

**STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:
AN EXPLORATION OF UNIVERSITY STAFF PERCEPTIONS**

by

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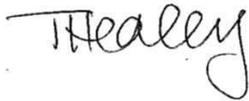
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January 2014

DECLARATION

Student number: 3559-008-4

I declare that Students with Learning Disabilities: an Exploration of University Staff Perceptions is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



22 January 2014

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, Daniel, whose happy face helps me keep everything in perspective at all times.

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ABSTRACT

The number of students with learning disabilities entering the higher education system in South Africa is increasing dramatically. At the same time, the misconceptions about disabilities can have distressing consequences for disabled students. A thorough understanding of current staff attitudes and knowledge of learning disabilities will assist when setting up interventions aimed at improving perceptions. This qualitative, phenomenological case study uses the bio-psycho-social model of disability to explore staff perceptions at the University of the Witwatersrand. Interviews with staff members showed that a wide range of opinions and attitudes exist. Although perceptions varied between participants, the main findings indicated that they presented a poor understanding of what disability, and in particular, learning disability means. The conclusion was drawn that Wits University should be proactive in empowering their staff by providing them with opportunities to learn about disabilities. This investment in staff development should ultimately lead to a richer campus life where all students feel welcome.

KEY TERMS:

Learning disabilities; university staff perceptions; reasonable accommodations; bio-psycho-social model.

CHAPTER 1 – ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND

“I firmly believe that deep in their soul everyone has a champion
that can overcome obstacles and do great things.”

Bruce Jenner, former Olympic Gold Medalist, Dyslexic

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

More than one billion people in the world live with some type of disability, and, due to aging populations and an increase in chronic health conditions, its prevalence is on the rise (World Health Organisation Report on Disability 2011: xi). Disability Studies as an interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry that began to emerge in the 1970s in the United States (US) and in the United Kingdom (UK), and today is a nearly global phenomenon. This field grew as the advocacy for people with disabilities increased, and as it developed, many disability theorists began to question the notion of disability as a sickness that requires correction (Mason 2010: 252). Subsequently, the fight for the rights of people with disabilities has come a long way in the last few decades as more countries are becoming aware of the rights and needs of disabled people.

In South Africa, before democracy in 1994, many people with disabilities were systematically excluded from education and employment opportunities. Today, liberal legislation and policies exist in our country to promote human dignity and equality. The White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (2001) emphasises inclusion and a move towards full-service schools that are able to provide for a full range of learning needs. In a similar manner, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are required to promote equal access to all qualifying students, including those with disabilities. These changes to the South African education system have resulted in more students with disabilities passing through the schooling system and accepted into university.

As the number of students with disabilities entering HEI's increases, students, parents and the general population are realising that having a learning disability is a lifelong condition (Shapiro & Rich 1999: 125). In addition, adults with learning disabilities are the fastest growing group of university students with disabilities (Shapiro & Rich 1999: 127).

Therefore it is important that educators are equipped to support students with learning disabilities in the higher education environment.

My personal involvement in the field of disability started in 2008 when I became the Project Manager for the Disability in Higher Education Interest Group. As Project Manager, I have witnessed a similar trend of increasing enrolment of people with disabilities, especially learning disabilities, in South African universities. My involvement with the interest group led me to believe that research is much needed on learning disabilities in higher education. Information, particularly up to date information in the area of learning disabilities, is required if informed decisions are to be made by HEIs. I became aware that university staff, both academic and support staff, are grappling with the issues surrounding students with learning disabilities. It also became clear that staff members have a basic understanding of hearing, visual and mobility disabilities but learning disabilities remain a grey area for many staff and support staff.

In 2011, I presented a series of disability awareness workshops to several HEI's. The workshops focussed specifically on learning disabilities and aimed to sensitise staff to disability. From my experience in conducting the workshops, this led me to believe that university staff are largely unaware of how learning disabilities can affect students and what staff can do to effectively support these students. Consequently, if meaningful interventions are to be implemented, the way in which staff conceptualise disability needs to be understood.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Report on Disability (2011: 4) discusses how, over the last twenty years, the way in which disability is conceptualised has changed, and advocates the shift from an individual, medical perspective to a social perspective in which people are viewed as being disabled by society rather than their bodies. This shift in thinking, along with the rise of advocacy for people with disabilities, has led to an increase in formal policies being implemented to protect the rights of people with disabilities. The University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter referred to as Wits) is no exception.

The Wits Policy on Disability (hereafter referred to as the Policy) was established in 2000 and states that Wits is committed to the promotion of equal opportunity for all

persons. The Policy also confirms that the university will ensure that its teaching promotes an understanding of disability and that its research pursues the creation of knowledge around disability (2000: 4). In addition, the Policy commits to making reasonable accommodations for students since the goal is “ensure that no student or staff member is unjustifiably excluded from any university activity or facility because he/she has a disability” (2000: 6).

Notwithstanding the shift in thinking, changes in legislation and implementation of policies, the misconceptions about all types of disabilities prevail. According to Leyser & Greenberger (2008: 238), the success of all students with disabilities in tertiary education depends not only on their own efforts and the physical accessibility and availability of services, but also on faculty knowledge and their attitudes towards students with disabilities as well as their willingness to provide reasonable accommodations. The misconceptions that staff have about learning disabilities can have a lasting negative impact on the learning experience of the student. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of staff perceptions and attitudes towards disability is required if meaningful changes are to be made.

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

This research is aimed at understanding the prevailing perceptions and attitudes of both academic and support staff at a HEI towards students with learning disabilities. The perceptions and attitudes of staff can affect many aspects of tertiary education, including admission; support services; curriculum design; teaching and assessment methods and the personal experience of the student, each of these has an impact on the success of the student. By understanding the attitudes, perceptions and having knowledge of learning disabilities this will assist HEIs with setting up interventions that are aimed at improving these perceptions.

The study also explores the paradigm shift in disability thinking from a medical to a social model. It aims to increase knowledge about learning disabilities, which will enable successful training interventions to be conceptualised and implemented, and hopefully lead to increased retention and throughput of students with disabilities.

In the long term, it is hoped that this research will play a role when stakeholders leverage for resources and make policy amendments and curriculum changes. The ultimate aim is to make the necessary attitudinal changes in staff to effectively support students with learning disabilities in HEIs; for the barriers in the learning environment to be removed; for best practices that apply across other HEIs to be implemented and for mediating meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Accordingly, the main question is:

- *What are the perceptions of university staff of students with a learning disability?*

The sub-questions implied by the main research question include:

- *What is the university staff's understanding of learning disabilities and associated concepts (such as universal design and reasonable accommodation)?*
- *What are the prevailing attitudes of university staff towards students with learning disabilities?*
- *What is the university staff's understanding of university policy, support systems and practice?*

A thorough investigation of the current perceptions of staff is the starting point for further research. Accordingly, I selected Wits University as the research site. The research paradigm, design and methodology that were selected as appropriate to meet the aims of my research, are presented below.

1.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM

1.3.1 Qualitative research

This research is qualitative in nature. Groenewald (2004: 6) describes a paradigm as the patterning of the thinking of a person; it is a model to follow according to which a person takes action. A paradigm guides the researcher where to look for answers. Qualitative research also assumes that there are multiple realities that are constructed

through different views of the same situation (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 12). It accepts that reality is a multi-layered, interactive, shared social experience that is interpreted by individuals, and that their beliefs and perceptions direct their thoughts and feelings (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 315-6). It therefore aims to understand a social situation from an individual's perspective, and in this case the research aims to understand the perceptions of university staff of students with a learning disability.

According to Creswell (2012: 17), in qualitative research, a literature review is conducted to justify the need to conduct the research and to provide evidence for the problem. However, it does not provide the major direction to the research questions. This is because using the literature to foreshadow the direction of the study is inconsistent with the qualitative approach of learning from the participants. Accordingly, the research activities that are employed in this qualitative study are a literature review and interviews with participants to assess individual viewpoints relating to learning disabilities at Wits University.

1.3.2 Phenomenological case study

This research adopted a qualitative phenomenological case study design, which examines a set of individuals bounded in time and place (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 26-7). A phenomenological study is a type of interactive method that describes the meanings of a lived experience and transforms it to its essence (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 26). The aim of this type of study is to investigate a particular phenomenon as accurately as possible, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts (Groenewald 2004: 5). Interviews are a typical technique used to conduct a phenomenological study, as it allows the researcher to understand the perspectives of the research participant on their everyday lived experience of the phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 26). In this research study, I interviewed a sample of university staff to understand their perceptions of university students with learning disabilities.

1.3.3 Theoretical framework: the bio-psycho-social model of disability

Omirin and Falola (2011: 9-12) assert that a theoretical framework guides research by relying on an existing formal theory. This implies that a framework can be expected to raise different values and beliefs that are shared in a common paradigm with other scholars, and is not unique to the researcher. The bio-psycho-social model offers a coherent explanation of disability. It is an interactive and individual-centred framework that takes into account the person, the biological problem and social contextual influences (Waddell 2010: 23). It combines and balances the medical and social models and introduces a personal dimension. Thus, from a bio-psycho-social perspective, disability originates from a health problem, but is influenced by psychological and social factors. This will provide the underlying theoretical foundation on which the study is conducted.

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology in this study includes both an extensive literature study and semi-structured interviews in order to triangulate the research findings.

1.4.1 An extensive literature review

As mentioned above, the research design may be regarded as phenomenological. However, no research project exists in isolation. Each should build on previous research. Therefore, an extensive literature review was performed to establish what research was previously conducted, particularly with regards to university staff perceptions. Creswell (2012: 81) says that in many qualitative projects, researchers compare and contrast the major findings of the research with what is discovered in the literature. The literature review follows in Chapter 2.

1.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

In this study, the semi-structured interview provided greater scope for discussion and learning about the research problem, opinions and views of the participants. Semi-structured interviews are based on an interview guide with questions to be answered

openly and extensively (Flick 2011: 112). They allow for a dialogue to be initiated between the researcher and the participant, but the exact formulation of the questions does not have to be adhered to (Flick 2011: 112).

As is appropriate for qualitative, phenomenological research studies (Groenewald 2004: 12-13), questions were directed to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about students with learning disabilities. The interviews were reciprocal, whereby both researcher and research subject were engaged in the dialogue. In order to complement the interview data, field notes were also made of the observations and relevant documents (such as the Policy) were analysed.

1.4.3 Site Selection

The research was conducted at the Wits, where the greatest number of students with disabilities is enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities. Conversations with Disability Unit (DU) staff to establish possible reasons for this phenomenon were held. One possible explanation is that many special schools in South Africa do not offer Mathematics as a subject, only Maths Literacy. To enrol in most courses, besides those offered in Humanities, Mathematics is a required subject. This limits the choices available to students who enter Wits from the special schools. I therefore chose to limit my interviews to staff at the Faculty of Humanities.

1.4.4 Sampling

For this study, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling selects information-rich cases for in-depth study (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 319). Individuals are intentionally selected to understand the central phenomenon (Creswell 2012: 206). Snowball sampling (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 321) is a type of purposive sampling whereby participants suggest other individuals to participate in the study. It occurs after the study begins (Creswell 2012: 209). Thus, for this study, I selected participants who might have had experiences with students with learning disabilities, and asked them to recommend other participants who may or may not have had any such experiences.

1.4.5 Ethical considerations

During the data collection process, it is crucial that issues such as ethics, legalities and technical issues are addressed. It is imperative that the research be conducted in an ethical manner. Researchers should make their procedures transparent; should avoid any harm or deception for the participants and should ensure that the data is protected (Flick 2011: 216). This means that when the data is collected, the participants sign an informed consent form before they participate in the study. This form should state the purpose of the study, outline the rights of the participants (including their right to withdraw) and inform them that participation is voluntary (Creswell 2012: 149).

It is recommended that certain measures are taken into account if the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants are to be maintained. Assigning numbers to individuals on instruments such as transcripts and keeping the identity of participant's confidential offers privacy to individuals (Creswell 2012: 169). The research design and methods should be evaluated by an Ethics Committee (Flick 2012: 223). The researcher should avoid deception as to the purpose of the study (Creswell 2012: 231). These measures are explained fully in Chapter 3.

1.4.6 Measures to ensure trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, Guba's model was used evaluate the trustworthiness of the research. Guba identified four criteria of trustworthiness, namely credibility; transferability; dependability and confirmability (Shenton 2004: 64). These criteria are important to researchers in designing ways of improving the rigor of their qualitative research, and are a means of assessing the value and findings of the research (Krefting 1991: 215). The strategies used to address the four criteria are discussed in Chapter 3.

1.5 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

“ADHD is a condition of the brain that affects a person's ability to pay attention. Although it is most common in school-age children, it is a chronic disorder, meaning that it affects an individual throughout life.”

<http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/adhd/>

Barrier

“Factors in a person’s environment that, through their absence or presence, limit functioning and create disability – for example, inaccessible physical environments, a lack of appropriate assistive technology, and negative attitudes towards disability.”

WHO Disability Report 2011: 303

Disability

“People with disabilities means those people who have a long-term or recurring physical or mental impairment which substantially limits their prospects of entry into, or advancement in, employment.”

Employment Equity Act No 55, of 1998: 50

Dyslexia

“Dyslexia is a brain-based type of learning disability that specifically impairs a person's ability to read. These individuals typically read at levels significantly lower than expected despite having normal intelligence. Although the disorder varies from person to person, common characteristics among people with dyslexia are difficulty with spelling, phonological processing (the manipulation of sounds), and/or rapid visual-verbal responding.”

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/dyslexia/dyslexia.htm>

Learning Disability

“A heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These differences are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be a result of central nervous system dysfunction and may occur across the lifespan.”

Sherman 2008: 4

Reasonable accommodation

“Necessary and appropriate modification and adjustment not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy or exercise, on an equal basis with others, all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

WHO Disability Report 2011: 303

Universal design

“The design of products, environments, programmes, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

WHO Disability Report 2011:303

1.6 RESEARCH PROGRAMME – DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

This research study contains the following five chapters:

Chapter 1 presents the background to and rationale for the study, the aims of the research, the research questions and research paradigm, a brief description of the research methods and design and a clarification of concepts.

Chapter 2 explores the literature that was reviewed to establish the foundation of this research through the review of relevant studies and debates in this field.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and methods, including the data collection and data analysis. In addition, the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness, ethics and validity of the research are described.

Chapter 4 presents both the research findings and a discussion of these findings in the light of the theoretical (bio-psycho-social) framework, reviewed literature and the research question.

Chapter 5 presents the conclusions drawn from interview data in light of the research questions and aims. The limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, the recommendations are made and the conclusion is presented.

1.7 SUMMARY

This chapter gave the background to the study and presented the research questions and aims.

In the next chapter, a literature review is presented with a discussion of the relevant studies in this field. This chapter also provides an explanation of the theoretical basis for my research.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 provided the background to the research and an overview of the research project. This chapter begins with an exploration of the nature and concepts related to learning disabilities. Accordingly, factors relating to disability in higher education, including legislative matters, prevalence and definitions, are examined. The context of Wits as a HEI is explored. A discussion of the strategies and plans for supporting students with learning disabilities in higher education is presented. The issue of staff perceptions is explored in the literature, and the need for additional research and training is explored.

2.2 EXPLORING THE NATURE OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

In Chapter 1, I alluded to the shift in thinking about how people with disabilities are viewed. In the next section, I explore how this shift in human-rights is a suitable model for my research.

2.2.1 Conceptualising learning disabilities: towards the bio-psycho-social model

Zaretsky (2005: 66) asserts that there is a substantial need to support educators in understanding how they have come to conceptualise disability in different ways. Waddell & Aylward (2010: 8-12) discuss the changes to predominant modes of thinking about disability, from the medical to the social model. The medical model of disability has dominated thinking of disability for generations and provides the standard framework for most people, especially health professionals and policy makers, on how to think about disability. However, the medical model has a mechanistic view of the body, in which an illness or a disability requires fixing (Waddell & Aylward 2010: 8). The focus of this model is on the diagnosis and treatment of a biological pathological condition. The weakness of this model is that it does not include the individual or their unique human attributes and subjective experiences (Waddell & Aylward 2010: 11).

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing recognition of the needs and rights of people with disabilities. In the 1960s, as part of the fight for disabled rights, the medical model was rejected and the social model became established. It represents the perspective of disabled people. Whereas the medical model focused on impairments and the cures, the social model shifts the focus of the problem of disablement from the individual onto social structures. It specifically argues that many of the restrictions suffered by people with disabilities are imposed by the way that society is structured for able-bodied people and therefore, people with disabilities are marginalised and cannot fulfil their true potential. This results in a complex form of institutional discrimination (Waddell & Aylward 2010: 13-22).

The differences between the medical and social models of disability have been well documented in the literature (FOTIM Report 2011; Mont 2007; Simmons, Blackmore & Bayliss 2008; Waddell & Aylward 2010; WHO Report 2011). Simmons, Blackmore & Bayliss (2008:733) describe the medical model wherein human beings are viewed in relation to a normalised view of ability, which regards those with impaired ability as abnormal. In contrast, the social model sees disability as a product environmental inequities and not a feature of individual impairment. Such a model argues for the removal of environmental barriers to reduce the debilitating effects of society (Simmons, Blackmore & Bayliss 2008: 733). This implies that barriers, including educational barriers, need to be removed.

Barriers exist in many settings, including the higher education environment. The removal of the barriers in higher education is discussed by Howell (2005: 3). According to the author, from the perspective of the social model, disability can only be understood by focusing on the relationship between persons with disabilities and the social context of which they are part. In the higher education context, this refers primarily to the relationship between the student with a disability and the teaching, learning and research process (Howell 2005: 3). However, there are limitations to the social model. Firstly, it pays insufficient attention to the personal experience of the disability and the limitations it imposes. Even if all the barriers that a disabled person experiences in society were removed, barriers would still exist. Secondly, if the creation of equal opportunities is purely about changing the way disability is perceived and fails to take

into account the material basis of disability, then allocating resources to remove barriers are not of primary importance (Howell 2005: 4-5).

From the above discussion, neither of these two models adequately explains why individuals with similar biological conditions, healthcare, social or work contexts behave so differently and fail to adequately allow for personal and psychological factors. In addition, the medical and social perspectives are often presented as dichotomous. An approach that balances the medical and social models, and includes a personal element, is preferable.

The WHO Report (2011: 4) affirms this viewpoint and suggests that disability should be viewed neither as purely medical nor purely social and thus, as a compromise, the bio-psycho-social model was adopted. The bio-psycho-social model was first introduced by Engel in the 1970's. The defining characteristic of this model is that it recognises that biological, psychological and social factors, and the interactions between them, can influence the course and outcome of any illness or disability. It is thus a dynamic systems approach rather than a linear causality paradigm. It combines and balances the medical and social models, and introduces the personal/psychological dimension.

It is apparent that the bio-psycho-social model understands functioning and disability as a dynamic interaction between health conditions and contextual factors, both personal and environmental (WHO Report 2011: 4) Therefore, I contend that an evidence-based enquiry which is based on the bio-psycho-social model could allow South African universities to provide meaningful, updated services to students with disabilities.

In the next section, the difficulty of defining learning disabilities is explored.

2.2.2 The difficulty of defining learning disabilities

The difficulty of defining learning disabilities and dyslexia is widely acknowledged in the literature (Reid 2003: 5; Vogel et al 2003: 53; Wong 1996: 26; Mamen 2007: 11; Ryan 2007: 438). Vickers (2010: 4) highlights that, to the lay person, it would seem that several of the learning disabilities are often termed 'disorders' and are vaguely defined. In addition, since there is no single test to determine if a person has such a disability,

and that this is dependent on both the specialist making the diagnosis and the demographic group of the person, there is great variance in the diagnoses.

For the purposes of this study, 'learning disabilities' will be used to describe the range of conditions that cause significant difficulties in perception, including dyslexia.

