

Access Challenges for Students with Disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: A Situational Analysis of the Edgewood Campus

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ABSTRACT The study explored the nature of access challenges faced by students with visual disabilities at the Edgewood campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A case study which was qualitative in nature was used. A sample of two staff members in the Disability Support Unit was interviewed and documents analysed. Data was coded into categories and then themes. The findings show that although access has improved for students with disabilities in this institution, there are still systemic barriers that limit the participation of students with visual disabilities in the academic programs. The article concludes that improved access requires partnership between government and HE institutions to monitor and support systemic transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Disability is one of many markers of difference and people with disability tend to be marginalised or excluded from social activities, especially education. In 1994, the United Nations re-emphasised the need for states to recognise the right of people with disabilities to education (UNESCO 1994). Similarly, the South African Constitution (RSA 1996) upholds and entrenches the human right of all citizens, irrespective of difference whilst the Higher Education Act (Department of Education 1997a) promotes equality of access for all, especially for those previously marginalised or excluded. These declarations and policies may be very good on paper but the biggest test is in their applicability in real life situations.

Higher education (HE) has an important role to play in addressing the challenges and demands of the 21st century. Teferra and Altbach (2004: 21) regard this century as a knowledge era because it has brought about an unstoppable demand for access into higher education in Africa since “higher education is recognised as a key force for modernization and development.” The above authors acknowledge that universities are at the forefront of knowledge and information production and consumption, especially in the African continent. The increased demand for, and access to HE is regarded as a result of

massification (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007:385). Whatever the cause of this demand, there seems to be pressure for African countries to compare favourably with other countries in similar contexts in their ability to provide access to HE whilst creating opportunities for further study to those who have qualified for post-secondary education (Teferra and Altbach 2004).

Internationally the movement to transform HE by increasing the intake of students who were previously marginalised or totally excluded, including those with disabilities has intensified (IIE 2013). Mbabane (2010:3) defines transformation as a radical process that leads to “dissociation with the past” and in HE, this process is “revolutionary, qualitative and multi-dimensional”. This process, he adds, is capable of altering the form, culture and shape of institutions. Transformation in South African HE is evident in increased numbers of previously marginalised students. For example, the demand for higher education has pushed enrolments in these institutions to over 500 000 students (Teferra and Altbach 2004), a demand that has been strengthened by the passing of Education White Paper 3 on the transformation of HE institutions (Department of Education 1997b). This White Paper urges these institutions to become more responsive to societal needs, a call that resonates with Education White Paper 6 (DoE 2001) which calls for the creation of inclusive learning centres

where teaching methodologies and cultures are welcoming and accommodating of all learning needs. The university under study has not lagged behind in heeding the call to transform and to be responsive. It has set up student support services to ensure that it is accurate and relevant in supporting and promoting the participation of those previously marginalised. As Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) assert, all strategies used to promote participation need to produce positive outcomes. As such, some of the facilities forming part of student support services are the Writing Centre, Student Counselling Services, Academic Monitoring and Support Services, and the Disability Support Unit. However, not all of these have a presence in all the campuses of this institution as yet, but there are plans to duplicate all across in an attempt to ensure that all students can access support that is relevant to their learning needs.

Discourses of Disability

The transformation of HE would not be complete if it did not extend to students with disabilities as they also have been marginalised and excluded in the past. The establishment of Disability Support Units (DSU) on all campuses of this university is the university's response to students' diverse needs. The DSUs ensure that affected students get the accommodations and support they need in order to fully participate in the teaching and learning process.

Although people with disabilities have the same rights as other people nowadays, there are still a number of discourses on disability competing today, discourses which influence how people with disabilities are treated. The main one is the medical discourse which has, over the years, influenced educational provision (Fulcher 1989 cited in Ntombela 2006). This discourse views disability not only as physical incapacity but individual characteristics are over-emphasised (Morrison et al. 2009) and the context overlooked, a practice that Vlachou (2004:7) maintains is a "deficit-individualistic approach to needs" that perpetuates discrimination. When educational provision is undertaken within this discourse, admitting students with disabilities can be regarded as doing them a favour, thus they would be expected to fit in without much support, a practice that continues to keep them at the margins or exclude them.

More recently, a social model of disability has emerged, highlighting the 'disabling' role of

physical and social environments in the lives of people with disabilities (Ntombela 2006; Morrison et al. 2009). It is within this model that institutions of HE need to understand and attempt to accommodate the special needs of students with disabilities as such perspective would lend themselves well to the provision of meaningful and relevant support.

