

Perceptions of students with disabilities concerning access and support in the learning environment of a rural-based university

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Abstract

Disability is an inevitable human phenomenon that limits equitable access as a result of activity limitation and participation restriction in society. For students with disabilities in tertiary educational institutions, lack of necessary access and support services can render them socially and academically excluded and overly dependent. The study assessed the perceptions of students with disabilities concerning access and support in the learning environment of the University of Venda. A self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from 67 students with disabilities (mean age=26.6±4.7 years). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Twenty-eight (43.8%) of the participants affirmed that the physical environment constituted a great barrier in their learning; and more than half (53.8%, n=35) of the participants maintained it was true that the physical environment made students with disabilities vulnerable to dangers. Most preferred user-friendly facility was the residence (Friedman's mean rank=5.23) whilst the least ranked were campus sanitation/hygiene (Friedman's mean rank=3.11) and disabled sports/recreational facilities (Friedman's mean rank=2.93; p=0.000). Increased access and support services are needed to allow equal participation in social and academic life of students with disabilities.

Keywords: Access, students with disabilities, support, perceptions, learning environment.

How to cite this article:

Tugli, A.K., Zungu, L.I., Ramakuela, N.J., Goon, D.T. & Anyanwu, F.C. (2013). Perceptions of students with disabilities concerning access and support in the learning environment of a rural-based university. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, December (Supplement 1:2), 356-364.

Introduction

Disability is an inevitable human phenomenon that limits equitable access as a result of activity limitation and participation restriction in society (WHO/World Bank, 2011 cited in Hanass-Hancock et al., 2013). Students with disabilities require special support in the learning environment. For many people with disabilities, assistance and support, including special services or care givers are prerequisites for their full participation in society (WHO/World Bank, 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: UNHCR, 2011).

Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson et al. (2004) argue that in terms of institutional structure, students with disabilities pose formidable challenges to higher institutions not only in terms of gaining physical access to buildings, but also in relation to much wider issues within the institutions. These wider issues include negative attitudes, lack of appropriate services, social integration, curricular barriers and progression (Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Obiozor, Onu & Ugwoegbu, 2010; Zisser, 2011). This means that poorly resourced institutions coupled with poor infrastructural designs can impact on institutions and students in terms of support, access and equity (Howell, 2006).

These demands of a tertiary institution, therefore, place an enormous strain on both the institution and the student; hence, if these students are not assisted or supported in a proactive way, their educational expectations will be unattainable. In line with this, the Department for Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2012) alludes that it is pertinent to provide an array of special programmes and services to support students with disabilities. It is, therefore, not surprising to note that in South Africa, a number of tertiary institutions ranging from the most advantaged (University of Cape Town, University of Johannesburg and University of Pretoria) to the least resourced ones such as University of Venda and University of Zululand have embarked on establishing Disability Units (DUs) to promote equal participation of students with disabilities in all spheres of university life (Department of Education: DoE, 2005). In this regard, DUs have become the first point of contact for many students with disabilities (Naidoo, 2010).

A survey carried out to explore the factors that inhibit access to higher institutions by the students with disabilities in the Free State region revealed that there were subjugation and marginalisation of students with disabilities (Nkoane, 2006). Ramakuela and Maluleke (2011) conducted a study in a higher institution to explore the views of students with disabilities regarding the social and learning environment. According to them, the majority (80%) of students with disabilities feel rejected by their fellow non-disabled learners, staff and the institution. This is an indication of an atmosphere of intolerance and resentment towards students with disabilities. Other challenges reported are unaccommodating physical environment, unavailability of seats in some lecture halls and inadequate learning support materials as well as dysfunctional ablution facilities (Ramakuela & Maluleke, 2011). Akintunde's (2011) study reported poor sanitation and hygienic practices in the learning environment which could also place this group of students at health risk. In fact, disability needs not be an obstacle in an environment that is sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities; but regrettably, many sources (Fuller et al., 2004; Lawson et al., 2008; WHO, 2011) acknowledge that students with disabilities constantly face various barriers in their learning environments. It is against this background that this study sought to assess the perceptions of students with disabilities

concerning access and support in the learning environment of the University of Venda.

Methodology

Population and sample

The study targeted 132 students with disabilities who were registered for undergraduate and post-graduate programmes at the University of Venda during the 2011 academic year. However, due to the small number involved and to avoid excluding some disability categories, all students with disabilities were recruited to participate in the study.