2.2.3 A specific learning disability: dyslexia

Cottrell (2003: 122) terms dyslexia as a specific learning disability. Dyslexia describes a range of learning difficulties related to underlying differences in processing information, including *dyspraxia* (difficulty in coordinating movement); *dysgraphia* (difficulty with writing) and *discalcula* (difficulty with numbers). It has a neurological basis and is constitutional in origin (Vogel et al 2003: 53). It is a processing difference related to the acquisition of basic skills (such as reading, spelling and/or writing). The difficulties experienced by a person with dyslexia are usually unexpected to the person's cognitive abilities (Reid 2003: 5-6), and may be evident in persons with high intelligence, as can be seen by the achievements of people with learning disabilities, including Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Cruise, Albert Einstein, Richard Branson and many others.

The literature showed that explanations for the cause of dyslexia vary and include genetics; brain structures differences; neurological differences; deficiencies in fish oils; left ear dominance and other explanations. Despite the lack of clarity on causes, what is clear is that dyslexia is a complex syndrome that affects each individual differently depending on their specific cluster of difficulties, and is compounded by other factors such as age and diagnosis and intervention; support received; coping strategies; individual strength and their immediate environment (Cottrell 2003: 126). This difficulty with processing words or numbers can affect a person into adulthood.

2.2.4 Learning disabilities over the lifespan

Similarly, a learning disability is usually not outgrown and can continue into adulthood, In some cases, it might even intensify with changes to the task and/or environment (Smith, Dowdy, Polloway & Blalock 1997: 258). However, some people with a learning disability overcome their academic deficit relatively easily, while others remain almost

persistently impaired. This may be partly explained by the level of severity of the learning disability, but other factors beyond the domain of academic learning may also have an effect on learning, including other cognitive processes such as memory, attention and general language knowledge (Sherman in Wolf, Schreiber & Wasserstein 2008:20). According to the Help-for-Lecturers resource on the Wits website (<http://www.wits.ac.za/disabledstudents>), although a learning disability cannot be 'cured', it can at least be bypassed to some extent through compensatory strategies. There are a variety of learning methods that can be utilised to enhance learning for students with learning disabilities which allow them to master material that may have been inaccessible in a particular form.

2.2.5 Cognitive tasks affected by learning disabilities

Cottrell (2003: 122-4) describes the various tasks of a person with a learning disability as having difficulties in dealing with sounds; visual stimuli; symbols and movement. These tasks include information processing; linear sequencing; timing and motor coordination. As a result, automated activities, such as: reading; writing; dance; organisational skills; listening; speaking; balance and coordination of physical movement can be adversely affected. Difficulties with non-automated tasks might also be present. These include: listening; writing; spelling; speaking; writing up answers on a flip chart; group activities; balancing during verbal problem solving etc. This list covers a wide range of essential school activities that need to be mastered.

It is interesting and important to note that the higher cognitive tasks required at tertiary level such as: reasoning; interpreting; understanding; creating and synthesising are not directly affected by having dyslexia. Students might be indirectly affected in certain situations, such as not being able to access course material because they cannot visually decode a text, and therefore their difficulties are similar to those of a visually-impaired learner. Or students might have trouble processing sound, in which case their problems are similar to those of a hearing-impaired learner. In some cases, writing is impaired, and the associated problems are similar to a student with a mobility-impairment (Cottrell 2003: 122-4).

Some students with dyslexia experience a combination of these difficulties at different times and in different ways. Dyslexia also induces tiredness and students with dyslexia might show stress-related symptoms such as asthma; allergies; skin conditions and auto-immune conditions, such as psoriasis, or eczema (Cottrell 2003: 122-4).

2.2.6 Diagnosing learning disabilities: a contentious issue

Coles (1978: 313) investigated the most frequently used tests for diagnosing learning disabilities, and found that these are based on the medical model of disability and used biological explanations to explain learning disabilities. Siegle (1999: 316) argues that, although the use of standardised tests to diagnose learning disabilities is essential, there are issues around what specific tests should be used and what the cut-off scores. The author concludes that specialists will probably never agree on what tests should be used and on the cut-off scores.

Moreover, Vickers (2010: 4) discusses how the changes in legislation relating to learning disabilities in the US have given rise to an increase in the number of school mental health professionals. In addition, the improved level of awareness of teachers about learning disabilities has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of diagnoses of people with learning disabilities. The author (Vickers 2010: 5) postulates that this rise of diagnoses has stirred up unnecessary controversy. One of the main reasons for the controversy is the evidence that some diagnoses are illegitimate. Various US news organisations reported that for a price, it is possible to secure an illegitimate diagnosis in order to obtain academic advantage. In particular, Vickers (2010) found thirteen scholarly journals that studied the undesirable incentives to seek diagnosis in order to obtain extra time for taking exams.

From the above discussions, it is clear that diagnosing learning disabilities and understanding its nature is a complex task. In the next section, the complexity of determining the prevalence of students with disabilities in higher education is discussed.

2.3 PREVALENCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

No other disability has seen as dramatic a rise in numbers of diagnoses in recent decades as have learning disabilities (Vickers 2010: 3). Disabled students may be found in any setting and studying at any level. They represent a broad and diverse group and include learners with a visual, hearing, mobility or learning impairment, mental health difficulty or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Students can also be affected by multiple impairments and the impact on learning will depend on the nature or extent of the impairments. Their needs are often around access to learning and the adjustments that organisations and staff make to ensure they can engage fairly and effectively in the learning process (Lifelong Learning UK 2010: 5).

2.3.1 Lack of accurate data on the international front

According to the literature, accurate data on the prevalence of students with disabilities is limited. In 2007-2008, the US reported that eleven percent of undergraduates had a disability (US Department of Education 2011: 15). From 2000 to 2010, the proportion of undergraduates with learning disabilities or ADHD almost doubled, to reach more than two percent of the total US undergraduate population (Vickers 2010: 3).

In the UK, of those students for whom disability information was available, the proportion known to have a disability was 7.5 percent in 2008-2009 (United Kingdom, Equality in Higher Education 2010: 104). Although the prevalence of dyslexia varies between countries, the worldwide average for the school population is ten percent (National Centre for Learning Disabilities 2011: 5). Murray, Wren and Keys (2008: 95) estimate that approximately ten percent of American youth with learning disabilities have enrolled in tertiary education during the first two years after leaving high school. Mont (2007: 1) notes that high quality, internationally comparable data on disability is often not available. Mont (2007) attributes the variance in prevalence rates to the different definitions of disability, different methods of collecting data, and variation in the quality of study design. It seems that there is also a lack of accurate data in South Africa, as discussed in the next section.

2.3.2 Lack of accurate data in South Africa

The lack of accurate data on the prevalence of disability in the higher education HEI sector in South Africa has been acknowledged in the FOTIM Report (FOTIM 2011: 86). In South Africa, due to changes in census questions, 2011 results are not comparable with the previous census results from 1996 and 2001. The reason for this is that the censuses in 1996 and 2001 based the measurement of disability on the definition from the 1980 WHO International Classification of Impairments (Republic of South Africa, Census 2011: 41). In the 2011 South African Census, questions on disability were replaced by general health and functioning questions. Accordingly, in the Census 2011, disability was defined as difficulties encountered in functioning due to body impairments or activity limitation, with or without the use of assistive devices. This implies that due to the changes in definition, comparisons over time are difficult.

The study conducted by FOTIM from 2009 to 2011 highlights the lack of available South African statistics in higher education. The study estimated that less than one percent of students at a HEI utilise disability services. If this percentage is an accurate indicator of the level of representivity of disability within the tertiary sector, then this is much less than the estimated 6 – 10 percent of the South African population that is disabled (FOTIM 2011: 87). The report further lists various reasons for the lack of statistics. One reason is that some students choose not to identify themselves as 'disabled', hence not all students who are disabled make use of the disability services offered by universities. Secondly, data capturing processes are often not in place and hence the lack of statistics. (FOTIM 2011: 42).

Similarly, Cottrell (2003: 126-7) noted that students very often do not declare their learning disability when entering university education, and lists possible reasons for their non-disclosure. Prior to enrollment, some students might have developed negative connotations about their impairment, and might fear university exclusion. Some students might have no idea that they have a learning disability, and some might have no idea of what the implications of their disability are for them as adults.

There are four major disability categories: visual; hearing; motor and cognitive disabilities (Crow 2008: 51). The FOTIM report (2011: 136-137) highlights that in South

Africa, the absence of a national legislative framework in the higher education sector may have resulted in the lack of standard definitions and categories of disabilities being used in HEIs.

As is evident from the above discussion, accurately assessing the number of students with disabilities in higher education is a difficult task. The FOTIM Report (2011: 136) recognises that although accurate South African statistics are not available, learning disabilities is the category with the highest number of students, more than other categories of disabilities such as visual; hearing or mobility disabilities. However, the increase in the number of students with learning disabilities (as discussed in Section 2.2.6) is in itself, a contentious issue.

Without a national higher education policy that delineates disability categories, accurate data collection is difficult. The South African legislative framework is investigated in the section that follows.

2.4 LEGISLATION AND POLICY FRAMEWORK ON A NATIONAL LEVEL

On a national level, South Africa has put in place a legislative framework that supports the needs of people with disabilities. These legislations are: the Employment Equity Act (no. 55 of 1998); the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (of 2000) and the Code of Good Practice of the Employment of People with Disabilities (2002). These are all examples of legislation that aim at improving the lives of people with disabilities. South Africa ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol in 2008. In the Education White Paper 6, the Ministry of Education committed “our higher education institutions to increasing the access of learners with special education needs” (Republic of South Africa, White Paper 6. 2001: 2.2.5.1).

Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde (2012: 1-2) recognised that even though South Africa has adopted an inclusive education policy, the implementation of this policy is hampered by the lack of teachers’ skills and knowledge in differentiating the curriculum to address a variety of learning needs. They describe the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa as ‘slow and partial’, and identify that the reasons for this are

numerous, and relate to (amongst others) problems that affect the education system as a whole; conditions of poverty and the role of special schools and other support structures.

Despite the legislation and policies that are in place, implementation requires attention. The South African Minister of Higher Education and Training, Minister Blade Nzimande said at symposium in 2010 that “for far too long, disability issues have surfaced in our national and institutional policy documents and plans without meaningful action being taken to address the challenges which exist” (Address by Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande at the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA) gala dinner at the University of the Free State).

It is therefore evident that, despite the existence of legislation and policies, the lack of implementation creates barriers that affect students with disabilities. Relevant, reliable and up-to-date information and statistics on the prevalence of disabilities and their impact are not yet available. This underpins the fact that the disability movement is still facing many challenges in South Africa, in particular, misconceptions of staff surrounding learning disabilities in higher education. This leads to my main research question, and is discussed in the following section.

2.5 STAFF MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

The notion that misconceptions that staff have about learning disabilities contribute to the problems experienced by students was examined in the literature. Specifically, the literature was explored for studies conducted on staff misconceptions and how they impact on students. In an Australian study of students with learning disabilities (Ryan 2007: 440), it was found that lecturers viewed students’ difficulties with learning as something that was inherent in those individuals. This fits in with the medical model of disability, where the individual is considered to be deficient, rather than the society. The lecturers appeared not to be aware of their own role in contributing to the students’ difficulties. Students reported that they were often made to feel that they did not “belong” in an academia. Although promised with the equal opportunity of access to higher education, the students faced a very different reality and found that their learning needs were not accepted nor understood.

Vickers (2010: 3) recognised that the diagnosis and accommodation of cognitive disabilities has facilitated some students to perform well and gave them the opportunity to achieve their true potential. However, the accommodation of students with learning disabilities is controversial, because neither all the diagnoses, nor all the accommodations, are perceived as legitimate. The author (Vickers 2010: 3) describes how some professors have spoken out against accommodating students, and others have complained about the power of the disabilities offices who make the decisions as to whether a student is accommodated or not.

A study conducted by Kravets (2006: 18-25) investigated the common misconceptions of lecturers toward learning disabilities. The author found evidence of many misconceptions, including:

- That individuals with learning disabilities should not consider college as an option.
- The term “learning disability” is the same as “mental retardation” or “slower learner.”
- Learning disabilities do not exist if they are not visible.
- All learning disabilities are alike and require the same accommodations.
- Individuals receiving accommodations have an unfair advantage.
- Claiming to have learning disabilities is just an excuse for laziness.
- There are no accommodations that can effectively assist students who cannot remember, express thoughts, read, stay focused, understand social cues, be organised or manage their time.

Furthermore, there is a risk that accommodations may be perceived by non-disabled students as unfair, particularly if the accommodations are granted too freely or subjectively, or if the requests come from students who are improperly qualified for them (Vickers 2010: 13).

2.5.1 The accommodation of learning disabilities

A study conducted by Leyser and Greenberger (2008: 247) found that several factors impact on faculty attitudes and practices. The intensity of personal contact with

individuals with disabilities such as with a family member, a friend or a co-worker had the strongest impact on both the attitudes provision of accommodation - including the willingness and actual provision. The extent to which a faculty member had training in disabilities also impacted on the willingness to provide accommodations (Leyser & Greenberger 2008: 247). A study by Bourke, Strehorn & Silver (2000:26) shows that the beliefs about the helpfulness of and need for instructional accommodations are associated with the provision of the accommodations. The study also emphasises the need for a close working relationship between faculty, administration and other service providers (Bourke, Strehorn & Silver 2010:31).

Vickers (2010: 9) reflected on a number of studies conducted in the US, for example, in a 2008 survey of professors at a US university investigated the subject of accommodations for students with learning disabilities and showed that some professors are ambivalent about whether accommodations are fair to students without accommodations. In another study that Vickers (2010: 9) reflected on, only a few professors interviewed were willing to have their names associated with a study that was critical of accommodations, or even to be quoted anonymously on the subject. Yet the criticism was evident. University staff members said that they thought that criticism of current accommodation practices was widely shared but was unlikely to surface publicly.

May (2006: 15) concludes that despite the weak link between attitudes and the provision of accommodations, attitudes and misconceptions can impact on the success and personal experience of students, and can have distressing consequences. It not only the perceptions of academic staff that has an impact on students, but also the perceptions of administrators and support staff can also affect students. Every day, administrators make decisions that affect the lives of students, faculty and staff. They need to resolve student's complaints and create and interpret policies that affect various segments of the university community. Thus this study will investigate the perceptions of both academic *and* support staff.

Vickers (2010: 14) expressed doubt that the controversy surrounding the accommodations that are made for students with learning disabilities will be resolved in the near future. According to the author, in the meantime, well-meaning administrators

are caught in the crossfire between their desire to serve the genuine needs of their disabled students and the need to avoid unfairness by granting accommodations to students who do not really deserve them.

In a recent study of students with disabilities in South African HEIs (Matshediso 2010: 732), the students reported that there are two types of lecturers; the first type was responsive to curriculum flexibility and allowed for accommodations to be made. The second type of lecturer refused or ignored requests for alternative teaching and assessment methods. The students recommended that it was a matter of educating all lecturers about disability and disability support. This alludes to the notion that there is a lack of knowledge and misconceptions amongst lecturers with regard to students with learning disabilities; and these misconceptions result in negative consequences for students with learning disabilities. This supports the aim of the study, which is to explore the perceptions of both academic and support staff regarding students with disabilities at Wits.

Despite the lack of accurate statistical data on student numbers, and more pertinently, the misconceptions that staff may have, support can be provided to students with learning disabilities. In the section that follows, some of the possible support mechanisms, including making reasonable accommodations, are explored.

2.6 SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As mentioned in 2.2.5, different neurological processes are impaired in each student with a learning disability. This implies that the support needed by an individual student will in turn, also differ. Some of the factors that might affect a student with a learning disability are presented below.

2.6.1 Academic factors

Martin & McLaughlin (1993: 296) identified academic factors such as language and mathematical processes as being problematic for students with learning disabilities in higher education. They recommend that instruction in learning strategies; self-advocacy

skills and writing skills that allow the student to acquire, organise, store and retrieve the information are useful. Instruction on how to enhance comprehension; learning to use the computer as a writing tool; memory and listening skills improvement; vocabulary use; writing and paper writing skills; library use; effective use of text books; note-taking strategies and test-taking skills are all important skills that require mastering. Reading assignments aloud can also be effective.

The success of the strategies used depends on the diagnoses and the professional who decides which strategies fit with a particular individual. A deep understanding of how cognitive processes work, and grasping different ways to approach a problem are vital in assisting students with learning disabilities. Understanding the processes involved in each task can make each academic task manageable. Specific subjects require specific strategies. Reading-orientated subjects might require strategies of self-study (such as highlighting text), whereas mathematics might be better enhanced through discussions with tutors or other students

Martin & McLaughlin (1993: 296) identify a number of strategies that can be employed to enhance academic effectiveness. These include tape-recording lectures; using tape recorded text-books; obtaining extra time for assignments and examinations; learning graphic skills; using calculators, computers, calendars and schedules; participating in diagnostic and study skills sessions; using support services; asking classmates to take lecture notes and identifying staff and tutors knowledgeable about learning disabilities.

Cottrell (2003: 122-3) discussed the different strengths and strategies that students with learning disabilities might use. Some students with a learning disability show an unusually high level of mathematical, special, linguistic or creative ability. In general, they tend to excel in subjects such as: engineering, architecture and design, and this can be attributed to the different way in which their brain functions because higher order thinking/tasks can be easier than simple tasks. Some of them find university level work easier than school work since memorising parrot fashion is more difficult for them than attaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter. It is becoming well established that dyslexia is not a barrier in itself to achieving the higher degrees, such as a masters or a PhD.

2.6.2 Time management

Time is a key factor in the success of a student with a learning disability. Due to the difficulties experienced in processing information, students with learning disabilities require more time than most to complete basic tasks. Providing sufficient time, and allowing knowledge to be processed then demonstrated in an appropriate manner, are two methods of altering the learning environment that will assist students with learning disabilities (Cottrell 2003: 123).

Some students with dyslexia will benefit from learning how to use their time effectively and how to identify important parts of the text with less effort. These sections can then be scanned into a computer and the appearance of the text or colour of the paper altered. In some cases, a screenreader can be beneficial. Lecturers can supply students with dyslexia with material on a disk so that these can be adapted as required, and lecturers can assist by pointing out important parts of text. Adult students often benefit from coaching in how to transfer skills from everyday activities to develop the necessary academic skills (Cottrell 2003: 127-8).

2.6.3 Support provided by lecturers

Cottrell (2003: 133-4) recognises that there are many practical techniques that lecturers and programme designers can apply to supporting students with dyslexia, including: maintaining the awareness of learning disabilities that might be undisclosed; creating a safe environment where a student might disclose their difficulty with learning; providing lecture notes in advance in electronic format; providing reading lists that highlight important sections; offering alternatives to timed examinations; using assessment methods where students can demonstrate knowledge with reduced emphasis on memorisation; being aware of assistive technology; ensuring that photocopies are of a good quality so that they can be scanned in and printing text in columns, double spaced in Ariel font, size 14.

2.6.4 Curriculum support

The curriculum also affects learning. Students can be empowered by curricula that are created with students with disabilities in mind. Diaz-Greenberg, Thousand, Cardelle-Elawar & Nevin (2000: 885-6) propose that *conscientisation* is achieved when learners become more aware of their own role in their own learning experiences through the cycle of action, reflection and new action cycles. Self-regulation can be achieved through curricula that include elements such as: strategy teaching, practice, feedback and monitoring of self-regulatory strategies and social support. The authors concluded that a new curriculum that embraces these constructs will ensure that students with disabilities become consciously aware that they are self-regulated, self-determined individuals.

2.6.5 Universal design

The techniques recommended for the effective evaluation and support of students with learning disabilities are the same techniques that would be used to facilitate learning for the general class population, where students each have their own learning style. All of the suggestions made for students with disabilities above are beneficial to the general student population. By employing “universal design of instruction”, all students can be accommodated. Universal design refers to the creation of environments and products (including learning programmes) that are accessible to and usable to all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation (Burgstahler 2001: 3).