Inclusion and Inclusive Education

Inclusion is a difficult concept to describe because how it is defined and implemented tends to be context specific (Armstrong et al. 2011; Lambe 2011). This fluidity of the concept and its conceptualisation can lead to it "meaning everything and nothing at the same time" (Armstrong et al. 2011: 31). However, it is defined broadly as a philosophy informing educational planning, provisioning and resourcing, a definition that prioritises diversity and how education institutions respond to that (Armstrong et al. 2011).

In South Africa, inclusive education is regarded as a unifying response to the country's history of divisions. Education White Paper 6 (DoE 2001) is concerned with the transformation of Basic Education to an Inclusive Education and Training System. Such a system recognises that all children and youth can learn, and that they require support to do so; it celebrates learner diversity and focuses on the responsiveness of educational provision to all learning needs as well as improving access for marginalised groupings, including physical access to buildings and grounds (DoE 2001: 29-42). This policy statement seeks to develop a just and humane society, a value that resonates with the Constitution. It also is concerned with the creation of a quality education system, which, if coupled with access, makes the core of what Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) regard as a successfully transformed higher education. The adoption of an inclusive education and training system is a significant shift from the medical discourse that once influenced educational provision in South Africa.

As already mentioned earlier on, in the not too distant past, the accommodation of students with disabilities was not a priority for HE. Students with disabilities who found themselves admitted to HE institutions had to find ways to adapt or the harshness of the system would

soon push them out. The first international call was made in France at the World Conference on Higher Education which called for equality of access and recognised the need to place students and their needs at the centre (UNESCO 1998). Clancy and Goastellec (2007) are of the opinion that increased access to higher education is a result of mounting political, economic, demographic and ideological pressure. However, they add, increased access does not necessarily lead to reduced social inequalities, and, as Armstrong et al. (2011) observe, in the midst of the inclusion rhetoric in education, many remain excluded. The persistence of exclusionary practices and attitudes is exacerbated by the fact that most university tutors have no expertise to work with students who have disabilities (O'Connor and Robinson 1999) and that not all of them hold positive attitudes towards inclusion generally, a condition that affects their ability to provide support for all students (Lambe 2011).

Morrison et al. (2009) applaud the move to increase access for all students but caution that addressing the special needs of students with disabilities could pose a number of challenges to HE institutions. All students experience adjustment challenges when they first begin tertiary education but it is worse for those with disabilities because, as Getzel (2008: 208) maintains, they often feel unaccepted due to the levels of support they require which causes many not to disclose their disability. As a result, they tend to be underrepresented and most of them do not perform at the expected levels because they feel pushed to the margins and disempowered (Morrison et al. 2009).

Goals of the Study

The study explored access challenges faced by students with visual disabilities at the Edgewood campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The study sought to find an answer to this critical question:

- ♦ What access challenges do students with visual disabilities face at this university?

METHOD

Design

An exploratory case study design was used. In Robson's (2002) view, a case study is exploratory in nature if the purpose is to understand

what is actually happening within a particular setting. Such a design lent itself well to this study which sought to understand the context that provides support to students with visual disabilities.

Sample

A purposive sample of two staff members of the Disability Support Unit (DSU) (one permanent and one short term contract) was identified as participants. The rationale was that DSU staff has regular interaction with students with disabilities, including those with visual disabilities, and therefore would be able to shed light on some of the access challenges faced by these students on this campus.

Instruments

Data was generated from semi-structured interviews with the two DSU workers. In addition, several documents in this office were analysed (monthly reports, school board reports, and yearly audits).

Procedure

A situational analysis (IUCN 2013) was selected as a data collection approach and the DSU was identified as the main site for data collection since it is where most students with disabilities access personal, social and academic support. It was felt that this office is central in the lives of students with disabilities, including those with visual disabilities, and that it would have vital information on the challenges (if any) faced by these students at this institution. As such, in accordance with the situational analysis approach chosen, face to face interviews were conducted with the two members of staff on duty, documents were analysed, and a 'tour of the office' conducted to see what resources are available to support students with visual disabilities. All ethical requirements of the University of KwaZulu-Natal were satisfied and an ethical clearance certificate was issued.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using a session summary sheet, member checking, and the development of categories which were compressed into

themes. A session summary sheet is a summary of findings prepared on a single page. Once this summary was prepared, we approached the DSU staff (member checking) to corroborate our findings. The findings were then coded into categories and then themes.

RESULTS

Data generated was reduced to three key themes, namely, systemic challenges, school experience challenges, and academic challenges.

Systemic Challenges

Staffing

As indicated, the DSU is where the situational analysis was based and it soon became clear that there were systemic challenges that could compromise the support provided. For example, at the time of this study the DSU at the campus under study had only one permanent staff member (Disability Support Officer) and 6 student assistants. The Disability Support Officer manages the administrative component, the reformatting program, advocacy, counselling and support, support programs for teaching practice, collaboration with internal and external stakeholders, student funding and other functions of this office. The office relies solely on student assistants to reformat notes yet this is a labour intensive program.