Instrument and data collection

A self-administered questionnaire was used. It was semi-structured with closed and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were included to capture a variety of qualitative responses so as to enhance and enrich the quantitative data. The instrument was designed to solicit demographic information and issues pertaining to access and support services including the assessment of the environmental conditions using a five-point Likert scale. To ensure validity, the development of the instrument was guided by a wide range of literature, inputs of experts and the objectives of the study including the World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS, 2011). Furthermore, the instrument was pre-tested on three learners with disabilities who volunteered to take part in this exercise. Pre-testing results were used to rephrase and modify some aspects of the questionnaire thus making it user friendly and more meaningful to the participants. Above all, reliability of the instrument was carried out by checking the similarity of the participants' responses through a test-retest administration of the instrument on a few (11) participants who availed themselves to fill in the questionnaire for the second time. Cronbach's alpha which measures the degree ($0 \leq \alpha \leq 1.0$) of internal consistency of the instrument was used to ascertain the reliability of the instrument. The results yielded an alpha (α) value of 0.81 which was an indication of a high consistency between the test-retest responses. The questionnaires were administered and collected at convenient places agreed upon by the participants. However, students with severe disabilities (e.g. the blind) were assisted by persons of their choice.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance approval (Project No. 0765-705-6) was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Health Studies at the University of South Africa to conduct the study. In addition ethical clearance

approval (Project No. SHS/11/PH/06/E0811) was obtained from the Research and Innovation Directorate of the University of Venda. Since the study also involved vulnerable students, permissions to conduct the study were also received from the offices of the Council for Higher Education, Teaching and Learning (CHETL) and the Disability Unit of the institution. Besides adhering to the principles of voluntary participation and informed consent, participants were also made to fill in the consent forms and were also guaranteed confidentiality of their responses and anonymity of their identities.

Data analysis

Friedman's test statistics was used to carry out a rank test on some domains in the learning environment. Descriptive statistics (percentages, mean and standard deviations) were calculated for the demographic variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 and the Microsoft Excel were used to perform the analyses of the data.

Results

Out of 132 questionnaires distributed, 67 were returned. This represented a response rate of 51%. Most (84.8%; n=56) of the participants hailed from the Limpopo province. The minimum age was 19 years and the oldest participant was 44 years. The mean age was 26.6±4.7 years. Seven disability categories emerged from the study, and the most common among them was the mobility impaired category (41.8%; n=28).

Challenges in the learning environment

Table 1 shows the responses of the participants' encounters and challenges pertaining to facilities, learner support material and access within the institutional environment. Almost half (47.7%; n= 31) of the participants concurred that their disabilities affected their attending seminars, tutorials, library laboratory etc, while 47(72.3%) maintained that assistive devices and other learning equipment were adequate in meeting their needs. As to whether there are special arrangements made to accommodate students with disabilities on field trips and extra-curricular programmes, the majority (58.1%; n=36) of the participants declined whereas 26(41.9%) agreed. However, whilst 28(43.8%) of the participants affirmed that the physical environment constituted a great barrier in their learning, more than half (53.8%; n=35) of the participants maintained it was true that the physical environment made learners with disabilities vulnerable to dangers.

Table 1: Participants’ responses to areas of encounters and challenges in the learning environment

| Areas of encounters and challenges | Responses | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|----------|
| | True | False | Total |
| My disability affects my attending seminars, tutorials, library, laboratory etc | 31(47.7%) | 34(52.3%) | 65(100%) |
| Special arrangements are made to accommodate disabled students during fieldtrips, and other extracurricular activities | 26(41.9%) | 36(58.1%) | 62(100%) |
| Assistive devices and technological equipments are adequate for learning needs of disabled students | 47(72.3%) | 18(27.7%) | 65(100%) |
| The physical environment constitute a great barrier in my learning as a disabled student | 28(43.8%) | 36(56.3) | 64(100%) |
| The physical environment makes disabled students vulnerable to dangers | 35(53.8%) | 30(46.2%) | 65(100%) |
| Lecture halls, labs, libraries etc are suitably adapted to suit my disability | 37(57.8%) | 27(42.2%) | 64(100%) |

Environmental and facility assessment

Table 2 shows the result of the Friedman’s test statistics used to carry out a rank test on seven domains in the learning environment. These domains were each rated by the participants using a five-point Likert scale. The rating key used ranged from ‘1=very poor’ to ‘5=very good’. The higher the ‘mean rank’ given by the Friedman’s test statistics, the higher the ‘preference’ for such a domain. The results suggest that the most preferred and user-friendly facility was the residence (Mean rank=5.23). This was followed by buildings (Mean rank=4.57), disability facilities (Mean rank=4.23) and physical environment (Mean rank=4.17). The least preferred among all the domains were the sanitation/hygiene (Mean rank=3.11) and the disabled sports/recreational facilities (Mean rank=2.93). In addition, the p-value of 0.000 suggests that there was a significant difference in the preference of the domains at the 5% level.

Table 2: Environmental and facility ranking (N= 56)

| The ranked domains in the learning environment | Mean rank |
|--|-----------|
| 1. Residences/dormitories | 5.23 |
| 2. Buildings- Internal & External designs | 4.57 |
| 3. Disability facilities- toilets, beds, ramps, guides, baths etc. | 4.23 |
| 4. Physical environment, geography etc | 4.17 |
| 5. Safety, security- danger warning signs and protection | 3.76 |
| 6. Sanitation/hygiene | 3.11 |
| 7. Disabled Sports/recreational facilities | 2.93 |

Degrees of freedom=6; Chi-Square(χ^2)= 65.105; Asymp. Sig (p-value)=0.000

Assessment of support services received by participants

In Table 3, the Friedman’s test statistics were also used to carry out a rank test on 19 areas under support services. From the table, the most outstanding support came from their family members (Mean rank=16.38). The next in rank was from the services received from the Disability Unit (Mean rank=13.28). The last three services on the ranking scale were the academic staff (Mean rank=8.18), Disability Welfare groups (Mean rank=7.40) and Rehabilitation/therapeutic services (Mean rank=5.61). The p-value of 0.000($p < 0.05$) suggests that there was a significant difference in the services received.