People with disabilities are just one of many groups of people that universal design will accommodate. For example, a ramp access to a building will be of use to a mother pushing a pram, a person delivering a trolley of goods as well as a wheelchair user.

Burgstahler (2001: 3-4) discusses the principles of universal design. The principles can be applied to environments, communication and products. These are:

- Equitable use (the design is useful to people with diverse abilities).
- Flexible in use (the design accommodates a range of individual preferences and abilities).

- Perceptible information (the design communicates information effectively regardless of conditions or a sensory abilities).
- Tolerance for error (the design minimises consequences of accidental errors).
- Low physical effort (the design allows for comfort and minimal fatigue).
- Size and space for approach and use (design accommodates approach and usage regardless of an individual's mobility).

The principles of universal design can be used to enhance the learning of all students, including those with disabilities (Burgstahler 2001: 3-6). Instruction methods that support these principles include an inclusive classroom environment, accessible venues and work spaces, alternate delivery methods, information access different ways of encouraging integration, multiple ways of providing feedback and demonstrating knowledge. Universal design of instruction is particularly relevant to the higher education environment, where large classes are a reality. It also minimises the need for disclosure. However, the question should be asked: how will it translate in practice in the South African HEI environment?

A search of the literature uncovered a recent study conducted by Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde (2012: 1-7). They conducted a workshop with teachers and therapists in South Africa and introduced them to the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The authors identified several reasons for using UDL as way of improving inclusive education practices. They postulate that by using UDL as a framework, the need for flexible curricula to be designed can be conceptualised. This, in turn, empowers teachers, dismantles barriers to learning and enables learners with a wide variety of needs to be included in the learning process.

The principles of universal design can be applied to lectures; hand-outs; web-based instruction; field work and other academic activities, and allow for all material and activities to be accessed by people with a wide range of abilities, language skills and learning styles. It ultimately creates a world that is more accessible for everyone, without the need for alteration (Burgstahler 2001: 5).

Over the last few years, I have discussed the implementation of UDL with a number of disability practitioners. These conversations have led me to believe that that even at institutions where universal design principles are taught to lecturing staff, in reality, the principles are not carried through, and lecturers end up teaching the way that they were taught. It might take many years for the change to happen, but hopefully when faced with increasing numbers of students with disabilities, lecturers will start to implement universal design principles in their classrooms.

2.6.6 Other support

It is not only in lectures that students require assistance. Support can come from a variety of places. Success at university can also be impacted by emotional strength, vocational and educational choice and types of emotional support. This is where support services and guidance counsellors can play an important role. Students with learning disabilities often have an “organisational deficit” which manifest in poor time management, unsystematic lecture notes, poor examination preparation and unorganised writing. Strategies that are useful to compensate for these deficits could include keeping a daily and weekly assignment schedule, and a semester calendar with examination dates, projects etc. (Martin & McLaughlin 1993: 296-6).

At tertiary level, it is expected that all students, including those with disabilities, will identify and use their own strategies to succeed in their studies, for example, breathing exercises and meditation can help to reduce stress. Learning to organise their work through self-observation and reflection can be greatly beneficial. Students need to try out different solutions to different challenges to find out what works best for them (Cottrell 2003: 130-1).

However, the change in perspective from a medical to a social model has caused a re-assessment of implications in all environments, including HEIs.

Despite the importance of these issues, both awareness of and scientific information on disability are lacking (WHO Report 2011: xxi). Therefore, more research and training is required.

2.7 INCREASING DEMAND FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING

The dramatic increase in number of students with learning disabilities entering HEIs in the last decade has been well-documented in the literature (Heiman & Precel 2003: 248; Vogel et al 2003: 3; Ryan 2007: 436; FOTIM 2011: 44; Murray et al 2009: 117; Cawthon & Cole 2010: 112). Due to the increase in numbers of students with a disability, which is a worldwide phenomenon, it is important to initiate research in this area (Leyser & Greenberger 2008: 240).

2.7.1 International need for research and training

The literature reveals that more studies on the disposition of faculty staff towards students with disabilities in higher education are needed. Although studies on faculty perceptions and practices regarding students with disabilities are reported in the literature, further research is needed in other countries, because most of the studies were conducted in the US (Leyser & Greenberger 2008: 240).

Staff training is clearly an area that needs attention. Murray et al (2009: 117-129) conducted a project that was designed to promote disability awareness, understanding, and responsiveness among university staff at a large private university in the US. The project report recommended that, in addition to training programmes directed towards changing attitudes and practices, organisational characteristics may have a significant impact on the performance of students with learning disabilities. According to this report, efforts to promote positive experiences among students should be focused more on the changing the overall climate of institutions. Their research further found that the time spent engaged in training was also an important predictor of attitudes and perceptions; such that faculty and staff who had spent a greater amount of time in training had the most positive attitudes to students with learning disabilities.

2.7.2 National need for research and training

The FOTIM Disability in Higher Education Project was conducted in South Africa by the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) during the 2010 academic year. It was an exploratory study which aimed to describe and analyse the

role and function of DUs at South African HEIs. The FOTIM Project Report (hereafter referred to as the Report) describes the available disability services at South African HEIs (2011: 24-25). In general, where services do exist, these tend to operate separately from or have limited collaboration with broader teaching and learning support initiatives at the institutions. Where links do exist, the collaboration is mostly with student counselling services rather than with teaching and learning. The support services are, in many cases, based on the assumption that problems can be remedied through technology, rather than trying to understand the social context. According to the Report, an integrated approach would be preferable. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the bio-psycho-social model encapsulates such an approach. This affirms the notion that the bio-psycho-social model could allow South African universities to provide a more meaningful, updated service to students with a learning disability.

In South Africa, institutions are reporting that more and more students with learning disabilities are requesting assistance (FOTIM Report 2011:88). The lack of reliable South African statistics on the prevalence of students with disabilities in higher education is problematic and more research is needed in this area (Howell 2005 v-vi; FOTIM 2011: 86). Howell (2005: vi) postulates that, as a consequence of the lack of statistics, no systematic central monitoring of disability in HEIs has been put in place. This lack of information undermines attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of policy implementation for students with a disability.

The FOTIM Report (2011:88) further highlighted the need for a prevalence study and recommends that, in particular, research and guidance on issues such as psychosocial and emotional disabilities is required (2011: 102). Staff training is another area of concern. The authors of the Report suggest that compulsory skills based training should be offered to lecturers to ensure the implementation of universal design principles in teaching processes and methodologies (2011:102). Attention also needs to be given to the academic environment and the process of teaching and learning (Howell 2005:60-62).

In a study of the academic support needs of students with disabilities at three South African HEIs, Crous (2004:247) recommended that it should be the responsibility of the DUs on campuses to conduct research regarding the nature, identification, assessment

and support of students with disabilities. The author also recognises that there is often ignorance and misunderstanding about students with disabilities, and that the units should train all staff to identify and to provide at least first phase assistance to students with disabilities.

Both teaching and administrative/support staff should be equipped to deal with students with disabilities. The Report (FOTIM 2011: 63-64) showed that in general, staff do not receive specialised training on disability. Some institutions do provide awareness training, but this seems to be limited. The research also found that attitudinal barriers persist within institutions, unless challenged and that staff are not always sensitive or empathetic to the special needs of students. The research looked at the extent to which universal design principles are used in South African universities, and found that little attention was paid to universal design principles (2011: 97-99). Universal design, as an instructional approach, allows programmes to be used by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. As stated in Section 2.6.5, this is achieved by developing flexible classroom materials, using various technologies and varying the delivery of information and assessment methodologies. Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde argue that Universal Design for Learning (ULD) can have a “useful application in the South African context of inclusive education” (2012: 1). In addition, the FOTIM Report recommends that more awareness should be created with staff about disability and universal design principles (2011: 97-99).

Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde (2012: 5-6) state that if South Africa is to address the exclusion of students from the education system, there is an urgent need to address the range of diverse learning needs in their classrooms. They suggest that besides the skills, training, and support from the educational system that teachers are required to have, there is a need for teachers and therapists to find ways to work collaboratively, for the greatest benefit of all their learners.

This line of thinking also applies to HEIs, as illustrated in another South African study. Steyn and Kamper (2011: 132) used the “photovoice” method to investigate learning barriers in higher education. The authors conclude that HEIs with diverse socio-economic student populations have the non-negotiable task of involving a composite institutional guidance programme on study planning and contextual coping skills. Only

through such programmes, will institutions succeed in really developing their students' potential, to establish their own identity and develop a sense of purpose - with all the implied benefits for the students themselves and society (Steyn and Kamper 2011: 132).

Thus, the need and direction for more research and training is clear. Since the aim of my research was to investigate staff perceptions at Wits University, a clear understanding of the Wits context is necessary, and provides the background to my research. The next section examines the Wits context in detail.

2.8 THE WITS CONTEXT

The question to be asked at this point is: What is the status of disability services at Wits University? As noted in the introduction, Wits has a policy on disability that was formulated and implemented in 2000. Information about this policy was obtained via e-mail correspondence from the head of the DU, as well as [website](#) information, provided facts on the Wits context.

The Disabled Students' Programme, now known as the Disability Unit, was established in 1986. The DU began with less than ten students. In 2000, the policy on disability was adopted. In 2012, 343 students were registered. This figure has increased dramatically in 2013, currently 537 students are registered at the DU (a total of 30833 students were enrolled at Wits in 2013). As more students with disabilities become aware of the opportunities that are offered, the demand for support is increasing. With the increasing demand, it became necessary to develop support structures. With support from both the university and donors, the services to students with disabilities has improved over the years.

The Unit comprises of the following staff (information from the DU's website (<http://www.wits.ac.za/prospective/studentervices/disabledstudents/11548/services.html> accessed 13 October 2013):

- Unit Head
- Information Technology Specialist
- Maths Tutor

- Learning Disability Coordinator
- South African Sign Language Interpreter
- Secretary and Test & Exams Officer
- Wits Education Campus Administrative Officer
- A team of editors

The DU assesses students to determine if the student has a disability that hinders them from educational access. The assessment comprises of interviews with the student and a review of documentation provided by physicians and other clinicians (such as: clinical psychologists, audiologists, or optometrists). Once approved, the student can register with DU make use of its services.

The DU also coordinates reasonable accommodations for students, and has specialist computer centres across the campus. A dedicated learning disability computer centre and separate examination venue with invigilation services are also available to students. In addition, DU arranges for structural or organisational adjustments to be made to the physical infrastructure, if required. The DU runs an Orientation Programme for new students; a Braille service; provision of books in electronic format and sensitisation and awareness training to employees and students. Detailed information of how lecturers can best support students with disabilities is provided on the Wits website. The webpage

(<http://www.wits.ac.za/prospective/student-services/disabled-students/11552/help-for-lecturers.html>) contains practical suggestions of how lecturers can support students with learning and other disabilities.

It is not only the DU that provides services to students with disabilities. Other centres that provide ancillary support include the Campus Health and Wellness Centre; Counselling and Careers Development Unit; Sports Administration; Financial Aid & Scholarships Office; Office of Residence Life; Student Development Office and the Wits Writing Centre.

From the above information, it is evident that the university is well-equipped to support students with disabilities. However, irrespective of how many services are available to support students with learning disabilities, if students with disabilities encounter

negative or uninformed misconceptions of staff towards them, then their learning experience will be affected. For this reason, the study aims to explore the prevailing attitudes of university staff towards students with a learning disability and their understanding and knowledge of university's disability policy, support systems and practices.

2.9 CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review delivered a detailed background to my research. It exposed the complex and often controversial nature of learning disabilities and showed that, despite the existence of legislation and policies, implementation is difficult and deficient. The review revealed misconceptions can have a negative impact on students with a learning disability, and exposed the need for further training and research. The aim of this study is to explore perceptions of the staff at Wits.

The next chapter contains an overview of how this exploration was conducted, and delineates the research design and data collection methods used to explore the perceptions of university staff towards students with a learning disability.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains a discussion of the research design that was used for the study. The methods used to investigate the perceptions of university staff towards students with learning disabilities are explained. Accordingly, the chapter begins with an account of the research design, the data collection methods and the data analysis process that were used. In addition, the chapter describes the ethical considerations and the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and validity.

3.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is qualitative in nature. This means that the research analyses social actions, beliefs, thoughts and actions (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 315). In this study, I researched the participant's beliefs, thoughts and actions of students with learning disabilities. As discussed in Chapter 1, qualitative research assumes that multiple realities are constructed through different views of the same situation, and aims to understand a social situation from an individual's perspective (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 12). Since the aim of the research is to understand learning disabilities from the perspective of university staff members, the qualitative approach was selected as an appropriate method to conduct the research.

3.2.1 Phenomenological case study

I chose a phenomenological case study design as the most appropriate explorative research design for my study. A phenomenological study is a type of interactive method that describes the meanings of a lived experience and transforms it to its essence (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:26). The aim of this type of study is to investigate a particular phenomenon as accurately as possible, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts (Groenewald 2004: 5). In this research study, I interviewed university staff to understand their perceptions of university students with a learning disability. Since my research took the form of a case-study, it examined a set of

individuals bounded in time and place (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 26-7), hence, a sample of staff at the Wits were interviewed.

3.2.2 Site and participant selection

As mentioned in the previous section, the selected site is Wits University. As discussed in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.4.3), the greatest number of students with disabilities is enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities. Furthermore, the university is experiencing an increase in the number of students with learning disabilities (see Section 2.8). During the planning stage of the research, I gave much consideration as to whether this study should focus on a single group within the university, for example: a faculty, course, support staff or lecturers of first-year students. As the research progressed, it became evident that both support staff and academic staff should be interviewed, as both have an impact on the student's experience at Wits. The qualitative research design allows for such changes to be made.

As discussed in Section 1.4.4, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used. After the pilot interview, potential participants were emailed and requested to take part in the research. Each participant was requested to recommend other possible participant's, who were then approached. The selection of participants is further described in Sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.3.3.

3.3 ETHICAL MEASURES

As a Unisa student, I obtained permission from the Unisa Ethical Clearance Committee to conduct the research (see Appendix D). As a Wits staff member, permission to interview Wits staff (see Appendix E) was obtained from the Wits Registrar's Office, on the strength of the Unisa Ethical Clearance Certificate. A discussion of the ethical measures which serve as guiding principles, follows.

3.3.1 Informed consent

In order to ensure ethical research, I made use of informed consent. According to McMillan & Schumacher (2006: 143), informed consent implies that the participants

have a choice about whether to participate or not, without penalty. It is done by providing the participants with an explanation of the research and any associated risks; as well as informing them of their right to terminate their participation at any time.

I emailed a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) to the selected participants and requested them to complete an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) prior to the interviews. The Information Sheet introduced the researcher; provided the aims; outlined the risks and benefits and gave detailed information as to the interview, what could be expected and where to find information on the Unisa Research Ethics Policy. The value and the importance of the study were explained.

Participants were asked to sign their consent to be interviewed and audio recorded. They were required to acknowledge that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time. The manner in which the data would be managed was outlined in detail.

3.3.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

McMillan & Schumacher (2006: 144) state that information obtained about the participants must be held confidential. This means that, unless otherwise agreed to in advance, the individual data and the names of the participants are not disclosed. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in the participant Information Sheet (Appendix C).

3.3.3 Avoidance of deception

Creswell (2012: 231) emphasises the importance of avoiding deception as to the nature, purpose and conduct of the study. Thus, the nature of the study and the purpose thereof were disclosed to all participants via the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C). In addition, participants were requested to give their signed consent to be interviewed and recorded (Appendix B). They were also given the right to refuse to reply to any questions that they did not want to answer.

3.3.4 Role of the researcher

As researcher, I endeavoured at all times to conduct myself in an ethical manner, as outlined by McMillan & Schumacher (2006: 334-335). Thus, I adopted a policy of informed consent, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity. I strived to conduct myself in a caring and fair manner, and promoted open discussions and reasonableness at all times. In light of the sensitive nature of the topic, I was conscious of remaining neutral and respecting the participants,

3.4 MEASURES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS

In this study, Guba's model for ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative data was employed. The four constructs used to ensure trustworthiness are described below.

3.4.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the congruency between the research findings and reality (Shenton 2004: 64). The specific provisions (Shenton 2004:64-7) that were made in this study to ensure the credibility of the research are:

- The research methods that were utilised were well established.
- A number of different data collection methods were utilised to triangulate the results.
- A comprehensive literature review provided the background and contributed to explaining the attitudes and behaviours of the participants.
- Tactics to ensure the honesty of informants were employed to increase the credibility of the research. This includes the use of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent to be Interviewed and Recorded (see Appendices B and C), whereby participants were ensured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the interview sessions, an attempt was made to establish rapport with each participant. Each participant was encouraged to be frank and honest in the interview sessions.

3.4.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Shenton 2004: 69). However, in qualitative research, where the findings are specific to a particular environment, it is difficult to demonstrate transferability. Despite this limitation, and in accordance with the recommendations made by Shenton (2004: 69-71), the following strategies were utilised:

- Sufficient contextual information about the particular environment is provided, to enable the reader to make such a transfer.
- Sufficient 'thick descriptions' of the phenomenon are provided of the phenomenon under investigation to allow the readers to compare the instance under investigation with other, similar situations.
- Information about the research methodology (including the organisation where the research takes place; the number of participants; the data collection methods and the time period covered) is provided.

3.4.3 Dependability

This construct refers to the consistency of the data, and whether the findings would be consistent if the study was replicated in a similar context (Krefting 1991: 216). Shenton (2004: 7172) discusses the methods that can be employed to ensure dependability. The research processes should be provided in detail, thereby allowing future researchers to replicate the study, but not necessarily to gain the same results. Hence, the following strategies were utilised:

- In-depth coverage of the research design and its implementation is provided.
- The operational detail of the data-collection methods is provided.
- A reflexive appraisal of the project is provided (see Chapter 5).

3.4.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are a function solely of the participants and conditions of the research, rather than the characteristics of the

researcher (Krefting 1991: 216). As suggested by Shenton (2004: 72), my beliefs underpinning decisions made and methods selected are acknowledged in the research report (see Section 3.2.2 above).

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

As appropriate for qualitative research, the research design was tentative and open-ended, and allowed for emergent design (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 464). The shape of the research grew and changed according to the data that was collected.

3.5.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling is frequently used in qualitative sampling, whereby the researcher intentionally selects sites and individuals to understand the central phenomenon (Creswell 2012: 206). Participants were selected from the Faculty of Humanities as they were more likely to have had contact with students with learning disabilities (as described in Section 3.2.2 above). Initial participants were identified by asking the assistance of the DU at the university. Snowball sampling (Creswell 2012: 209), whereby the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled, was also utilised.

Sampling and interviews continued until data saturation had been reached, that is, the point at which the interviewees introduce no new perspectives (Groenewald 2004: 11). It was initially envisioned that eight to ten interviews would be conducted, however, after eight interviews it was evident that no new information would be obtained by conducting additional interviews. Maximum variation sampling took place (Creswell 2012: 207-8), individuals are selected that differ on a characteristic, to present the perspectives of individuals that represent the complexity of our society. Accordingly, participants were selected that I perceived to have differing levels of knowledge of and contact with students with learning disabilities. Thus, eight interviewees participated in the research, which included four support staff and four lecturers.

3.5.2 The researcher as instrument

In qualitative research, with its associated data collection methods of interviewing, field observations and document analysis, researchers tend to become the instruments through which data is collected. According to Chenail (2011: 255-6), researchers who wish to discover what is known about a particular phenomenon from the insiders' perspective, tend to structure their interviews with open-ended questions. However, if time is not spend on preparation of the field; or on the reflexivity of the researcher; or on the researcher ensuring that triangulation takes place, the researcher as instrument can be the greatest threat to trustworthiness.

Chenail (2011: 257) proposed that, in addition to the threat to trustworthiness, the researcher as instrument also raises concerns of bias. This bias can occur if the researcher's discomfort with the topic poses a threat to the truth value of data obtained; or if the researcher is not sufficiently prepared to conduct the research; or if the researcher interviews inappropriately. Accordingly, to counter these challenges in my research, a pilot interview was conducted and the data was triangulated with the literature. These methods are discussed below.