The orientation and mobility instructor (employed on a contract basis) provides services on an ad hoc basis at this campus as she is also responsible for services at the other campuses where the number of students with disabilities requiring this highly specialised service is also large. We were informed that it takes many weeks/months of mobility and orientation instruction to rehabilitate (environmental navigation and activities of daily living) persons who are blind and partially sighted. In view of the ad hoc nature of this service the rate of visual rehabilitation for independent academic and living experiences is severely affected. Orientation and mobility remains a highly specialized area of rehabilitation and can only be undertaken by persons who have undergone specialized training through The Guide Dog Academy: School of Orientation and Mobility.

As a result of the very limited orientation and mobility services at this campus, I had to assist with accompanying students to use the ablution facilities, navigate to and from lecture venues and student residences as well as to make students physically aware of environmental inconsistencies like potholes, building constructions, change of lecture venues, broken stairways which can be totally damaging for anyone using the white cane or whom is mobility impaired (Ms Rosebud)

Clearly orientation and mobility training are vital in the lives of some students with visual disabilities. Without it, they remain dependent on others and their movement on campus is limited. Therefore, we acknowledge the need for an orientation and mobility instructor to fast track academic, personal and social independence on campus as well as at the schools these students choose for their teaching practice.

Assistive Devices

In addition, the JAWS and the Duxberry Braille Translator programs do not convert diagrams, graphs, tables and any other graphic information into an accessible format for students who are blind. Strategies and interventions have to be developed to present this graphic information in a way that must be conveyed to the student as accurately as possible in the format of a narrative. Apart from reformatting for students who are blind this office also reformats for a student with visual perceptual learning disabilities which was said to be *“more labour intensive than reformatting for students who are blind”* (Ms Rosebud).

Reformatting course packs for students who are blind can take the form of Braille (a conversion of print information into an electronic format using JAWS; Job Access Word with Speech) software. Each blind student has their own preferences of the manner in which they choose to access their print. Students who are blind and undertake isiZulu modules face additional challenges which were explained as follows:

The Duxberry Braille Translator program is not yet compatible with isiZulu (unable to convert isiZulu into a Braille format). This means that isiZulu print information cannot be converted into Braille as there is no software was available for this conversion. The JAWS

program is also not compatible with isiZulu. The Disability Support Unit has devised an innovative but labour intensive way of reformatting isiZulu print. This requires someone with a good command of spoken and written isiZulu to undertake reformatting responsibilities (Ms Shoestring).

The shortcomings of these two programs have necessitated the recruitment of student assistants with these competencies and skills. This initiative has been complicated by the fact that most of isiZulu speaking post graduate students are studying part time and hold full time employment, therefore unavailable to undertake this task. Generally, challenges have been experienced in recruiting helpers/assistants who are fluent in isiZulu. As an interim measure, this campus relies on Disability Units in other campuses to audio tape isiZulu course packs. However, not all students who are blind may want to access their isiZulu print in the form of audio recordings.

During our analysis of records, we came across a report that an ex-Disability Officer, Ms Memela, had written for the School Board in March 2011, wherein she highlighted the paramount role played by student assistants:

It is of great importance that our student assistants are contracted to the disability unit at least by the third week in January as pre-orientation and orientation for first entry students plays a pivotal role regarding the access, retention and throughput imperative into academic and student residence programs. As a result of the absence of this service early in the first semester, first entry students are not adequately prepared to integrate academically, socially and technologically. In the absence of student assistants early in the first semester, I have had to request the assistance of student housing and a factotum to provide support to a student who is blind (Ms Memela).

However, we were informed; the university continues to employ student assistants well into the semester which means that students with visual disabilities remain unsupported as the DSU struggles to find human resources to format their notes/readers.

School Experience (Teaching Practice) Challenges

All students enrolled in Initial Teacher Education programs participate in school experience for a set number of weeks (Bachelor of Educa-

tion, 16 weeks over a four year period and Post-Graduate certificate in Education, 10 weeks) as part of their curriculum. This is done at schools that offer relevant subject and phase specialisations. Students are placed in different school contexts each time they go for school experience to enable them to experience and appreciate the diversity that prevails within the education arena. Whenever possible students are allowed to choose where they want to be placed and this sometimes creates challenges for students with visual disabilities, as it was explained:

Sometimes students with visual disabilities prefer to go to mainstream schools which, in most cases, do not have auxiliary teacher aide support which is readily available in special schools, albeit on a limited basis (Ms Rosebud).

Students with high support needs like students who are blind undertaking their professional practicum would require additional support in the form of auxiliary support from a teacher aide to serve as a vital link between the teacher and the learner. The reasonable accommodations for students with high support needs are individualistic and vary, depending on the nature and needs of the student's disability.

