especially the medical library. It is clear that in this institution the infrastructure is not user –friendly for the physically challenged people”*

### **Challenges with accessibility to halls/auditoriums**

With regards to the accessibility to halls/auditoriums the students expressed concern about the steps. They also mentioned that these facilities were too far from their residences. The following are the verbal quotes from Student C.

*“The halls and auditoriums are too cold in winter and too far from where I stay. I also find it difficult to move up and down the steps.*

### **Challenges with access to the residents**

Again the issue of steps was a challenge. The students complained that the steps were everywhere at the residences. This becomes problematic for them as they are forced to face that problem on a daily basis. They also complained about the huge distance between the residential area and the lecture rooms. Following is the extract from Student F:

*“A great challenge is to walk up the steps to the third floor every day. I find it difficult as the residences are not wheelchair friendly. There is a shortage of toilets at the residences and the few available are not PWD friendly. Some residences like Baghdad and Atlanta are too far from the residences. It is clear that the residences are not built for the disabled people”*

### **Challenges with access to the administrative block**

The students expressed concern about the accessibility to the administrative block. They indicated that they were forced to visit this block from time to time to address their administrative issues, like their bursary grants. They mentioned that the access to the building was difficult for them as the whole building was not designed for the disabled people. The following are the verbal quotes from the students:

Student H

*“There is no access to the administrative block as the whole building does not have access, it’s all steps. Another thing that frustrates me is to stand in line for more than an hour before you get assistance.*

On the same issue, Student I mentioned the following:

*“I always experience a problem when I visit the administration block. For example, when I want to access my results or academic records, I always stand in long lines. I do not even usually go there”.*

### **Barriers to learning**

With regard to challenges associated with learning, the students mentioned the fact that some of them write very slowly and there was no special time allocated for the disabled students. They also mentioned that they struggled to access information in the library and computer laboratories. They also complained that they found it difficult to hear some lecturers and have problems in reading long textbooks. Some complained that they could not see clearly on the chalkboard or projector screen. The following extracts support the above explanation:

Student L

*“My writing pace is too slow and unfortunately there is no extra time for people like me. When there are many tasks administered in the lecture rooms I usually get tired because my eyes get tired when reading. Another important thing that frustrates me is that when we write exams and tests there are no time extension, time allocated is always short and in many cases I find it difficult to finish writing.”*

In the same issue, Student F mentioned the following:

*“I cannot see questions clearly since my eyes get sore when spending long time reading. Another problem is that I am unable to carry books from the library to the residences. I have a study group and we always meet in the study centre which is far from the residences and sometimes I end up not meeting my group members due to the fact that I get tired when walking a long distance”*

Student A mentioned the following:

*“In the library there are no resources like textbooks. Sometimes we have share one available copy and in such cases you have to wait for a long time before you get the textbook. I also find a problem accessing the internet where I could get information without going to the library”*

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of the study was to explore and report on the experiences of students with disabilities in one of the higher education institutions in South Africa. Despite the fact that physical access constitutes a crucial issue to teaching and learning spaces (Tiklin, Riddell and Wilson 2004), the results of this study revealed that the students with disabilities experienced problems related to the access to most of the buildings in the institution. This inaccessibility of the buildings emanated from the fact that the buildings were not user-friendly for the students with disabilities. Another problem related to the inaccessibility of the buildings in the institution was associated with the long distances the students with disabilities were supposed to walk from their residences to the various buildings. This is a cause for concern as the academic success of these students relies on their ability to gain access to the key buildings like the library, lecture rooms, and administrative block. Therefore it is clear that these students were denied of their right to education. This finding is supported by the results of a study conducted by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011) on the experiences of the students with disabilities in higher education in Botswana. The findings of their study revealed that there was an acute shortage of appropriate resources for students with disabilities; most of the buildings at the university were not accessible for individuals with mobility impairments; the halls of residences for students with disabilities were not suitable, for example, there were no assisted bathrooms, toilets, adjustable furniture; and support mechanism like the counselling centre was not well resourced in handling issues of disability. With regards to the challenges associated with learning the results revealed that the students with disabilities experienced a problem with the duration of the examination papers or tests administered throughout the year. As some of them wrote slowly, they found it difficult to finish writing the examination papers. This is likely to deny them accessibility to education as Sachs and Schreuer (n.d.), point out that accessibility to education is important for people with disabilities as education is a predictor of gainful employment in meaningful occupations and opening opportunities for career development. The results also indicated that some

students with disabilities could not see properly on the chalkboard or projector screen and also could not hear some lecturers at all. This finding was due to the fact that among the students with disabilities in the institution, there were those who were partial sighted and partially deaf. It seems as if there were no special arrangements provided for such students. This is supported by the results of a study conducted by Matshediso (2007) on access to higher education for disabled students in South Africa. His results indicated that 83% of the institutions reported that they offered support services whereas 17% said that they did not provide such support. It is likely to happen that the institution under study falls under the institutions that did not provide support for the students with disabilities. In another study conducted by Beilke and Yassel (1999), the students with disabilities perceived their classroom to be an unwelcome place due to the fact that what was taking place in the classroom did not favour them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The experiences of the students with disabilities in the current study were not favourable for them to succeed academically. Based on their responses it is clear that the infrastructure in the institution is not user-friendly for the students with disabilities. These students feel sidelined in many ways. It is clear that the institution treats them like normal students and as a result there are no special facilities for them. The students with disabilities find it difficult to gain access to the relevant support facilities that can assist them in their academic activities. These students are left to fend for themselves in order to survive academically.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

The university should change the infrastructure so as to accommodate the students with disabilities. Specifically, the library building, residences, lecture rooms, administrative block etc. should be user-friendly to students with disability, especially to wheelchair-users. The university should take into cognizance that adapting the environment to the needs of the students with disabilities should be a process that combines legislation, persuasion, good example and human pressure (Hadjikakou, Polycarpou and Hadjilia 2010). Providing the students with disabilities with laptops that are linked to internet can minimize the number of visiting the library as the students will easily gain access to information. During examination

and tests, the students with disability should be given more time to write. In order to provide for the partially deaf students the university should have lecture rooms that are fitted with speakers linked to microphones. The university should have an office that deals with the needs of the students with disabilities. Since this study was carried out at one institution, there may be a need to consider the views of a number of students from different institutions on this aspect of the experiences of students with disabilities. Further studies may also capture how the students with disability engage

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