3.5.3 Data collection methods

3.5.3.1 Pilot study with key informant

A pilot study is a means of pre-testing a particular research instrument (Chenail 2011: 257). A key informant interview is an interview protocol with an individual who has special knowledge he or she is willing to share with the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 351). I decided to conduct my pilot interview with a key informant, with the aims of refining the interview guide; gaining knowledge of the Wits context; testing the recording apparatus and familiarise myself with the interview process. A staff member was purposely selected who had in-depth knowledge of learning disabilities. The interview proved instrumental in increasing my understanding of current staff practices at the university, and identifying areas for discussion in the interviews. During

the pilot interview, I asked for names of other staff members who might be suitable to interview. After the pilot interview, the Interview Guide (Appendix A) was refined.

3.5.3.2 *Interview guide*

For my research, I used an interview guide with predetermined (but not exclusionary) questions (Appendix A). According to Fick (2011: 112), an interview guide provides the orientation for the interviewer; however, the sequence and exact formulation of the questions may differ. As this was a phenomenological study, the questions focused on the perceptions of learning disabilities and the meanings that staff attributed to their perceptions. Questions were designed to elicit information on the individual's experiences, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, feelings and knowledge were asked. Accordingly, the questions are both probing and open-ended. With these guidelines in mind, the questions included in the interview guide interrogated what the participants know, understand, perceive and think about learning disabilities from their experiences (see Appendix A for details). They were also asked if they wanted to share anecdotes or other experiences, or if they had anything extra to add.

3.5.3.3 *Semi-structured interviews*

After conducting the pilot interview and refining the interview guide, I distributed emails to staff members in the Faculty of Humanities requesting them to participate in my research. An attempt was made to involve staff members from a variety of schools and disciplines, in both academic and support staff positions in the Faculty of Humanities.

Although semi-structured interviews are steered by an interview guide, the interviewer should probe and lead the discussion to a greater depth, and encourage answers beyond the general and superficial (Flick 2011: 113).

Thus, in my study, although an interview guide was used, the order in which the questions were asked, and the way in which they were phrased varied between participants. Not all questions were asked to all participants. The list of questions was edited at my discretion, according to how each interview was progressing. The duration of interviews varied from one participant to the other, but on average, the duration of

each was approximately one hour. After each interview, I wrote field notes of the interview experience. A description of this process follows:

3.5.3.4 *Field notes*

Groenewald (2004: 13-14) discusses the importance of 'memo-ing' in qualitative research. It is the researcher's fieldnote recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process. Groenewald (2004:13-14) suggests that researchers are easily absorbed in the data-collection process and may fail to reflect on what is happening. He says it is imperative that the researcher maintains a balance between descriptive notes and reflective notes, such as hunches, impressions, feelings, and so on.

After each interview, I wrote down my initial impressions, thoughts and feelings. After transcribing each interview, I added to the impressions with reflections and ideas. I also maintained a list of possible themes and data categories. These memos were helpful in the analysis phase of the research. This phase of the research is now described.

3.6 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

3.6.1 Recording and transcription of the interviews

As described in Section 3.3.1 above, informed consent was obtained from all participants (see Appendix B). All interviews were recorded using the Express Scribe App on my iPad. The recordings were saved to my computer and backed up on a flash disk. Each recording was transcribed verbatim and written up in Microsoft Word (2010). The transcriptions were stored with the recordings.

3.6.2 Interim analysis

Creswell (2012: 237) describes the steps involved in analysing and interpreting qualitative data. The process starts with organising the data and engaging in an initial exploration of the data through the process of coding. Then the codes are used to

develop a more general picture of the data and themes are identified. Once the themes are finalised, the data is represented using narratives. This is followed by making an interpretation of meaning by reflecting on the findings; and reflecting on the literature that might inform the findings. Finally, strategies are conducted to validate the accuracy of the findings.

Accordingly, an interim analysis using both the memos and transcripts was conducted to identify possible themes and patterns. The transcripts were coded using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas-TI. The process is similar to manual processing of data (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 379), and includes coding the text; processing the codes; recoding and creating themes.

As with manual processing of data, the process of coding and categorising was conducted in a cyclical manner. Initially, I looked at the research questions and coded the data according to the three main questions:

- What is the university staff's understanding of the concept of learning disabilities? This category was called: "What do the staff know about LD's".
- What are the prevailing attitudes of university staff towards students with learning disabilities? This category was called: "Prevailing Perceptions".
- What is their understanding of university policy, support systems and practice? This category was called: "Wits specific issues"

Two additional categories were initially identified:

- South African Challenges
- Reasonable accommodations

As the research themes and sub-themes became evident, the data was re-coded and re-categorised until I was satisfied that the information formed succinct themes. This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

3.6.3 Analysis

After finalising the data categories, the data was analysed into the four themes. Reflections on what was uncovered through the literature survey were made and conclusions were initiated. As this is a phenomenological study, the presentation of findings focuses on textual descriptions of both the participant's and researcher's experiences, followed by composite descriptions and the essence of the phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 382).

3.7 SUMMARY

This chapter describes the research active phase of my research. An overview of the research design is provided, followed by an explanation of the techniques that are utilised to ensure the ethics, trustworthiness and validity of the study. The various data collection methods are explained; and the process of collecting and analysing the data is described. The presentation of the data follows in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The main research question is: “what are the perceptions of university staff to students with learning disabilities?”

The previous chapter explained how the data was gathered. In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. Thereafter, the findings of the literature review are compared and contrasted to the major findings of the study (Creswell 2012: 81). The findings are presented by using the words of the participants, as is standard practice for a phenomenological study.

4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff at Wits University, four of the interviews were conducted with academic staff (i.e. lecturers) and four interviews were conducted with support staff. As described in Section 3.5.1, maximum variation sampling was used to select participants that I perceived to have a wide range of knowledge and experience with students with learning disabilities. Six of the participants were female and two were male. Five participants were white and three were Black, Asian or Coloured. The length of service to Wits ranged from one year to 12 years of service. The job portfolio of the participants ranged from secretarial to managerial. The table below represents the gender and race of the academic and support staff participants.

Table 4.1 Participant demographics

Academic staff demographics	Support staff demographics
Female, White	Female, Black
Female, Asian / Coloured	Male, White
Female, White	Female, White
Female, White	Male, Black

The findings of interviews, according to the four major categories are now presented.

4.3 CATEGORIES AND SUB-CATEGORIES

At the end of the analysis process, a number of categories and sub-categories were identified. These are presented in Table 1.

Table 4.2 Research categories and sub-categories

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY
Understanding of learning disability concepts and areas of concern	<i>Lack of knowledge</i> <i>Diagnosis</i> <i>Reasonable accommodations</i> <i>Universal Design</i> <i>What is it like to have an LD?</i> <i>Types of LD</i> <i>Concept of fairness</i> <i>Spelling</i> <i>Reaction to a new “sticker” system</i>
South African issues	<i>Multi languages</i> <i>School and the transition to university</i> <i>South Africa and disabilities</i>
Issues specific to Wits	<i>Advocacy of students with learning disabilities</i> <i>Improving staff knowledge of learning disabilities</i> <i>Perceptions of Wits services</i>
Challenges	<i>Academic challenges.</i> <i>Disclosure</i> <i>Categorising disabilities.</i>

The above Table 1 illustrates the main findings of the research.

4.3.1 Understanding of learning disability concepts and areas of concern

This category presents the participants' understanding of disability concepts. It demonstrates how they think a learning disability is diagnosed; what they think is meant by the terms 'reasonable accommodation' and 'universal design'; what they perceive it is like to have a learning disability; what types of learning disabilities they think there are; their concept of fairness, particularly with regards to spelling, and finally, it presents their reaction to a new way of marking examination scripts of students with learning disabilities.

4.3.1.1 *Lack of knowledge*

All of the participants admitted to having limitations in their own awareness with the concept of learning disabilities. Although a range of knowledge was evident, all participants expressed the limitations of their knowledge. The literature review (see Section 2.4) showed that the implementation of inclusion in South Africa is slow and partial (Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde 2012: 1-2), therefore, it is not surprising that the participants' knowledge is limited. This quotation demonstrates that their understanding is limited:

P1: I don't think many academic staff are aware of the non-verbal learning disabilities, and.. um.. the impact that it can have.

All except one of the participants had heard of the term 'learning disability', but participants found it difficult to articulate a clear definition, as demonstrated by these responses:

P1: ...anything that with either... like... hinder somebodies...somebodies learning or like, hinder their...be able to perform at their full potential, so, um... you know... something like dyslexia, to...maybe... struggling to... like.... comprehend things at the same pace as others.

P4: Um, someone who has, well, some difficulties in understanding, or like getting through their learning procedures.

One participant had not heard of the term 'learning disability':

P8: I have never heard of the term 'learning disability'. But the first thing that came into my mind was, maybe, maybe people with disabilities, maybe studying and learning how to deal with it, but I don't know what it is actually about.

Some participants had a clearer understanding of the term 'learning disability', for example:

P5: My understanding of a learning disability is basically a student who is able to comprehend information but may take a longer process.

This participant also had a clearer understanding of what a learning disability is and alluded to possible causes:

P5: And um, it's not that the student is not able to process, it's that the motor neurons are working on different levels because the vestibular system is trying to balance, and... it's those little nodes and hairs, they are moving to create, what happens is that the body uses other survival skills, so what happens is the body is so busy trying to use survival skills in concentrating to focus the eye or the hand or whatever, that the brain is not being utilised to its maximum capacity when it is processing information.

This quotation clearly demonstrates thinking that is rooted in the medical model of disability (see Section 2.2.1).

One participant thought that staff might think of learning disabilities as something that only affects children:

P6: ...it's also a lot ...um...of university academic staff that think of learning disabilities as more something that that happens to kids in childhood and should be resolved by now.

Two participants thought that learning disabilities can be outgrown. One said that:

P6: It's also important for us to be aware that...um...with learning disabilities they can be outgrown.

However, the participant went on to say that the students “...found the coping strategies to work through it.” Therefore, it is not that the student had outgrown the disability, but rather found the appropriate mechanisms to cope with the learning disability.

The idea that a learning disability can be outgrown is echoed in this exchange:

I: So then what about somebody with dyslexia coming into university, how do you think they would be affected?

P3: I think that person would have adjusted, because throughout the primary school and high school, it's like – how many years?

I: Twelve years.

P3: Twelve years, it's a very long time to adjust and get into the mix of things and kind of catch up if you have to and you know you have coping mechanisms. So I think it's not an issue if you come to university, I really don't think it is.

The above examples also demonstrate thinking that is based on the medical model of disability (as described in Section 2.2.1), wherein a learning disability is viewed in mechanistic terms and requires ‘fixing’.

However, as was seen in the literature review, a learning disability is not outgrown, it continues over the lifespan of an individual (see Section 2.2.4). Thus, it is evident that many misconceptions exist about learning disabilities.

Many of the participants had no experience with students with learning disabilities. One participant said:

P2: I have only been here a couple of years, and I haven't actually experienced a student with a learning disability myself.

None of the participants had a clear understanding of the assistive technology that can be used to support students with learning disabilities, as is demonstrated by these quotations:

P2: There are a lot of tools, you know, computer technology tools to help. I don't know a lot about them, I just know that they exist.

P4: I think one of my students make use of the disability unit, like I think there is a computer room, so she goes there often, sometimes she just borrows something, like a laptop extension cord.

One of the participants indicated that they would like to know more about learning disabilities:

P2: Umm, yeah, I mean it would be nice to know more about what to do and who the resource people would be, and be willing to talk about issues.

A few of the participants admitted to knowing very little about learning disabilities and how best to support students:

P1: And I think a lot of us are quite ignorant, because we go through, you know, we are aware of students that are, you know, in inverted commas (gestures) "normal", so we are not aware, we have students with disabilities come in, or we don't notice it as much.

P6: I don't think many academic staff are aware of the non-verbal learning disabilities, and.. um.. the impact that it can have.

It is evident from the above quotations that, in general, knowledge of learning disabilities is limited and misconceptions do exist. The difficulties of defining learning disabilities were discussed in the literature review (see Section 2.2.2) and it is clear that participants do not know much about the concepts (such as universal design and reasonable accommodations) surrounding learning disabilities. Misconceptions of university staff of learning disabilities (as explored in the literature review in Section 2.5) impact on the experience of students' with learning disabilities. Misconceptions also surround the diagnosis of learning disabilities. The concepts surrounding learning disabilities, and the misconceptions thereof, are discussed below.

4.3.1.2 *Diagnosis*

The controversial issues surrounding the diagnosis of learning disabilities are discussed in Section 2.2.6. Vickers (2010: 4) showed that learning disabilities are poorly defined and that diagnoses varied according to the specialist making the diagnosis and the demographic group of the person. The interviews with participants revealed that the participants knew very little of the tests available to diagnose learning disabilities. Some of the participants thought that a learning disability would be diagnosed at school, as demonstrated by the following quotation:

P1: I mean I think that in an ideal world at school level if the teacher picked it up or a teacher, you know the problem is the teachers aren't experts either.

Some participants thought that psychological testing was required to diagnose a learning disability:

P2: Well, there is psychological testing, um, I really don't know how they are diagnosed in South Africa.

P3: I think child therapists would diagnose such things, 'cause I am not sure, I am not sure teachers would readily diagnose that.

One respondent thought that students might become aware of their learning disabilities at university level:

P4: So it looks like, they don't know in the beginning, they become aware through the process and the years in the university.

Coles (1978: 315) maintains that most tests used to diagnose learning disabilities are based on the medical model of disability. As discussed in Section 2.2.1, the bio-psycho-social model of disability will allow for meaningful changes to be made to the education environment. However, until such time as diagnostic tests are taken into account individual strengths and weaknesses not detected by standardised tests, the process of assessing whether there is a learning disability or not will remain a complex issue (Siegle 1999: 316).

4.3.1.3 Reasonable accommodation

Accommodating students with learning disabilities in higher education is discussed in Section 2.5.1. Cottrell (2003: 130-1) argues that students who identify and use their own strategies were more likely to succeed in their studies, and consequently, students should be encouraged to find what works for them. I asked the research participants to reflect on what they knew about accommodating students with learning disabilities. None of the participants had heard of the term: 'reasonable accommodation', although most could guess correctly at what it means, as demonstrated by this exchange:

I: Have you heard of the term 'reasonable accommodation'?

P4: No, not really as a term.

I: What do you think is meant by it?

P4: You are expected to provide some 'reasonable accommodation' if they then agree they have a learning disability.

Vickers (2010: 3) showed that although the diagnosis and accommodation of students with learning disabilities has increased the performance and opportunities for some students, the perceived legitimacy of the diagnoses and accommodations is controversial (see Section 2.2.6). One participant gave an example of a colleague who

said that students just want extra time so they find loopholes in the system; therefore they go to the DU and receive the extra time but are not actually deserving of it. It is this type of misconception that can be damaging to students with learning disabilities.

4.3.1.4 *Universal design*

Universal design is particularly relevant to the higher education environment (Burgstahler 2001: 3) and can increase inclusion of all students without need for special accommodations to be made (see Section 2.6.5). None of the participants had heard of the term 'universal design'. Most had this reaction to the question:

I: Do you know what is meant by universal design?

P1: I have no idea, sorry.

One participant did guess:

P5: I have never heard of the concept as a concept. But um, if it was linked specifically to something like learning disabilities it would be a universal concept across the board across the university in terms of how disabilities are handled or approached or dealt with, within a three- of four-year curriculum.

One participant acknowledged that having a student with a disability in the classroom had motivated her to re-consider her teaching practice:

P1: And that was good for me, because sometimes just having that like, that experience there has really helped me like, realise that you can't just stick to one kind of method.

The participant also said having awareness was a good thing because it made you realise that: "Actually, you know, your way isn't like the only way."

4.3.1.5 *What is it like to have a learning disability?*

Participants were asked to reflect on what they thought it would be like to have a learning disability, and used words such as ‘frustrating’, ‘traumatising’ and ‘harrowing’. Two participants thought it would affect the confidence of the student. This quotation demonstrates the perception:

P1: And I think it's also like the confidence side, you know, the emotional side. It can be quite traumatizing for someone if they had dyslexia or a slight learning disability or they are aware of the fact that they don't learn or they don't perform like others.

4.3.1.6 *Types of learning disabilities*

Learning disabilities (see Section 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) is the term used to describe conditions that cause significant difficulties in perception, including dyslexia. Participants were questioned on their understanding of the different types of learning disabilities. As discussed in Section 2.3.2, there are four major disability categories (visual; hearing; motor and cognitive disabilities). One participant demonstrated confusion as to these categories:

P3: Um, I think a learning disability is let's say, if the child is slow, or if the child is un-attentive, or maybe if the child has a physical disability, like maybe blindness or is partially deaf, or something like that, something that will hamper their normal.

Half of the participants identified dyslexia as a learning disability. None could name any other learning disabilities, although some did consider ADHD to be a learning disability:

P1: Definitely, I think ADHD would affect the learning, ja I think so.

P6: I would say it's a disorder that impacts on learning, and.. um...therefore, I would kind of categorise it but it would still be

separate 'cause in the real...in the actual terminology...it doesn't fall under learning disabilities...

As can be seen from the above examples, identifying different types of learning disabilities is challenging for most participants. Vickers (2010: 4) showed that, according to the lay person, it would seem that several of the learning disabilities are vaguely defined. Thus, the finding that university staff are unclear about the types of learning disabilities, as well as how to define learning disabilities, is consistent with what is demonstrated in the literature review.

4.3.1.7 *Concept of fairness*

Participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of what they regard as “fair” when accommodating students with learning disabilities. The literature review revealed the wide range support methods that are available (see Section 2.6). Extra time is one mode of support. Most participants agreed that students should be allowed to have extra time in exams. However, students with learning disabilities using computers are in particular to write their examinations emerged as a contentious issue, and are demonstrated by these opinions:

P2: Well, that...that [using a computer during an exam] is a little bit more fringy. That is another accommodation, we did allow people to use um, a dictionary, for some disabilities. Um, the thing is that you can get more from a dictionary than just spelling. You know, you can get definitions for words. So maybe if there was a special dictionary that only addressed spelling, that could be useful.

P3: I think so, as long as there is no internet connection. (Laughter). Then they can do all sorts of things.

One participant, when asked if students with learning disabilities should be allowed to use voice-recognition software to write their examinations, said that students should be allowed *less* time:

P3: if an exam was two hours, then their time would have to be shorter obviously. But I think, because speaking is easier than writing, you know, thinking and writing everything down. That would be nice hey?

One participant said that making accommodations “leveled the playing fields”. Another had this to say about the concept of fairness:

P1: Well, I mean, that’s the thing, the problem is having a disability, it that fair? I mean, if we were all cookie cutters it would be great, then you could say “this is fair, this is not”, but the thing is, if you do have a disability, how fair is it for you to be marked the same standard, whereas you are lacking in something that somebody has, the ability to spell, then...then is it fair to be marked as strictly as somebody else. Although, having said that, you know, as long as it doesn’t give an excuse to not try and develop and improve or work on your disability.

The quotation above demonstrates, once again, how perceptions are rooted in the medical model.

As discussed in the Section 2.5.1, participants in research studies about disabilities are often reluctant admit to admit to their criticisms of disabilities. To circumvent asking my participants direct and personal questions that might elicit criticism of disabilities, I asked all participants to reflect on what they thought of their colleagues’ perceptions. Three participants thought that their colleagues had good perceptions of students with learning disabilities, and that their practices and accommodations were fair, as demonstrated by these quotations:

P2: We had instructors that did not know a lot about it but they knew that some students needed extra time on a test, but, um, I never observed them marking them harsher. They might have been resistant to it, you know ‘oh they shouldn’t have it, that’s not fair’, you know, but I don’t think they actually marked it differently.