In addition to auxiliary support, technological support as in a laptop with computer adaptive software (JAWS program) would present as a challenge for a student who is blind and placement schools (excluding schools for the blind and visually impaired) do not have these assistive technologies. This was explained further:

In 2012, a blind student participated in teaching practice (PGCE) and these accommodations were required before she could assume her teaching experience: an auxiliary teacher aide support for the duration of her professional practicum (4 weeks in semester one, and 6 weeks in semester 2) and a laptop with JAWS after her 'funded' computer with JAWS was stolen). As a result, she was forced to go to a special school where the necessary support was available (Ms Shoestring).

When such issues come up, students rush to the DSU for help which may not always be easy to organise in the context of limited resources. At the same time, these students have to satisfy all the requirements of school experience or face failure.

Academic Challenges

Students with visual disabilities require extensive support in terms of academic literacy,

particularly in writing, as the following excerpt indicates.

Students with visual disabilities struggle to keep to writing conventions, and that there is an urgent need to establish a writing centre where these students can get support in terms of editing assignments and projects (Ms Rosebud).

Four out of five campuses of this university have a writing centre. From discussions with the DSU staff it emerged that the establishment of such a centre would provide a highly valuable support to all students of Edgewood, especially those with visual disabilities. Generally, students without disabilities are not keen to volunteer their services and even if they were, it would not be the same as having a structured support program.

Records also indicate that over the past two years this office has initiated education and awareness programs. The target audience included both support and academic staff and the purpose was to educate and promote awareness about how students with disabilities in general can be supported. Ms Rosebud indicated that “very few staff members show interest in these sessions.” She added that they have “compiled booklets on teaching and learning strategies that can improve the outcomes for students with disabilities, but there is very little interest among staff”.

DISCUSSION

What emerges from the data generated is that there are systemic barriers limiting the access of students with visual disabilities and that students with visual disabilities experience a number of barriers to learning and participation at this institution. Although there is a disability office on this campus, inadequate accommodations are available to ensure students with visual disabilities can function effectively and independently. This confirms Howell’s (2006) concern that blind students struggle to access information in some university campuses, a situation that exacerbates barriers to learning and development experienced by these students. Another study on the experiences of a student with disabilities in HE, Ntombela (2013) draws attention to the fact that when it is minority groupings that are disadvantaged in any way, there is an absence of urgency in addressing

the key issues. Ntombela argues that whilst inclusive education is concerned with the removal of barriers and the creation of centres of learning that are responsive, the main challenge is changing deep-seated attitudes that make us unsympathetic to the challenges that do not affect us directly.

The adoption and promotion of inclusive education in the South African context is intended to transform the education system, as captured in the 1997 document:

[O]ne of the goals of the transformation process is to build a higher education system that promote[s] equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realize their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities (DoE 1997b: 14).

The findings of this study also show that there is a shortage of human and physical resources in the DSU. Although bold steps have been taken to enrol students with visual disabilities at this institution, a lot still need to be done to ensure that they have access to relevant and meaningful support in the form of human resources as well as prescribed and auxiliary materials that are available on time and in the right format if the playing field is to be level. As a result of these shortages, students receive limited academic support.

All this does not mean that transformation has not taken place yet at this campus but it confirms that inclusion is a journey (Mittler 2000), and an unending one for that matter. Unfortunately, as Ntombela (2013) highlights, when the obvious needs of the minorities are not prioritised, it can be interpreted as if they are insignificant, and it can easily compromise the process of transformation.

Since the focus of the study reported herein was a preliminary enquiry into access challenges that students with visual disabilities face at this institution (hence the situational analysis), the actual experiences of students with visual disabilities were not sought and therefore, their voices were not heard. However, we do not doubt that the realities portrayed above are a major frustration in their lives as they traverse university life. In this regard, we cannot help but concur with O’Connor and Robinson (1999) who argue that unless transformation in support of students with disabilities is heavily subsidized,

their participation levels are not likely to increase much

CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the University of KwaZulu-Natal is transforming and responding positively to the call to include previously marginalised groupings. Although it is evident that access for students with disabilities has improved drastically, there are still systemic barriers that limit the participation of students with visual disabilities in the academic programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

Physical access into HE does not necessarily lead to academic access. It is thus important for institutions of learning to strive to provide relevant and meaningful support to all students, particularly students with visual disabilities, and that this support should be linked to teaching and learning programs.

Universities require financial support from the Department of Higher Education and Training in order to provide intense levels of support that many students with visual disabilities require in order to participate in the teaching and learning process.

The quality of students' experiences of teaching and learning depends largely on how aware, able and willing staff is to support all students. This speaks to the need for HE institutions to provide on-going staff development and support programs across the board.

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