Table 3: Support service ranking (N= 47)

| Sources of support services (ranked) | Mean rank |
|--|-----------|
| 1. Family members | 16.38 |
| 2. Disabled Students Unit services | 13.28 |
| 3. Student financial support | 12.20 |
| 4. Assistive facility/IT staff | 12.05 |
| 5. Hostel staff | 11.66 |
| 6. Non-disabled peers and colleagues | 10.68 |
| 7. Career guidance/orientation | 10.28 |
| 8. Student council | 10.05 |
| 9. Counseling services | 9.86 |
| 10. Emergency/Medical/paramedic teams | 9.26 |
| 11. Administration staff | 9.21 |
| 12. General Assistance | 9.12 |
| 13. Physical environment induction | 8.97 |
| 14. Health Care Promotion teams and visits | 8.88 |
| 15. Cafeteria services | 8.61 |
| 16. Grievance redress services | 8.32 |
| 17. Academic staff | 8.18 |
| 18. Disability welfare groups | 7.40 |
| 19. Rehabilitation/therapeutic services | 5.61 |

Degrees of freedom=18; Chi-Square(χ^2)= 187.465; Asymp. Sig (p-value)=0.000

Participants’ responses to some open-ended questions

- “Rains stop me from attending lectures”
- “We have to sit at the back in some classes because there are no ramps”

Discussion

The average age of the participants is 26.6±4.69 years where the youngest was 19 years and the oldest 44 years. This is an indication of a youthful group of participants compared to the participants in Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis’ (FOTIM’s) (2011) study where the oldest participant was 57 years. Seven various disability categories emerged from the study of which 41.8% were mobility impaired. Though this category is equally reported

as the dominant disability group in other studies (Jacklin et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2008; Brunton & Gibson, 2009) their proportions in the student body populations ranged from 6% - 66%. The presence of different disability categories in an institution can place a huge demand on resources in terms of provision of assistive devices and adaptation of the learning environment that will suit and address each disability needs. A one-size-fit-all approach can not work in such environment.

In the learning environment, the participants rated disabled sports and recreational facilities as the poorest (Mean=2.93) among other facilities. This suggests that extra-curricular activities for students with disabilities are a secondary issue. Success of an individual can not only be measured through academic excellence alone but through other areas of human endeavors such as sports, music etc. This poor rating indicates that there was lack of support for disabled sporting activities in the institution, and this is confirmed by a comment from one participant states that *“The extra-curricular activities are usually restricted to abled bodies”*.

This study corroborates Tinklin et al. (2004) study that extra-curricular activities, which should improve social networking and healthy integration among able and students with disabilities, were not promoted in institutions. On the contrary, the highest ranked facility was the student residence (Mean=5.23). This is not surprising in that students with disabilities are given preference when it comes to allocation of rooms in the institution.

Environmental conditions and facilities can play a significant role in the learning experiences of learners with disabilities. This study reveals that whilst 43.8% of the participants reported that the physical environment constituted a great barrier in their learning, more than half (53.8%) of the participants affirmed that the physical environment made learners with disabilities vulnerable to dangers. This finding corroborates an earlier finding in a similar study by Ramakeula and Maluleke (2011) who reported that participants felt unwelcomed in the learning environment especially in the lecture halls.

Inadequate assistive devices and lack of learner support materials were also reported by some of the participants as denying them access to full participation in the institution. Almost 1 in 2 (47.8%) participant concurred with the statement that their disabilities affected their attending seminars, tutorials, library etc. Without any doubt, these participants are learners whose learning experiences depend on how much educational support and assistive devices are ploughed into assisting them. Hence, by not providing them with the necessary learning needs can impact negatively on their academic freedom and progress. Government Accountability Office (2009) argues that, institutions that offer enhanced or more comprehensive services generally have structures in place to mitigate the barriers and challenges facing learners with disabilities.

In this study, rehabilitation/therapeutic services were the least ranked among other services provided in the institution. Enhanced services imply that specialized and trained staffs and professionals must be easily available to assist those in need of their services. Without these services, students with disabilities will be excluded from the core activities in the learning environment.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the study, inaccessible environment coupled with poor support services emerged as the main inhibitors to quality of life in the learning environment. To promote learning and unhindered social integration and to make the learning environment least restrictive, immediate focus must be placed on adapting buildings, facilities and the physical environment to be more disability user-friendly. Above all, acceptance and positive societal attitudes towards disability can also help eliminate the ongoing exclusion of people with disabilities in the learning environment.

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