P5: It's never been brought up, ever. It [extra time] has never been questioned, at staff meetings when we allocate and we are told you have got two students if you are coordinating the exam, you are the examiner, and you need to get the extra papers from the exams office, no-one has ever questioned why or what, it is just standard practice.

These participants expressed the notion that some staff were not so accommodating:

P1: I don't know, with the brief exposure I have had with some lecturers up in main campus, it's like 'No, that's the way I teach! Fit in or...go!' And then you know that impatience of like 'Oh come on, why don't you get it?'

P6: ...and she [a colleague] just turned around and said "Oh ja, those students that that need, you know...that just want extra time and then they find loopholes in the system..."

Thus, from the excerpts above, we can conclude that some staff is more accommodating and others are not so accepting. This is consistent with the literature (see Section 2.5.1), which showed that many staff are ambivalent about whether the accommodations made to students with learning disabilities are fair to students without accommodations. In addition, the literature review showed how staff misconceptions about disabilities contribute to the difficulties experienced by students (see Section 2.5). The study by Ryan (2007: 440) demonstrated that lecturers did not to appreciate the impact that their own role had in contributing to the students' difficulties and the students' feeling of alienation in academic environments. The participants' responses indicate that some negative misconceptions do exist. However, the difficulty of determining what staff *really* do think of students with learning disabilities should be acknowledged, as they might be hesitant to express any criticism of students with disabilities or the accommodations that are made for them (Vickers 2010: 9).

4.3.1.8 *Spelling*

The literature review showed that spelling is often affected in students with learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia (see Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.5). The interviews with

participants showed that spelling is another area where a wide range of perceptions exist. Participants were asked if spelling was a contributing factor when marking exams and essays. Most expressed that spelling was a problematic matter. Some participants said that it depended on the activity and the subject. Most agreed that the ability to construct an argument and apply theoretical constructs was more important than spelling. Spelling was considered to be more important in a language subject than in other humanities courses. These excerpts demonstrate the complexity of the issue of spelling:

P1: ...it really depends on what kind of things you are doing, it's like, if it's more like a fluency activity, you are looking at what the ideas, the organisation of ideas come into it, where grammar does come into it, if you are looking at a strictly accuracy exercise, then we would mark for spelling. But, at the same time, then if we were aware, say, I am just going back to dyslexia, if we were aware of that we could be a little more accommodating.

P6: It [spelling] shouldn't be counted against. Unless it's an English programme, or a French programme, a French course, when they are marking on spelling, but if a student is studying psychology, and they write a paper, and they spell something wrong, that shouldn't count against them.

It was acknowledged by some of the participants, that for the general student population, spelling is more important in essays than in examinations, as the students have access to spellcheck facilities on computers. One participant used a marking rubric and allocated a specified number of marks to the overall language. Two participants acknowledged that all students should be allowed to use a spellcheck or dictionary to write exams. A few participants referred students with poor spelling to the Wits Writing Centre for assistance. However, a system for marking the examination scripts of students with learning disabilities is used in the UK. This system is explained in detail in the following section.

4.3.1.9 *Reaction to a new marking system*

As the researcher, I wanted the participants to think of an issue they might not have had to consider before, to gauge their reactions to new information on disabilities. I told each participant of the “sticker system” that is used in the UK. Examination scripts, when they get handed in, have colour-coded stickers to flag to the examiner certain things about the writer. A particular colour might mean that the examiner should ignore spelling mistakes because the writer has dyslexia. All examiners are provided with training prior to using the system.

Initially, most of the respondents thought it to be fair but all expressed reservations. One thought that it could lead to misuse:

P1: Because that could, could lead to “Okay well I am disabled, so that is it”. Or “I have a learning disability so put that sticker on, it’s not my fault, so you have to accommodate me”. So this is the problem, it’s a fine line, you have to be fair in assessment, but at the same time, you have to be accommodating.

One participant was concerned about the impression it would create for the marker:

P4: As long as the instruction is clear what the marker can ignore and what is not allowed. Because I don’t want the person who is marking to have a special mindset about “this person has disabilities, therefore...” I think it might be useful.

One participant thought that if the students were accommodated by being given extra time or being able to use a computer to write the exam, it would be unnecessary and said if procedures are in place, then is it not necessary for the lecturer to know:

P6: I mean, one has to look at, is that going to be fair advantage then...’Oh because there is a sticker I should give them more marks’? But obviously, like spelling, spelling would be the main reason why a sticker would be there. But at university, spelling isn’t... shouldn’t be marked down.

Thus it is evident that the issues surrounding writing and spelling at tertiary level are complex. In South Africa, where students' first language is very often not English, the complexity is compounded. Issues specific to the South African context are discussed in the next section.

4.3.2 South African issues

'Problems specific to South Africa' emerged as a major theme. This theme consists of three sub-categories, namely: 'multi languages'; 'school and the transition to university'; and 'South Africa and disabilities'. The theme investigates the perceptions of disabilities in South Africa and the challenges that are specific to our country and education system.

4.3.2.1 Multi languages

South Africa has 11 official languages. However, the language of instruction at Wits is English. Therefore, many students with learning disabilities will not only have to contend with the specific challenges of their disorder, but will also have to cope with writing in a language which is not their mother-tongue. The following quotations demonstrate the complex nature of language in South Africa:

P1: It would be interesting to see how... how, like what the dyslexia is like in somebodies more native language, than into, like, a second or third language, I don't know, I mean it could be, I actually, it might have an impact, it might not, just because it's a different language system, it might not filter it so much, I don't know, I am sure learning a language would have a, if you are dyslexic, it would really influence the learning of the next language, I would think.

P2: When students are learning a language when they have a learning disability, it's really intense, because, not only are they getting frustrated just with a new language, but, um, if they can't learn the way

everyone else does in a classroom, then it just adds that much more complexity to the task of learning.

P1: Because the learning disability surely would affect it too, you know? If you have a learning disability in your first language, surely it would influence how you like, learn you your second or third language?

Kamwangamalu (2007:268) considers English in itself is a barrier to upward social mobility for many black South Africans. Thus, the use of English, and its implied compounded impact on students with learning disabilities, presents a complex subject.

4.3.2.2 School and the transition to university

Although South Africa has an inclusive school system (see Section 2.4), the perception exists that, in practice, schools are not managing to translate the policy of inclusion into practice:

P2: I think maybe teachers.... I don't know, I am not really familiar with the teaching environment, the schooling environment, but I think the teachers are so pressurised, it's just not happening.

P3: A lot of the time you find that a teacher doesn't have time to, to kind of wait for you, you know, maybe they can do extra lessons after school, but still, its outside of the normal class environment.

P2: ...we are supposed to have an inclusive schooling education....we have policies in place for that, so, but...

The transition from school to university is also perceived to be problematic:

P1: ...now you jump from matric to first year and you don't even know what's going on in the beginning, in the first place, and now you having to

like, and some people might not have been diagnosed, or it might not have been picked up, like mild dyslexia...

P5: South Africa is very unique because we have such very different backgrounds in terms of our education system and you pick it up in first year, it's the hardest year to teach because its um, so diverse, just the concept of, student are from such different backgrounds they are dealing with very different issues, they have students that are dealing with the city, they have students that are dealing with the language, there are some students that are dealing with the city, there are some students that have complete freedom and they finally are free, you know they are in a very different head space, and it comes through in the class, and how they process and how they engage with the lecture, some are petrified and they don't say a word, and even if they are lost they will remain lost because they won't communicate anything, whereas then there are others that will over communicate and um, it's not necessarily about a learning disability, but about it could also be, it's just about the environment, they are out of the school environment.

One participant did not think that making the transition from school to university was an issue, as the students should have adjusted to their disability by now:

P3: Twelve years [of schooling], it's a very long time to adjust and get into the mix of things and kind of catch up if you have to and you know you have coping mechanisms. So I think it's not an issue if you come to university, I really don't think it is.

The pilot interview revealed the complexities of students enrolling for qualifications that require Mathematics as an admission criterion. In addition, the situation is even more prejudiced towards students with disabilities, because bursaries are often not available to students in Humanities, as can be seen by this quotation:

P6: And you know, there are so many bursaries out there for students with disabilities within commerce and engineering and that, but... like...

those students are getting bursaries [edited]...there is a student who is studying music who is blind who would benefit from a bursary and we asked them and they said not they won't do that.

Inequalities also affect students coming to university:

P6: But the huge majority of students with learning disabilities are coming from advantaged backgrounds where they are going to private schools where there are resources to go to educational psychologists where they are getting assessed. So the students from rural schools that, um, that they are not getting that kind of exposure, so they are not coming through.

South Africa has a complex history of inequality, and has its own unique context. This context is examined in the next section.

4.3.2.3 *South Africa and disabilities*

When asked to reflect on disability practices in South Africa as compared to overseas, there was no consistent view as to whether our practices compare favorably or not. One participant expressed the idea that, as a country, our practices are favorable in comparison to those overseas:

P4: I don't see particular differences so far, and there they have students with learning disabilities and here and there they both have something that corresponds to a disability unit. And they both offer support.

Another said that South Africa was “*catching up, but it also depends very much on the university.*” This participant went on to say:

P6: The issues they are dealing with there are very similar to the issues that we are dealing with. And I think that the support we have in place are also quite similar. But, ja, I mean... (short laugh) the support and the amount of students in overseas universities is much bigger.

One participant did not know if our practices are comparable or not:

P1: I won't lie to you, I actually have no idea, I assume that things are maybe a little bit less developed, I don't have any facts to back that up.

One participant expressed concern about the lack of awareness in South Africa, and said:

P2: I know the US is really on top of it in term of addressing learning disabilities" and that "I don't see a lot about it [learning disabilities], it concerns me, it makes me think it's not in everybody's awareness. I don't know if inclusive school practices is even an issue here [in South Africa]?

The same participant said that:

P2: It seems like South Africa, in the universities, doesn't really have interactive learning. Student-centred approaches are not really adopted yet. In the US, student-centred learning is a lot more predominant in universities.

Another participant had just been to a country in Europe and compared services to students with disabilities there to South Africa:

P5: ...so there clearly is a difference in the systems, but I don't know enough about the systems to tell you what it is.

However, when compared to other African countries, two of the participants thought that South African disability services were superior to those elsewhere in Africa. One participant said:

P6: A few weeks ago we had a benchmarking exercise, two lecturers, or two support staff from a university in [Africa], a major university there, came to benchmark the disability unit, and they hadn't even heard of learning disabilities.

The other participant said that that the inclusive South African schooling system was better than the “special school” system that she had experienced in the other African country. She said that:

P3: So I think, I think that South Africa is doing it the right way in accommodating everybody in the normal learning environment, as opposed to having special learning environments for special people.

One participant had a very negative perception of certain practices in the US. The quotation also demonstrates the prevalence of the medical model of disability:

P1: I was actually watching this documentary, a Willie Theroux documentary looking at kids in America, and they were looking at them like, they were medicating them, as young as six. So I don't know how much better things are overseas, they were very quick to medicate them for like, ADHD, for example, and, and like, rather than maybe tackle the practical issues, the real issues, so I don't know, there is like maybe a trend of like, overseas “Oh you have ADHD, okay, pop a pill”, or “oh, you are depressed but you are only six years old, pop a pill”, so I don't know if that is a common practice that would impact even learning disabilities.

South Africa has its own unique history and circumstances that impact on the provision of services to students with learning disabilities. Wits also has its own issues, which are discussed in the next section.

4.3.3 Issues specific to Wits

‘Issues specific to Wits’ emerged as a theme. The categories that make up this theme are the advocacy of students with learning disabilities; improving staff knowledge of learning disabilities and perceptions of Wits services. The wide array of services available to students with disabilities at Wits is presented in Section 2.8. The perceptions and knowledge of these services is presented in the section that follows.

4.3.3.1 *Advocacy of students with learning disabilities*

Participants were also requested to give their opinion about who, within the university structures, should be advocating for students with disabilities and increasing awareness of disability issues. Most of the participants thought that the DU should be responsible for advocacy, and is demonstrated by this quotation:

P2: They [the disability unit] could create awareness, lecturers, how to address special needs.

Two participants thought that the university should play a bigger role in advocating and creating awareness. One participant thought that the Vice-Chancellor should ultimately responsible for advocacy:

P1: I guess they need to have some kind of body that is going to advocate for it, but it has to start at the top, surely, with the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, it has got to start somewhere.

Murray, Flannery and Wren (2008: 73), in a study of university staff members' attitudes towards students with learning disabilities at the tertiary level, concluded that a substantial number of respondents of their investigation indicated the need for professional development and training regarding students with learning disabilities in general, as well as strategies to support the students. From the interviews conducted for this research study, it appears that there is an equivalent need for training at Wits University. How such training should be implemented is discussed in the next section.

4.3.3.2 *Improving Wits staff knowledge of learning disabilities*

One of long-term research aims is to improve staff knowledge of learning disabilities. Participants were asked to consider how Wits staff could best increase their knowledge of learning disabilities. Participants had varied views on this, but most mentioned workshops as a possibility.

One participant thought that staff should take ownership themselves:

P1: I think we should take ownership ourselves, because I think sometimes, not that we are lazy but....you know, we have got other things going on, so we don't take the time. But it would be good if there were like, more like awareness, like, workshops or that people would come into different faculties.

The same participant also felt that there needed to be more exposure and awareness, and said that *"if you don't know, then you don't know or really think about it. Then you don't know the questions to ask, you don't know if you don't know, you don't know what to ask if you don't know..."*

Another participant thought that all staff should attend at least one session:

P4: I think everyone needs like, basic, not training, but at least one session, all the staff members. Because I never received any training, not training, what is the word? Like explaining, what types of learning disabilities and then what you should expect what. And things like that. I just learnt as I encounter individuals.

One participant thought that the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Development (CLTD) should be responsible:

P5: And I think that there should be some kind of interaction from CLTD because for example at CLTD, there are courses for new supervisors, there are courses for lecturers, there are courses for to refresh supervision, so you know there are all these thing... if you are dealing with specifically students with learning disabilities, they should be able to offer.

This participant thought that in-house training would be useful:

P2: I think in-house training would be useful for all the staff and lecturers. And then for students, I mean it could be addressed..... it

could trickle down, like maybe the lecturers could increase awareness in the classroom.

One participant thought it would be useful if staff were to interact with students with learning disabilities:

P6: Maybe, staff having to host disabled students, having them spend time in your office, or, try and get the staff to interact with them.

The importance of educating lecturers on disability support is discussed in Section 2.5.1. Students with disabilities, as shown in the recent study by Matshedisho (2010: 732), recommends that that it is a matter of educating lecturers about disability support. The author postulates that, in South Africa, because of the discretion that academics consider they have on disability support, the teaching and learning of students with disabilities will remain a challenge (Matshedisho 2010: 738).

Since the research aims to understand the attitudes and perceptions of staff, which consequently affect the way in which interventions are implemented, the current staff perceptions of university services are presented below.

4.3.3.3 Perceptions of Wits services

The lack of awareness of disability services is demonstrated by these extracts:

I: Do you know about any Wits support services for students?

P1. I actually don't, to be honest.

I: What do you know about Wit's support services for students with disabilities?

P2: I know they have them! (laughter). I have walked past the Offices! But I honestly don't know what they offer.

P8: Services? I am not aware. I know there is a disability unit, I know it is on the ground floor. But I am not aware of any of the services they get.

P5: I would not even know if there is a centre for learning disabilities at Wits, I have been here for 15 years and somewhere on the intranet I am sure it exists, but if it exists I don't know.

The pilot interview with a key informant established the services that actually providing for students with learning disabilities at Wits. The DU assists in coordinating extra time for students, but does not make the decision as to whether extra time is granted. The Health and Wellness Centre conducts assessments and make referrals to Occupational Therapists. It is up to the faculties to make the decision to grant a student extra time or not. The Writing Centre assists students with reading and writing skills. Software to convert speech to text and text to speech is available through the DU. Reading programmes and other support programmes such as stress management; coping skills; writing exams; mind-mapping; working with students on an individual basis to enhance coping mechanisms are conducted by the DU.

A dedicated Learning Disabilities Coordinator is employed full-time by the university. During the pilot interview, the specific services of the DU were established. Previously, Wits staff members were introduced to the DU and its resources at an Orientation Session for all new employees. This practice was discontinued and it became voluntary for staff to attend Disability Awareness sessions. According to the key-informant, there is an increasing trend for University Schools to request the DU to provide awareness training for their staff. The DU also has screening software to detect learning disabilities.

Participants were asked to reflect on what services Wits *should* provide to students with disabilities. There was not much consensus in their responses. Two participants thought that a resource person would be useful:

P1: I think just um, like support, or knowing that there is support, um doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be there 24 hours but I think if there was like, a dedicated resource, or a dedicated support.. like...person or people that they knew that they could go to - to seek assistance, I think that would be helpful.

P2: Well, I think it would help if there was maybe some kind of counseling or advising, just to have a resource as to how to survive on a campus that might not be that inclusive.

One participant specifically mentioned the general lack of care:

P1: I think that, there needs to be some kind of level playing field or interest with staff, I wonder how much, it's not just teacher, it's also administration and all of that, because, I think there is a general lack of care, in a lot of places.

The Writing Centre was perceived to be a resource for students with learning disabilities by one participant:

P5: And then they also go to, for example, they go to, they are not strong they will go to the writing centre.

One participant was not confident that Wits was supporting students with learning disabilities:

P5: I don't think Wits is addressing the issue at all, those students are just getting lost in the system.

None of the participants were aware of the Wits Disability Policy, as these quotations demonstrate:

I: Do you know if there is a policy at Wits?

P2: No, I assume there is? But I don't know anything about it.

P3: Disability policy? No. I am sure it's among the policies but it's not one we hear about all the time.

I: And do you know if there is a policy for students and staff?

P4: There must be.

P5: Not that I know of. There probably is one.

I: But it's never come your way?

P5: It's never come my way.

Thus, from the evidence presented in the literature review (see Section 2.8) and from the interview with the key informant, it is evident that Wits offers many types of support to students with learning disabilities. However, these are not generally known by the staff. This is a major challenge for the university. Challenges emerged as a theme in the research. This theme is discussed below.

4.3.4 Challenges

The theme of challenges is subdivided into 3 categories, namely: 'academic challenges'; 'disclosure' and 'categorising disabilities'. Although writing and spelling are also major challenges, these are discussed at length in 'prevailing perceptions' (see Section 4.3.1.8).

4.3.4.1 Academic challenges

Participants were asked to consider what academic challenges students with learning disabilities would encounter in higher education. Participants recognised that the learners would find comprehension, academic language, writing, time-management and assessment as challenging.

This extract shows demonstrates the challenges:

P1: Ja, I mean, I think it would challenge like their comprehension of like, I mean, especially in an academic environment, I think to read so much. If you have some kind of disorder, say like, you have dyslexia, it's going to influence not only their speed, but their comprehension, so things might take them a lot longer than other students...um...just you know in terms of actual production of writing for example, that could be affected.

This participant also acknowledged that academic language and context were challenging:

P2: Um, the academic challenges.... well... I mean, academic language is very complex, and very dense, and very abstract, and, if you have any kind of learning disability, that is just gonna compound the issues they might already have. Because, um, part of you know, making learning easier for students with disabilities is to contextual things, and um, maybe offering different styles, like, more visuals, and in the academic environment, that is just non-existent really, so, you have this huge text book, and its dense, and, you know, doesn't have... it doesn't really offer a lot of alternatives.

This quotation is an example of social model thinking, whereby the participant acknowledges that the environment should be modified to accommodate students with learning disabilities.

The same sentiment is also expressed in this quotation:

P4: I think... well I only have 2 or 3 experiences with learning disability students, but I think one of them, they did understand the lectures, but they just could not explain it in their own words.

The participant also shared this anecdote that demonstrates the complexities of assessing students with learning disabilities:

P4: So, that particular student couldn't really write any argument, but I think that she understood the concept, the basic concept. And she could talk to me, it was fine, but when it comes to like, writing it down, it was very difficult for her. And obviously most of the academic assessment is based on writing so that was very difficult, how can I assess this student? Whenever she came to me she was brilliant, she could talk to me and I can tell that she understood certain concepts but I cannot really prove that she has understood because her writing is not really, doesn't match.

This anecdote by the same participant showed how difficult it is to assess a student with a learning disability:

P4: I mean, it's not a learning disability, but I used to have a deaf student, and sometimes they can't just cope with writing (identifying data removed), so they just sign their assignment, and then it was clear because they can clearly express themselves in sign language but not in written (identifying data removed). But there are students with learning disabilities that don't even have that way.

Writing is clearly perceived as a major challenge, as this extracts demonstrate:

P5: The actual writing [is challenging]. Putting the thoughts into practice in the writing.

One participant thought that time-management and self-esteem issues were challenging. The literature review showed that time-management is a key aspect for success for students with learning disabilities (see Section 2.6.2).

Large class size was identified as an element that would be challenging to students with learning disabilities by one participant:

P5: I think the big classes – you lose more students in the big classes just because, either they are too afraid to ask in the lecture,

then they may not come for consultation. Some of them don't. Then they just get lost. And I think that is why also at university it is difficult to pick up.

Other implications for teaching and learning are demonstrated by these comments:

P1: And especially with your teaching, then you would be a lot more are, you could like factor that into the type of lessons that you do, you might think, okay, this person struggles with dyslexia, let's get them working in a group where maybe they are like, the presenter, as opposed to the writer, something like that. I think it would help, I think so.

P2: Um, so, for example, if they have trouble writing, then maybe they would have an opportunity to have an interview or assessment.

P6: I think maybe their awareness on teaching methods that they think are most appropriate, and you know, the awareness on, if they have made themselves accessible to being approached by students with disabilities, although that's not always easy.

The literature review presented various cognitive aspects that are affected by learning disabilities (Section 2.2.5) as well as different methods of providing support to students with learning disabilities (Section 2.6.3). The academic challenges present by the participants are consistent with those found in the literature, and include time-management; writing; self-esteem issues and assessment.

4.3.4.2 Disclosure

Disclosure (students revealing to university staff that they have a disability) is another contentious issue. At Wits University, it is voluntary for students to disclose if they have a disability or not. However, they have to disclose if they

require accommodations to be made. Learning disabilities are “hidden” disabilities, and this is also challenging:

P1: You see, and with somebody with a visual or a mobility or a hearing impairment, very often you are aware, you know, because you can see it, but with a learning disability you don't know, so you could have students with dyslexia in your class.

P4: So maybe the same will like happen to these students with learning disabilities, just because the disability is kind of invisible.

Most of the participants acknowledged that disclosure would be advantageous in allowing for reasonable accommodations to be made, but that it could lead to discrimination:

P2: I mean, that is a tough one, because if they disclose, it will help them receive more benefits, perhaps, if that system is in place that allows for that, then... the thing is, it could lead to labelling.

P3: I think people would have pre-conceived notions, but then I think it shouldn't affect the admission and the normal running of things in the school, it's just about accommodating the student just a little bit, making everybody kind of understand, ok, you know, of what it is, it's not being prejudiced toward the person, not accommodating them, because they are special or what, it's just something normal it happens, I mean, a lot of people could have... you can try change people's mind's but it's not a guarantee that they will understand.

One participant recognised that disclosure was a complex issue, in that it could have both positive and negative implications:

P3: Ja it could lead to labeling, but its two ways, it could lead to labeling in the negative way, that the student would be teased and ignored, and they would just be the only one there...not... because a

lot of the time students want to be in a clique or whatever. Or it could influence, like, in a positive way, where everybody is accommodating them, going the extra mile to be nice and trying to understand what it is really, so I think ja, it's a give and take.

One participant thought that students with disabilities were fearful that disclosure could lead to labelling by both peers and staff.

P6: ...or their fear is that...um...they might be labelled more by their lecturer or their peers.

The reasons for students not disclosing a learning disability when entering university education are discussed in Section 2.3.2. Fear of exclusion, not knowing they have a learning disability and not understanding implications are all explanations given by Cottrell (2003:126-7) as to why students don't declare a learning disability. It seems that disclosure is a complex matter with many facets that need consideration when making the choice to disclose or not.

4.3.4.3 *Categorising disabilities*

The four main types of disabilities are described in Section 2.3.2. One phenomenon that I noticed in most of the interviews is that the participants tended (albeit inadvertently) to group the disability categories together. It was made clear in the Participant Information Sheet and prior to each interview that perceptions of *learning disabilities* was being investigated. But most of the participants grouped disabilities together. These extracts validate the phenomenon:

P1: I guess there are varying degrees, do you mean... learning disabilities in the sense of like... um... intellect, that kind of thing.... Or do you mean, like...physical disabilities? Because even something like being deaf or being blind, can be like... can hinder somebody's learning.

P3: Um, I think a learning disability is let's say, if the child is slow, or if the child is un-attentive, or maybe if the child has a physical disability, like maybe blindness or is partially deaf, or something like that.

I: Can you name a learning disability?

P8: Blindness, hearing, sight and.... Someone with a mental disorder would not be allowed to study, would they?

The problems of defining and categorising disabilities are presented in the literature review (see Sections 2.2.2 and 2.3.2). The concept of ADHD as a learning disability is complex. Hence, staff are not clear if ADHD should be classified as a learning disability or not:

P1: Ja, definitely, and I think the problem is like, you know, you find that with children, they are very quick to diagnose them and like, give them medication, but the problem is that sometimes they are misdiagnosed, but also, like adults, a lot of adults.

One participant thought that having ADHD would be challenging:

P2: ...if they have Attention Deficit, and the lecturer, they are just speaking for an entire lecture and they just listen, um, that can be really challenging I would think.

One participant had clearly investigated the issue and thought that there was often confusion between ADHD and concentration:

P5: And that is, what I have read and what I have heard, is that it is not so much linked, a lot of scholars and students that are classified with ADD or ADHD are not necessarily ADD or ADHD, they have concentration problems not because they are ADD, they have concentration problems because the vestibular system is being over ridden by others.

This participant thought that it would impact learning but was not necessarily a learning disability:

P6: Um...I would say it's a disorder that impacts on learning, and.. um...therefore, I would kind of categorise it but it would still be separate 'cause in the real...in the actual terminology...it doesn't fall under learning disabilities.

One participant mentioned autism as a learning disability. According to O'Brien and Pearson (2004: 125), although many individuals with autism also suffer from a learning disability, both disorders show overlap but they are significantly different in many ways. The difficulty of classifying disabilities in South Africa is described in Section 2.3.2. In addition to the problem of classification, South Africa does not have a national strategy for support of students with disabilities in higher education (Matshediso 2010: 738). Until such time that such legislation is implemented, the definition, classification, diagnosis and support of students with learning disabilities is implemented will remain problematic.

4.4. CONCLUSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The four main categories that emerged from this study are: 'understanding of learning disability concepts'; 'South African issues', 'issues specific to Wits' and 'challenges'. These categories were presented using direct participant quotations. and these were discussed with the literature review.

From the analysis and discussion of the data, the following conclusions were made and are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 – SYNTHESIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The findings of the study conducted on university staff perceptions of learning disabilities are presented and compared with the reviewed literature in the previous chapter. In this chapter, the findings are summarised then the limitations of the study are delineated and opportunities for future research are offered. Thereafter, conclusions and recommendations are proposed. As with other qualitative research studies, the researcher's personal reflections about the meaning of the data are integrated (Creswell 2012: 258) into this chapter. In addition, as is appropriate for qualitative research (Creswell 2012: 206), the reader is cautioned that findings of the research are not extrapolated to a population, but are used to explore the central phenomenon, for improving service delivery for students with learning disabilities in HEIs.

5.2 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This investigation aimed to collect and analyse the prevailing attitudes of staff towards students with learning disabilities. Consequently, the participants were asked a range of questions to ascertain how they perceive learning disabilities and associated concepts and their ideas on the kinds of accommodations that are made for students with learning disabilities and their knowledge of the institutional stance towards disability, learning disabilities specifically.

Chapter 4 showed that that there is little consensus on the perceptions of staff and that a wide range of opinions, thoughts and attitudes exist. Although perceptions vary between participants, in general, they exhibited a poor knowledge about learning disabilities, or how students with learning disabilities can be accommodated and supported. In the midst of the data, it was found that the staff perceptions is predominantly based on that of the medical model of disability. My own observation of the participant's knowledge is that academic staff presented a slightly better understanding about learning disabilities compared to the knowledge of the support staff.

All of the participants admitted to a lack of awareness about learning disability concepts, and their difficulty in defining and categorising disabilities. Many of the participants had no prior experience with students with learning disabilities. As is consistent with the literature, they knew very little about the tests available to diagnose learning disabilities. None of the participants had heard of the terms 'reasonable accommodation' or 'universal design'; nor were they able to articulate a clear definition of learning disabilities. None of the participants demonstrated knowledge of the assistive technologies that are available to support students with learning disabilities. The academic challenges suggested by the participants are consistent with those found in the literature. The question of 'what is fair?' is highly contentious, especially in a multi-language country such as South Africa. Both South Africa as a country and Wits as a University have their own unique challenges, and these challenges were explored in this study.

Thus, it is evident that a lack of knowledge and the resultant misconceptions about learning disabilities exist. The misconceptions of university staff of learning disabilities can impact on the experience of students' with learning disabilities. The research showed the perception that certain staff are more accommodating while others are less tolerant. The research also exposed the complex nature of spelling and writing within a university context. The student's disclosure as a student with a learning disability was another contentious subject. This raised the point of the extra difficulty for students with learning disabilities in transitioning from school to university.

Although it is evident from the research that Wits offers several forms of support to students with learning disabilities, and indeed, to all disabilities, but this support is not generally known to the staff. Likewise, the participants exhibited very little knowledge of the institutional stance towards disability or the existence of the policy on disability. This emerged as a key finding of the research and reinforces the need for staff training and professional development at the university to improve disability awareness.

5.3 LIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH

The study investigated the experiences of university staff and their perceptions of learning disabilities. Other disabilities were not investigated; the study focusses on learning disabilities only.

Another limitation is that the interviews were limited to staff at one university. As a result of limited scope of the study, it is not possible to make comparisons with other HEIs, nor across faculties. This study also did not compare the perceptions of experienced against novice lecturers.

From a number of conversations with colleagues in the disability field, I found that students with disabilities are experiencing “survey fatigue” and that it was not advisable to impose another research study on them. For this reason, this study was limited to staff members only. Ideally, the perceptions of both students and staff should be investigated at the same time. This would open up new opportunities for future research.

5.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings from this study could be used to develop a survey to conduct a quantitative research investigation, in a cross-faculty comparison or a cross-university study. I believe that the ‘voice’ of disabled students should not be lost, and this could be captured in a series of focus group interviews with these students to give them an opportunity to present similar or different perspectives.

5.5 CONCLUSIONS

The bio-psycho-social model asserts that interaction between the biological, psychological and social factors affects people with disabilities. This model provides the fundamental principle on which the study was conducted. It builds on the concept that students with a learning disability are affected by their disability as well as personal and environmental factors. By using the model as a framework

for this research, the integration of disability into the HEI fabric is apparent, and disabled students are not left out of higher education.

Disabled learners, including those with learning disabilities, are often defined by their impairments. However, most of the tests used to diagnose learning disabilities are based on the medical model of disability. If the bio-psycho-social model of disability is applied, then the diagnostic tests should be based a more holistic assessment of the individual, and educators should be encouraged to embrace the idea that it is the society that erects the barriers and leads to exclusion, rather than their individual or the impairment.

Qualitative research assumes that reality is interpreted by individuals, and that their perceptions direct their thoughts and feelings. Staff members are likely to make decisions based on their own interpretation of their perceptions. If they do not have adequate knowledge about learning disabilities, their actions and decisions could be misinformed.

In a HEI, a student's ability to find suitable coping mechanisms and adapt them to their own particular circumstances is crucial for success. However, reasonable accommodations should be implemented to create a fair environment. The perception of the accommodations and the level of fairness that is attributed to the accommodations will impact on the way that they are applied. Prevailing perceptions will affect the students' confidence and feelings of self-worth, and could ultimately impact the success of their studies. The difficulty of ascertaining how university staff really do feel about accommodating students with disabilities has been discussed, but what is clear from this study is that very little is known about learning disabilities and that a wide range of perceptions amongst staff exist.

Issues that are specific to Wits University were highlighted by the participants in this study. Although there is good support and the existence of a policy, the study showed that university staff, in general, are unaware of the support mechanisms available to students with learning disabilities.

With adult learners, for that is what the HE students are now, it must be remembered that they have been through primary and secondary education, and have learned many lessons on their own individual journey. They can be supported in various ways that will allow them to adapt and cope with not only their study environments but with their future work environments too.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident that there is a need for a clearer understanding of staff towards all disabilities. Moreover, if staff members understand what a learning disability is and how it can affect individual students, they will be better equipped to support their student/s. Also, if academic staff are aware of and understand the principles of universal design and adjust their teaching methods to, all students, including those with a disability, then much will be achieved.

We are living in a world where new technology and new software is allowing people with learning disabilities to access information and services in new and inventive ways. It is encouraging to see the South African Basic Education system embracing inclusion as it is likely the number of students with disabilities in South African universities will continue to increase.

In order to maximise the integration of inclusion policy and practice into HEIs, equipping the staff with knowledge about disabilities is of paramount importance if HEIs are to be an equitable environment for all students.

Wits University should be more proactive in empowering their staff, both academic and support staff, by providing them with opportunities to learn about disabilities. Workshops are suitable but not always practical. Information about disabilities should be made available in many formats: electronic; print; online; face-to-face and even social media can be used to create awareness and increase the knowledge of disabilities. This investment will ultimately lead to a richer, more dynamic campus where all students feel welcome and staff feel more comfortable with disabled students in their classes.

5.7 CLOSING REMARKS

The most notable finding of this study is the lack of knowledge that staff have about learning disabilities, As a researcher, because I have an understanding of disabilities and learning disabilities, it is easy to forget that other staff have had little or no exposure to learning disabilities

In closing, the implementation of universal design principles at universities will go a long way to creating an environment that is accessible to all students, without the need for special accommodations to be made. Inclusive education might be in its infancy, and there are many hurdles to cross, many entrenched ideas and practices to change. But there is hope. Although South Africa does not have a national strategy to support of students with disabilities in higher education, and until such time that relevant legislation is applied, the support of students with learning disabilities will remain challenging for HEIs. Institutions such Wits should pioneer the support structures and services. However, I believe that if the staff have the necessary knowledge of disabilities, the future will be brighter for *all* South Africans.

“We have a moral duty to remove the barriers to participation, and to invest sufficient funding and expertise to unlock the vast potential of people with disabilities. Governments throughout the world can no longer overlook the hundreds of millions of people with disabilities who are denied access to health, rehabilitation, support, education and employment, and never get the chance to shine.”

*Prof Stephen Hawking
(WHO Report 2011:forward)*

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CLTD	Centre for Teaching, Learning and Development
DU	Disability Unit
FOTIM	Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis
HEI	Higher Education Institution
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
Unisa	University of South Africa
US	United States
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	The World Health Organisation
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

APPENDICES

Appendix A Interview Guide

Appendix B Informed Consent

Appendix C Participant Information Sheet

Appendix D Ethical Clearance Certificate

Appendix E Permission to conduct research – request from Researcher

Appendix F Permission to conduct research – granted by University

Appendix G Interview Transcript Examples

INTERVIEW GUIDE

PRELIMINARY TITLE: University staff perceptions of students with learning disabilities.

What do I want to find out:

1. What do university staff know about Learning Disabilities and how they can be accommodated?
2. What are their perceptions of these disabilities and the accommodations?
3. What is their understanding/knowledge of Wits disability policies and practices?

Main Interview questions and possible probing questions that might be asked during the interviews process:

- a. What do you understand by the term Learning Disability?
 - Can you name some Learning Disabilities?
 - What do you think it's like to have a learning disability?
 - How do you think a learning disability is diagnosed?
 - What academic challenges do you think students with learning disabilities face?
- b. What do you know about special accommodation for students with learning disabilities?
 - What types of accommodations do you think a person with a Learning Disability might need?
 - Do you think these accommodations with "advantage" the student in anyway?
 - Do you think that knowing a student has had extra time in an exam, or used a word processor, would influence how people mark?
 - Do you mark for spelling? Sticker system?
 - Have you heard of the term "reasonable accommodation"? What do you think is meant by the term?
 - Do you foresee any problems in the granting of reasonable accommodations?
 - How do you think a student with a Learning Disability can be reasonably accommodated in examinations?
 - How do you think it will help you if you are aware of students that have specific learning disabilities?
 - Have you ever made special accommodations for students with learning disabilities?
 - What accommodations could be made in your particular school / department?

- How could you accommodate a person with a learning disability if you were not aware of their disability?
 - How is the staff/student relationship relevant?
 - Do you think that disclosing a disability might lead to “labeling
- c. What do you think is meant by “Universal Design”?
- Is it possible to use Universal Design Principles in the classroom or other areas of the university?
- d. What do you know about Wits Support Services for students with disabilities?
- What services are provided?
 - What support services do you think should be provided?
 - What should a disability policy include?
- e. How can Wits staff members best improve their knowledge about learning disabilities?
- How would you increase the understanding of learning disabilities in your department/school?
- f. South Africa and learning disabilities
- How do you think our practices compare to those elsewhere in the world?
 - How do you think that multi-languages impacts on the assessment of dyslexia?
 - What and who should be advocating for better practices to be put into place?
- g. Other experiences and anecdotes?

CONSENT TO BE INTERVIEWED AND RECORDED

Research Project: University staff perceptions of students with learning disabilities (Preliminary title)

I _____
have read the participant information sheet and consent to be interviewed by Tanya Healey for the study on university staff perceptions of learning disabilities. I also give my permission for the interview to be tape-recorded.

I understand that:

- Participation in this interview is voluntary.
- That I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- No information that may identify me will be included in the research report, and my responses will remain confidential.
- The tapes and transcripts will not be seen or heard by any person in this organisation at any time and will only be processed by the researcher.
- All tape recordings will be destroyed after the research is complete.
- No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.
- Direct quotes might be used to illustrate consensus or alternate points but these will not be used in a manner that would identify an individual.

Signed _____

WITHDRAWAL FORM

If at any stage you wish to withdraw from the study, please fill in the form below.

I,.....

Wish to withdraw my participation from the above-mentioned study.

Signed:

Date:

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1. INTRODUCTION

As a registered Unisa student, I am conducting research for my Master's Degree in Education (Specialisation in Adult Education). I would like you to consider participating in my research, the preliminary title of which is "University staff perceptions of students with learning disabilities".

2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH INVESTIGATION

Misconceptions about disabilities can have distressing consequences. A thorough understanding of current perceptions is the starting point for further research. Understanding the attitudes, perceptions and knowledge of learning disabilities will assist when setting up interventions aimed at changing these perceptions. My investigation will ascertain the prevailing attitudes of staff towards students with learning disabilities, the accommodations that are made for them as well as their perceptions of the institutional stance towards disability.

3. RISKS & BENEFITS

The research aims to increase knowledge about learning disabilities, which will enable successful training interventions to be conceptualised and implemented and hopefully lead to increased retention and throughput of students with disabilities.

In the long term, it is hoped that the research will assist when leveraging for resources, policy amendments and curriculum changes. The ultimate aim will be for attitudinal changes to take place, for barriers in the learning environment to be removed, for universal design practices to be implemented in all courses and for meaningful learning experiences to be created for all students.

4. INTERVIEW PROCESS

During the interview session, you will be asked questions about your knowledge and understanding of learning disabilities and the accommodations that can be made. The questions are general, and are not sensitive or emotional in nature. It is not expected that you will experience discomfort during the interview. However, should you experience any harm through participating in the research, you have the right to get help, and should contact the researcher immediately for assistance.

It is estimated that the duration of the interview will be 30 – 45 minutes. This can be done at a time and place convenient to you. You will not be expected to travel or incur any expenses to participate. The interview will be recorded. Please be reassured that the interviews will be confidential and anonymous, and your privacy will be respected. A wide range of participants will be selected for interview, including those with little known experience to students with learning disabilities, to those who are perceived to have experience and / or knowledge of learning disabilities.

Unisa has a policy on Research Ethics, which can be accessed at http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/colleges/col_grad_studies/docs/Policy_research_ethics_21September2007.pdf. Should you require a copy of the policy before making an informed decision about your participation, please ask the researcher to provide you with a copy.

You will be given a form asking for your permission to be interviewed and recorded. You have the right to decline to sign the form. You also have the right to withdraw your given consent at any time without any penalty or prejudice. You are free to refuse to answer any question/s which form part of the interview.

The results of the research will form my dissertation of limited scope. As such, it may be published in open access repository. The research might be used in future papers and/or conference presentations. All publications and presentations will not violate the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of participants.

If you have any queries or would like more information, please contact me on (011) 717 4067, 083 462 7829, tanya.healey@gmail.com.

Thank you for taking the time to consider taking part in this study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tanya Healey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'y' at the end.

Tanya Healey



Research Ethics Clearance Certificate

This is to certify that the application for ethical clearance submitted by

T Healey [35590084]

for a M Ed study entitled

**University staff perceptions of students with learning disabilities: a
case study**

has met the ethical requirements as specified by the University of South Africa
College of Education Research Ethics Committee. This certificate is valid for two
years from the date of issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "CS le Roux".

Prof CS le Roux
CEDU REC (Chairperson)
lrouxcs@unisa.ac.za

2 May 2013

Reference number: 2013 MAY/35590084/CSLR

Tanya Healey

~ tanya.healey@gmail.com ~ PO Box 4781 Weltevreden Park 1715 ~ 083 462 7829

Ms K. Menon
Registrar
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

23 April 2013

Re: Permission to proceed with research at Wits

Dear Ms Menon

I am a Wits Staff member studying for my Master in Education (Specialisation in Adult Education). My research proposal for the dissertation of limited scope had been approved and ethically cleared by Unisa.

I am requesting to undertake my research at the University of the Witwatersrand. My research aims to investigate staff perceptions of students with learning disabilities. Misconceptions about disabilities can have distressing consequences. A thorough understanding of current perceptions is the starting point for further research. Understanding the attitudes, perceptions and knowledge of learning disabilities will assist when setting up interventions aimed at changing these perceptions. Perceptions and attitudes can affect many aspects of tertiary education, including admission policy; support services; curriculum design; teaching and assessment methods and the personal experience of the student, all of which will impact on the success of the student.

This investigation will ascertain the prevailing attitudes of staff towards students with learning disabilities, the accommodations that are made for them as well as their perceptions of the institutional stance towards disability. This study is related to the current paradigm shift in disability thinking. It aims to increase knowledge about learning disabilities, which will enable successful training interventions to be conceptualised and implemented and hopefully lead to increased retention and throughput of students with disabilities.

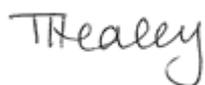
In the long term, it is hoped that the research will assist when leveraging for resources, policy amendments and curriculum changes. The ultimate aim will be for attitudinal changes to take place, for barriers in the learning environment to be removed, for universal design practices to be implemented in all courses and for meaningful learning experiences to be created for all students.

I would like permission to approach staff at the University of the Witwatersrand to participate in my research.

If you have any queries or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at 011 717 4067, tanya.healey@gmail.com, 083 462 7829. Alternately, please contact my supervisor Cheryl Ferreira. 012 429 2157, ferrec@unisa.ac.za

Looking forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely



Tanya Healey
Unisa Masters Student
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Our Ref: Ms Carol Crosley / nes
25th April 2013

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

It is hereby confirmed that the request by **Ms Tanya Healey**, a UNISA Masters Student currently in the employ at the University of the Witwatersrand has been granted permission to interview approximately 10 Wits staff members for her Master's in Education research into Adult Education with the aim of investigating staff perceptions of students with learning disabilities for which the necessary ethical clearance has been obtained.

Please be advised that staff have the right to withdraw from participating in the process if they find the contents intrusive, too time-consuming, or inappropriate.

Should the University's internal mailing system be the mechanism whereby this questionnaire has been distributed, this notice serves as proof that permission to use it has been granted.

Students conducting surveys must seek permission in advance from Heads of Schools or individual academics concerned should surveys be conducted during teaching time.

Yours sincerely

Carol Crosley
Deputy Registrar
Student Enrolment Centre
In the acting capacity as Registrar
(for the period 24th April to 10th May 2013)

Copied:
Ms Kirti Menon – Registrar
Ms Nita Lawton-Misra – Deputy Registrar, Academic
Dr K Kasonkola - Snr Director: Human Resources

Interview Transcript Examples

I = Interviewer

P = Participant

Example 1:

I: Okay, so like you have read, the aim of my study is to get an idea of what people know about learning disabilities at university. And I didn't only want to keep it to academic staff, because other people's perceptions might influence things, how things work. So, um, in general, what do you know about learning disabilities, or what do you understand a learning disability to be?

P3: Um, I think a learning disability is let's say, if the child is slow, or if the child is un-attentive, or maybe if the child has a physical disability, like maybe blindness or is partially deaf, or something like that, something that will hamper their normal... (pause)

I: ...their learning?

P3: yes, their normal learning.

I: And, so what do you think it is like to have a learning disability?

P3: I think um, I think you have to work twice as hard, to have to keep up with everybody. Because you have to adjust to everything, because a lot of the time you find that a teacher doesn't have time to, to kind of wait for you, you know, maybe they can do extra lessons after school, but still, its outside of the normal class environment. Ja so I think it... it becomes an issue if the child, I am not really sure, I would think if the child learns... does extra lessons, its extra work for them and then obviously in time they would think what is wrong with me.

I: And how do you think they are diagnosed, the learning disabilities? Okay, if we look at a learning disability as something maybe like dyslexia, how do you think that would be diagnosed?

P3: Yo! (laughs). I think child therapists would diagnose such things, 'cause I am not sure, I am not sure teachers would readily diagnose that, or maybe even diagnose it on time, but if they are much older they could say "okay maybe this person...". But if they are still young, maybe still in pre-school or grade 1, I don't think it would be easy.

I: So then what about somebody with dyslexia coming into university, how do you think they would be affected?

P3: I think that person would have adjusted, because throughout the primary school and high school, it's like – how many years?

I: Twelve years.

P3: Twelve years, it's a very long time to adjust and get into the mix of things and kind of catch up if you have to and you know you have coping mechanisms. So I think it's not an issue if you come to university, I really don't think it is.

I: So if that student who had to come into university, do you think there should be special accommodations that should be made for that student?

P3: There could be, um, well not necessarily, but if you could make um, if you can accommodate the student in a certain way then yes, by all means, but I don't think it is really necessary, because the human mind adapts to everything, it's not just... it grows and adjusts and adapts and whatever. Ja, so I don't think it's a big issue.

I: So if a student with dyslexia had to come into university and be given maybe extra time in an exam or be allowed to use like a spell check, do you think that it is fair?

P3: I think it is fair, I think it is fair, I think maybe a lot of people would think it's not fair because they are seen as normal, as opposed to people who are in wheelchairs, they have ramps and everything, so I think it would be fair, it would be fair, ja because then the person has to work harder anyway, so accommodating them in a certain way would go a long way in easing a lot of frustrations.

I: So using a computer during an exam, do you think that is fair?

P3: No, I don't think it... because it means that somebody would have to be sitting right next to the student, just in case the student goes somewhere and checks for answers and whatever.

I: Goes onto the internet?

P3: We have all been students and we have all been desperate, or maybe "Oh if I had this then, then I could just go..." – so it is a temptation, and I know I would not be able to write an exam with somebody watching my every move".

I: What about, let's say, maybe a computer that, maybe a software system, for example, some people maybe have problems with dyslexia and writing and reading, so now a software programme that would either write for them or read for them, in other words, they could speak, and it would write up what they are speaking, or it would read to them what was on the screen? Do you think that would be okay?

P3: Um, I think it would be okay if they are given, it means that they would have to take, say they are given, if an exam was two hours, then their time would have to be shorter obviously. But I think, because speaking is easier than writing, you know, thinking and writing everything down. That would be nice hey?

I: Ja it would be! Um, so have you ever heard of the term "reasonable accommodation"? Do you know what it means?

P3: No. Reasonable accommodation? Nah, not ever, no heard of it, ever.

I: Okay, um, so do you think that, if a student came into your school, and disclosed that they has a learning disability, do you think it would affect their studies in any way, um, would people have pre-

conceived notions about that student or how do you think it would all work, if you knew, as opposed to not knowing?

P3: I think people would have pre-conceived notions, but then I think it shouldn't affect the admission and the normal running of things in the school, it's just about accommodating the student just a little bit, making everybody kind of understand, ok, you know, of what it is, it's not being prejudiced toward the person, not accommodating them, because they are special or what, it's just something normal it happens, I mean, a lot of people could have... you can try change people's mind's but it's not a guarantee that they will understand.

I: Mmm. So do you think disclosing could lead to labeling?

P3: Ja it could lead to labeling, but its two ways, it could lead to labeling in the negative way, that the student would be teased and ignored, and they would just be the only one there...not... because a lot of the time students want to be in a clique or whatever. Or it could influence, like, in a positive way, where everybody is accommodating them, going the extra mile to be nice and trying to understand what it is really, so I think ja, it's a give and take.

I: Ja, I think you are right. Do you know anything about Wits support services for students with disabilities?

P3: I know that we have a disability unit. Um, and I know that if you are enrolled at Wits and you have some kind of disability, the disability unit finds ways to accommodate your learning, to accommodate you such that your learning it is made.. made easier or more normal. So ja, I think it's a nice idea.

I: Do you know what services they provide?

P3: No, I have no idea what services they provide. I have never actually been curious enough to find out. But I think it's nice that... I know that there is this boy, what's his name, Surprise..... we have nice artwork, oh my gosh, and I thought that really sweet! (Referring to a student with disabilities that had created artwork for the corridors of the Wits disability unit).

I: Ja he is so talented.

P3: Ja, hey, good ideas, so imagine if he wasn't accommodated at that level at university. Well I really don't know what they (the disability unit) do, I don't want to lie.

I: No that is fine. Do you know anything about a policy at Wits, for disability?

P3: No (shakes head).

I: Okay, um....

P3: Disability policy? No. I am sure its among the policies but it's not one we hear about all the time.

I: How do you think our practices here in South Africa compare to those overseas?

P3: Our practices, like what?

I: Our practices, like accommodating students with disabilities? Or providing services for them?

P3: Mmm, I don't know. Like I know that in other countries there is, I know that in Swaziland there is a School for the deaf. And there is a school for, there is a primary and high school for people with disabilities, so I am not sure if that helps or hampers their growth. So I think um, if you are in a school where everybody is disabled in some kind of way, you feel normal, you know, you just take it as it is. But if you are in a school where everybody seems normal and you are abnormal, then you do grow up with that thing that "oh, I am not really normal, or I can't do something". So, it's both negative and positive. But I think that if you are in a kind of environment where you are accommodated beyond... where you are cocooned...and the normal life carries on, then once you are out of that cocoon, then adjusting will be very difficult. So I think, if you have a school for deaf people, or for people with disabilities, it kind of hampers their normal life, I think. But on the other hand it makes them feel normal and they are able to learn certain skills that we may not teach them as parents or teachers in normal schools. So I think, I think that South Africa is doing it the right way in accommodating everybody in the normal learning environment, as opposed to having special learning environments for special people. I think everything should just be normal. 'Cause children tease each other hey! So I don't know, I think it's fine that it's a normal university, it's not a university for disabled people or anything like that.

I: Ja, we should accommodate everybody. And have you got any other stories or anecdotes you want to tell about... do you know anybody with a learning disability? Or have you had an experience at the school?

P3: I had a learning disability! (Laughter). I didn't know... I don't know if it was a learning disability... but I used to stutter in primary school, like really bad, in grade one and grade two.. and you know you used to, we were given reading books and you had to read a section and home, and you had to come back the following morning and you had to stand next to the teacher and kind of read so that they could like "Okay, she did her homework" or "Is her reading good enough" or "she can"....

And you know it took me like, *forever*, and it was very embarrassing hey, because you used to listen to people and they would read so fluently they you are going "er..er..err" stuttering. And then, um, my grade two teacher, she did something, it was just something very normal, Tanya. She put out a piece of paper like that (gestures) and she hid everything that was the rest of the sentence, so I was meant to read word by word by word by word, instead of looking at the whole line and stuttering, so that is how I stopped!

I: Did it help?

P3: Ja, it helped a lot!

I: Isn't that amazing?

P3: Just simple stuff, you know, I could be stuttering till today.

I: And that stopped it?

P3: And it stopped it. And I thought “aaaah that was nice, that was very nice” But then a lot, well, my grade one teacher couldn’t do anything, so you see its just different people having different ideas and knowing how to...ja!

I: I know my one teacher also thought, in grade one, they thought I was dyslexic ‘cause I couldn’t write. But I was left handed, and I kept writing all wrong, so finally we went with the parents and the teachers, and they were watching how I was writing, and then, they used to sit in class and say to the right handed children, “Now children, pull you pen across the page”, so I was pulling my pen so I was writing that way, and then once they said to me you can push your pen across the page, I could write, they just had to change the pull to a push and I was fixed!

P3: Wow hey!

I: So it can be something so small!

P3: Ja it can be something very very small.

I: Let me switch off...

Example 2:

I: Ok, so my research is looking at University Staff perceptions of learning disabilities. And, um, firstly, what do you understand by the term learning disabilities? What do you understand by that term “learning disability”?

P5: My understanding of a learning disability is basically a student who is able to comprehend information but may take a longer process in contextualizing and understanding and being able to regurgitate that information if necessary, or apply the theoretical principles that they have learned to something else. It's not that they are not able to, it's more about the time that is allocated, or that the person needs in order to comprehend that information.

I: And could you name a learning disability, or types of learning disabilities?

P5: Not scientifically, but I am aware of, there are say, dyslexia is a learning disability in terms of how the letters are read and communication in terms of the processes of the brain. There are other disabilities where for example the vestibular system hasn't developed properly in the toddler years, when the baby years, in terms...as far as I know... that goes back to being in the womb and the development that happened to that system. And for example, mothers that are given bed rest, and there is not enough movement within the ear and the vestibular system, that affects students' concentration, it affects them...it is linked to the pituitary, as far as I know, and it's about how that information is processed.

I: Wow that is interesting.

P5: And um, it's not that the student is not able to process, it's that the motor neurons are working on different levels because the vestibular system is trying to balance, and... it's those little nodes and hairs, they are moving to create, what happens is that the body uses other survival skills, so what happens is the body is so busy trying to use survival skills in concentrating to focus the eye or the hand or whatever, that the brain is not being utilized to its maximum capacity when it is processing information.

I: Wow, okay, I am learning some new things (laughter).

P5: And that is, what I have read and what I have heard, is that it is not so much linked, a lot of scholars and students that are classified with ADD or ADHD are not necessarily ADD or ADHD, they have concentration problems not because they are ADD, they have concentration problems because the vestibular system is being over ridden by others. And then obviously, also ADD and ADHD are also in terms of concentration....

I: So you would consider ADHD as a learning disability?

P5: Yes. Something that would hinder learning. And the vestibular system, I think it's called Integrated Learning Therapy ILT, is the therapy that is used for that. And then writing skills, you know, just in terms of concentration, at schools they go on about pencil grips and pen grips and all of that. But it's interesting when you see students, how some of them hold a pen!

I: That's true!

P5: I saw one, they were like kind of writing here somewhere (gesticulates).

I: Yes! And their arm is all twisted!

P5: So it was interesting as they get to this stage and those fine things....

I: Have not been ironed out?

P5: They haven't. So I don't know how it affects their comprehension skills. Or their writing skills, but um, one thing I do... I have picked up, is that students are writing less in exams than they did say, ten years ago.

I: Really?

P5: And I don't know what that is. I mean, there was a time when a student for a one-and-a-half hour question in a three-hour paper would finish a booklet and start maybe a second booklet. Now they don't even get to half the booklet. And I don't know what the.... 'cause now you are sending them powerpoints, you are sending them key... you know?

I: I wonder...

P5: ... the typing...

I: That is an interesting phenomenon.

P5: Ja, and I have picked up, there are more typing skills, there are more laptops, taking notes, that is one thing I have definitely picked up.

I: And then how would you think a learning disability is diagnosed?

P5: In schools, it comes from the schools. At the university level, I don't think we pick it up, there are too many students in class for us to pick up, and then what happens is, if you do pick it up, in the more intimate levels say for example supervision, if you can see that they are having problems, you will send them to the writing centre. Or you will sit, and you will work with the student, and work through the problem, just merely because they are not meeting the deadlines and it could be linked to a disability to comprehend information. But what you do is you sit and you struggle to try and get the deadline to finish whatever the task is at hand, rather than saying do you have a problem to X Y and Z. And the bigger classes, they get lost, but what happens, sometimes we pick up what has happened is for example, when I was teaching first year, there would be students that would just not cope with the exam, and then they went for the specific assessments to get allocated extra time. Sometimes, students arrive at university, and they have been through the process at school, so they immediately apply for the extra time and they write in another venue. But whether it's, they may be getting lost in the big lectures but sometimes they come for consultation where they patch up, but they never openly say "I have a learning disability".

I: Mmmm. Do you think that they should disclose?

P5: I think it would help them, because if you are a lecturer or a supervisor, and you are not understanding what the problems is, you may not be using the correct tools to rectify what you are seeing as a problem. Whereas, for example if you are aware of the problem you can go and you can

look up about it and you can see how you can assist. Whereas you may be thinking the student is just not reading enough, or understanding the theory, so you keep going over the theory, and outlining the theories and creating diagrams to try and explain what you are actually talking about, but maybe there is another method that can maybe be used..... for them to understand.

I: And the extra time? You don't have an issue with that? Is it a fair practice?

P5: Yes, it's a fair practice, it has helped students... there are students that I have picked up that have asked for extra time and have been allocated extra time by the university, because they go through a procedure which is outside of us, in Senate House somewhere. They do... they are students that... who you see struggling with essays. In consultation they tell you "I don't understand this or I am not comprehending this", it does help them when they are writing the exam.

I: And do you think that the perceptions of the other staff that you work with, do you think that, in general, it's accepted that it is a fair practice?

P5: yes. It's never been brought up, ever. It has never been questioned, at staff meetings when we allocate and we are told you have got two students if you are coordinating the exam, you are the examiner, and you need to get the extra papers from the exams office, no-one has ever questioned why or what, it is just standard practice.

I: And then, what do you think it is like to have a learning disability?

P5: I think it affects confidence, um, in terms of ability to process information and to actually communicate that in an open class. Students that I have picked up, never really told me that "I have a learning disability" but you see there is a problem, either it could be dyslexia, or it could be a concentration issue. You can see that they would interact on a different level in the classroom, and they will come here (indicating her office), and they will say "could you explain this" and they will be on a different level. And I think they create an image around themselves. There was a specific student that I can... that comes to mind, she is very eccentric in the classroom, and she always says something profound, and she was always late and she could not get her things together. And then she came for consultation and the way she behaved in consultation, she was very different, you know, the questions she asked, the way.... there were no more profound statements. And then she told me she is applying for... she came to an exam very late, I think she half an hour late for her exam. And then she said to me "I should be allocated extra time" when we were collecting the papers. And I said "well have you been through the correct procedure, you can't just sit here, you write in a different venue, cause everyone now has to leave the exam room." And she repeated, I think she failed the first year, she repeated it but she performed much better the second time around.

I: And did she have support then?

P5: Then she had support, in terms...she had extra time, I think there was dyslexia involved there and I think there was some other issues, but um....

I: It's interesting that you say – she almost had a different persona in class and in one-on-one. That's interesting.

P5: And she did things, for example, they had to do a photo essay, and I said “up to eight photos”, so I didn’t specify. Um, they could use three or four or whatever. And she used one. But the photo essay is about the... the criteria wasn’t... didn’t say, now I do a minimum of six to eight photographs. But I didn’t say one. So I had to let her go with it because the way I had said it, she interpreted it... so I had to... and despite the fact that it was a photo essay which was kind of – a beginning, a middle, and end. So she was insisting, she insisted “I am doing one photo, one photo, one photo”. And it was a very brave thing, to do one photo, and she came up with a brilliant photo, she did really well in that one photo.

I: She interpreted it differently to everyone else hey?

P5: Yes.

I: Ok, so academic challenges that somebody with a learning disability might have, you spoke about concentration, taking extra time to process, are there any other academic challenges that a student might have?

P5: The actual writing. Putting the thoughts into practice in the writing. Um, there is sometimes communicated in a very “out of the box” way. And then you think, “ok, all you have to do, is say at second year level, is talk about this, in relation to that”. And they will bring other things in, ...they will... and I think it’s maybe the speed at which they are processing information. Say for example, if they have got ADHD, I think they process too quickly. So then they link things that are...a whole lot of other things...

I: So they think to fast? (laughter) And it comes out...

P5: It comes out, I think to myself, “where did this come from? We didn’t discuss this in class!”

(Laughter)

So sometimes that happens. And it happens when they are pressured to do written work, and they have to hand in short exercises, or when they have to write about certain things, and the process time is shortened. Like the essays, they will get the essay topic in the first lecture, and they will hand it in in week 5 or 6 or 7, depending on the length of the semester. So they will have some time to reflect, re-write, reflect and re-write, but when you say, ok, I want this next week, an analysis next week, then they...

I: It all falls apart?

P5: Mmmm (yes). It all links, the writing the extra time, and also, I think the big class – affects it, I think the big classes – you lose more students in the big classes just because, either they are too afraid to ask in the lecture, then they may not come for consultation. Some of them don’t. Then they just get lost. And I think that is why also at university it is difficult to pick up, because it okay if... even our second year class is only thirty-five, but it’s too big to pick up someone who has got a problem. You may pick it up in an MA class when you have got maybe 5 or six, but then you are are not sure, is it a learning disability, an educational thing in terms of the school that they go to and what were they taught in primary and high school. So you are not always.... Unless they disclose it, you are not

sure where it is coming from. That's why it would be easier if they told you because then you can say, ok, this is how we need to approach this.

I: And then what about spelling, do you mark for spelling?

P5: Spelling is an interesting one because the spelling has got worse with texting and shortening, it's really bad. (Laughs)

I: Ja, I am sure!

P5: Ja it's like, even though I must admit, that I have just marked second year papers, and I was very, they were shorted, but um, the level of understating and comprehension, the grammar and spelling were of a much higher level than what I have seen before, so I don't know if this was a particularly strong bunch. But also now they have auto-correct. So you don't know. Because they are typing their essays and whenever they have the opportunity to type something they do, and you welcome a typed essay far more. So there could be more problems but you see them more in exams than in exercises or essays. And then they also go to, for example, they go to, they are not strong they will go to the writing centre.

I: Oh really?

P5: Some of them, you tell them, "Have you been to the writing centre", they will be like "No I am already going up and going for a couple of weeks or whatever." So some of them do it of their own accord. But, um, and there they will work with them and they will look at sentence structure and all those things. Um, but, they, at university they kind of get lost, they are not sure of the specific support mechanisms, they will speak to one lecturer and they will go to another lecturer, and you don't know if they are attending to the actual problem, if there is a real problem. You know, they will get all the extra help, but it will be on a different level. And I think the after-all effect is that a student may be a "first" candidate, an "A" candidate type of student but they may be only getting sixties and fifties. And only when they are failing, you start addressing, because you don't address the fifties and the sixties, only when they are failing you see, ok, there is a problem, what is the problem how can we help you. And then we start investigating. And then if anything like dyslexia comes up, or extra time, or things like that.

I: Ja. I came across a practice that they are doing in the UK. And um, the exam scripts, when they get handed in, there will be colour-coded stickers. A particular colour might mean that the lecturer might should ignore spelling mistakes because they have a learning disability, but then obviously the lecturers are all trained upfront to.. what to mark for what to ignore. I mean, do you think that is a practice that would be viable here, with handwritten exam scripts?

P5: It could help. It could help, especially if you understand, if someone has a very strong sense of dyslexia, you see it in the writing, you know immediately, actually, you pick it up because the writing is so large, the letters are so large. And they press, you know, they kind of almost kind of engraves into the booklets when they are writing. So you get a sense already, that there is a problem because the letters are like, the size of the line, sometimes.

I: Okay, so, what other special accommodation do you think... we have spoken about extra time...what other special accommodation can be made specifically for learning disabilities?

P5: I think specifically for learning disabilities, I think it should be encouraged within the university kind of morale, that in the same way that if you have a disability, there is a centre where you can go to, and there is a place for you, you know, a certain area, they have that disability unit in Senate House going towards Central block. It should be encouraged that if you do have a learning disability there is a place for you where they can go to enhance their skills. You know, how can I Because that will ensure that a student that may have ADHD that can't process information, maybe an "A" candidate, can actually up their marks by 20 or 40 percent. Just because they are getting lost into the system at the moment. If there is a place where they can actually focus on that disability and enhance it, you know, you can get much higher results from the actual students.

I: What about things like, using special software in exams that would help somebody with learning disabilities?

P5: Like for example autocorrect in terms of spelling?

I: Um, it would be spelling checks, there is also read and write software that will either read what is on the screen or software where they can speak, and it will write the essay up for them, I mean what do you think about technology?

P5: I think it can be used. You know, in the same way that we allocate technology to other problems, we can utilise technology for these kinds of problems. Because at the moment they really are overlooked. 'Cause when I got your first email, I was thinking, you know, if I had thought of the bunch, I would not be able to identify one with the learning disability. It's just, you sense there is a problem, or... but it could be a very concrete kind of down to earth...this person has this kind of problem and this is how it should to be addressed.

I: So if you think it could be used, do you think it could be abuse, using technology?

P5: Ja there is always that problem, there is always when you give a hand.... that possibility (laughter).

I: That is true!

P5: That why they don't use there cellphones in the exam or there is the student card on the table.

I: Students are students (laughter)!

P5: It's about trying to find the right processes.

I: Um, so, if you, if you are marking a paper and you know that the student had extra time or used a spell check, would it influence your marking in any way?

P5: No. Because I have um, with each of my exam questions, is I have an idea of the type of answer that I am looking for, and then when I am marking I am looking for those facts.

I: Ok, so you are looking for the content, rather than the...

P5: So sometimes, even if an essay is not well written, they have put the points in, they have followed the... they are able to apply the points, they are able to apply the case study attached in their field. And if they are able to... I would judge them, in terms of how they are able to apply the

points to the case study, and I won't actually mark it for, say for example, African Literature or English would mark a paper, I am looking for a specific... I am looking for specific pointer and theoretical concepts and how those theoretical concepts are argued. Um, and it's different, in terms of first and second year its more about understanding the points and applying them. By third year, they need to be able to engage more in an argument and then you are looking more for an essay. And fourth year as well. And um then obviously masters, but that's supervision, they don't write any exams for our MA programme.

I: And you perceptions of your colleagues, about things like spelling, are there still colleagues that are quite pedantic about it, who would make an issue out of it?

P5: I think there are some who are pedantic about it in the sense that they will write underneath every single thing and they will correct it, and you know. How they will mark it at the end, I think they will look at it in terms of face value, in terms of – did the person get the overall gist. Because what also happened was, in the late 90's, early 2000's, we had a lot of students coming in from the old bantu education system, and what happened was that we had to change the way we looked at essays, just because, and then we had, for example, our degree had a 5 year curriculum where they did visual literacy for one year, which was a brilliant programme which bought students up to speed. And some of those students ended up, after their fifth year, winning the best student award. You know it is possible if you have the right systems and foundation in place, but because of that when you are looking, it's not as much evident as it used to be. You could see very clearly from the way the essay was written from the language skills whether it was a first language English speaker or not. And, because of that, lecturers are more lenient in terms of how they mark grammar and spelling and things like that. Because sometimes you are thinking "this is a second language speaker". So, I think also within our field, you will correct the grammar, but you won't mark them because the grammar was not up to speed. But then you will consult with them, and tell them "you need to brush up on your writing". And then, um, at some point, it will work against the student if they don't fix it up. 'Cause they just, if they don't fix it up, the challenges get more tougher, by third year and fourth year, and then they start failing. And then it does affect, because if someone, if you have got a paper, or an essay or something, it is just incomprehensible in terms of how it has been written, you will judge it on that level, eventually. Whereas in first and second year, you will be more lenient, but you will tell the student – you need writing skills, you need to go for help, you need to write drafts, you need to process it, and quite often it is, we don't often see really really bad third and fourth year essays. Because by then they have worked with the writing centre and they have...

I: Ok. So in South Africa we have go the multi-language issue, and do you think that there is a link with multi languages and learning disabilities, is there an impact... or how do you see it?

P5: What I have seen, and what I have read about it, its, students and people that come from multi language backgrounds take longer, they for example, take longer, if they are thinking in English, and English is not their mother tongue, they will freeze to find a word. And then they will think about it and their brain will process the correct word. And it also apparently, it's evident with people that have been exposed to multiple languages, I think it's under the age of eight. Whereas if you were exposed to one language until the age of eight and then others, you don't have that problem you will stop to think about a word, and it may take longer for students with multiple languages to actually write an essay because they need to think about it, they need to correct the grammar, is this

right how I have written it, um, but I think it won't inhibit them in terms of the final product. But getting to the final product, may take longer than someone...

I: So it's a longer process?

P5: Mmmm (yes). Because I think you go into survival mode. You know, its adapt or die, your body will find that survival mechanism, a person with concentration skills will comprehend information but they will be busy doing something else for a long period of time until they process it properly, or they communicate it properly. But those students very often, they process the information and they are bored, and that is why they disrupt lectures or talk or go on a tangent, because the processed it and they are on the next step. Whereas the rest of the bunch are not on that step. And then you are questions and try and accommodate everyone up to speed but its um South Africa is very unique because we have such very different backgrounds in terms of our education system and you pick it up in first year, it's the hardest year to teach because its um, so diverse, just the concept of, student are from such different backgrounds they are dealing with very different issues, they have students that are dealing with the city, they have students that are dealing with the language, there are some students that are dealing with the city, there are some students that have complete freedom and they finally are free, you know they are in a very different head space, and it comes through in the class, and how they process and how they engage with the lecture, some are petrified and they don't say a word, and even if they are lost they will remain lost because they won't communicate anything, whereas then there are others that will over communicate and um, it's not necessarily about a learning disability, but about it could also be, it's just about the environment, they are out of the school environment.

I: How do you think our practices here compare to those overseas in terms of dealing with learning disabilities at a university? Do you know something about it?

P5: I don't know enough. But um, just in terms of, I have just been to *(identifying data removed)* recently, how systems are in place, there is a lot more support but they are smaller structures, you know the university I was at was very small. And um, its one section of the building, you know it's one section of a building that is smaller than this that is allocated to *(identifying data removed)*, and we are struggling with space, whereas they are, there work ethic is very different, how they approach the students, how they approach.. and I think it is also linked to the support students that the students have initially in the school environment, which we lack. And also we used to have an exchange programme with *(identifying data removed)* students, the level of comprehension and arguing, the ability to argue and construct an agreement was completely different.

I: I can image!

P5: You know, it was completely, you could see you could see it immediately, but if I look at say *(identifying data removed)*, the little that I saw, I mean I was only there for 18 days, you could see the way things are approached, but it's on a much smaller scale than we have here. And we are still too much about numbers. And is that because we have always been a capitalist system, or is it... *(identifying data removed)* is very socialist so it's free education and it's not... and that came up actually in one of the discussion, this privilege to be educated and the fact that its free, that you can have if you want to grab it or not, and you have people from Ghana and South Africa saying you

know you guys are so privileged. And they was a lot of debate about that, so there clearly is a difference in the systems, but I don't know enough about the systems to tell you what it is.

I: What do you know about policies and support systems at Wits for learning disabilities or disability in general? Let say, disability in general?

P5: Not enough. I know that when we have had someone with a physical disability, you know, there is there... there was a staff member in a wheel chair and we had to make ramps and we had to accommodate him and changed a whole lot of things to accommodate that and there was the disability centre was involved in terms of the changes that physically needed to take place. And that kind of physical disability in terms of support at Wits is far more visual than any other disability. I would not even know if there is a centre for learning disabilities at Wits, I have been here for 15 years and somewhere on the intranet I am sure it exists, but if it exists I don't know.

I: And a policy?

P5: Not that I know of. There probably is one.

I: But it's never come your way?

P5: It's never come my way. I am sure this is um....because Wit... all those emails underneath that they show no prejudice. (Laughter). But for example we have interviews where we interview potential candidates to come into first year, and that kind of policy for learning disabilities, or how disabilities need to be approached, should be communicated to anyone who is conducting an interview, and is not. And it should be communicated by person who is conducting the interview to the student with the learning disability to not feel prejudiced and should feel able to communicate that fact right at the beginning, before you go any further.

I: Um, what do you understand by the term universal design?

P5: I have never heard of the concept as a concept. But um, if it was linked specifically to something like learning disabilities it would be a universal concept across the board across the university in terms of how disabilities are handled or approached or dealt with, within a three of four year curriculum.

I: Um, how do you think that Wits staff members can improve their knowledge about learning disabilities, and maybe linked to that, who should be advocating?

P5: Kind of the support system is CLTD. And I think that there should be some kind of interaction from CLTD because for example at CLTD, there are courses for new supervisors, there are courses for lecturers, there are courses for to refresh supervision, so you know there are all these thing... if you are dealing with specifically students with learning disabilities, they should be able to offer. But there should be also one kind of policy, because they should a lot of the times the courses are during lecture times, and a lot of the times those lectures are one day, and you have lectures and so you can't attend because... and then they don't run in the holidays or you are away when it's in the holidays so that is not always easy to attend, but there should be some policy some document that you can click on via the intranet, that can give you a bread-down... this is what you can do, this is the websites you can go to to read about how to deal with students with learning disabilities. On that

level, I don't think Wits is addressing the issue at all, those students are just getting lost in the system.

I: I think by default we have covered most of my questions. Have you got any other experiences or anecdotes or had any other experiences with learning disabilities that you want to share?

P5: The only ones that have come up have been dyslexia mainly and concentration skills and processing information, because no one will ever disclose why they are not understanding, and even those, when you practically spoon-feed them, and they still not comprehending, it may be because it's something else, and that could be a learning disability and the ability to process information. And also it's all about deadlines here, so you get lost in the system, and the pressure, it all adds to ...and then those that will just cope will cope, that's the big thing, they could be "A" candidates but they are just scraping though. You will only address those that are failing

I: Ja that's the reality hey?

P5: Mmmm (yes).

I: Ok, let me switch off...

Example 3:

I: Okay, so I am just trying to find out, basically, what staff know about learning disabilities, and their perceptions on them, what the gaps are, and that type of thing. So, what do you understand by the term “learning disability”?

P2: Um, it's a..a...(pause)...it's a style, its... a learner needs to learn in a different way because they might have, um, some kind of interference, so it could be dyslexia, or attention deficit disorder, there is a lot of different types of learning disabilities.

I: And...I mean, what do you think it is like to have a learning disability?

P2: I would imagine it's very frustrating, um... and I teach (*identifying data removed*) and, um, when students are learning a language when they have a learning disability, it's really intense, because, not only are they getting frustrated just with a new language, but, um, if they can't learn the way everyone else does in a classroom, then it just adds that much more complexity to the task of learning.

I: And how do you think learning disabilities are diagnosed?

P2: Well, there is psychological testing, um, I really don't know how they are diagnosed in South Africa.

I: And overseas?

P2: Well, I am from the US, and um, in the US, in K through 12, the kindergarten through to Grade 12, testing has been implemented and it is free of charge for all students. Um, so as soon as a student is suspected to possibly have one, they can be diagnosed by professionals. And then they have a plan, I forget the name of the plan, it's called something, um... where there is a whole group of stakeholders that address the student's needs and they meet every so often, a few time a year, just to work with the student. But the trend in the US is also inclusive practices where you... where teachers learn about approaches to teach all types of learners and it actually helps students without learning disabilities to be very clear about instruction, to allow extra time, when that is a possibility, um, on tests or on tasks. Um, and so that's the main or major trend in the US. So I know the US is really on top of it in term of addressing learning disabilities, but um, the only issues that I have had, because I worked at a community college in the US, and um, if students were deemed ESL, where they learn English as an additional language, um, they often didn't get testing, because people would just assume any kind of difficulty they had had to do with...

I: Oh, it was related to the language?

P2: ...yes and it was only when I got them that I notice the differences among ESL students, you know, who really seemed to have learning differences, and um, by then, it would be too late to get any kind of support for the State, they would have to get the testing themselves. And I know the psychometric testing places would charge, you know, maybe US\$1000 for that kind of testing...

I: So it's expensive?

P2: Ja, so that was...

I: And how do you think we compare here?

P2: Well, um, I don't see a lot about it, it concerns me, it makes me think it's not in everybody's awareness. I don't know if inclusive school practices is even an issues here?

I: Well, I mean, it's... we are supposed to have an inclusive schooling education....we have policies in place for that, so, but....

P2: I mean; I now it's in the law, about disabilities....

I: Ja, in the policies, but in practice?

P2: It hasn't been filtered down?

I: Not really. I think maybe teachers.... I don't know, I am not really familiar with the teaching environment, the schooling environment, but I think the teachers are so pressurized, it's just not happening.

P2. Sure, and there is a lot of changes.

I: Ja. Um, so what academic challenges, or type of academic challenges do you think a person with a learning disability face?

P2: Um, the academic challenges.... well... I mean, academic language is very complex, and very dense, and very abstract, and, if you have any kind of learning disability, that is just gonna compound the issues they might already have. Because, um, part of you know, making learning easier for students with disabilities is to contextual things, and um, maybe offering different styles, like, more visuals, and in the academic environment, that is just non-existent really, so, you have this huge text book, and its dense, and, you know, doesn't have... it doesn't really offer a lot of alternatives.

I: There is only one format.

P2: Ja. And then also, a lecture, if they have Attention Deficit, and the lecturer, they are just speaking for an entire lecture and they just listen, um, that can be really challenging I would think, I mean, there is no... as far as I can tell, it seems like South Africa, in the universities, doesn't really have interactive learning. Student-centred approaches are not really adopted yet. In the US, student-centred learning is a lot more predominant in universities. Um so I would think that that would really...you know, it just doesn't seem like there is a lot of alternatives, there is just one style of teaching, and if you can't learn that way, you are in big trouble....

(Laughter).

I: You get left behind hey! So, what do you know about special accommodations for students with particularly, learning disabilities?

P2: Um, well they talk about reasonable accommodations, so um, it's not to water down the curriculum, but it's to allow more chances of success, so, um, you know, accommodating them in terms of time, giving them more time, um, maybe offering different ways for them to perform a task instead of just one way. Um, so, for example, if they have trouble writing, then maybe they would

have an opportunity to have an interview on assessment. I know our school used to do that, our college (meaning in the US)...

I: So you would have a verbal assessment?

P2: Ja, um, and also, you are really only talking about learning disabilities – not physical?

I: We can go into others, other accommodations.

P2: Our Disability Office had um, special screens that, large screens that make the text larger on the computer, or on paper. Um, I know that I used to read questions aloud sometimes to a student, they could write, they could do a test um, sometimes they would be removed from the classroom because the pressure of the classroom would be too much, so they could be in their own room with...with me or someone else there to read questions aloud so that they could have the two modes of learning.

I: And what type of disability was that accommodating?

P2: Um, (pause)... I honestly don't know, um, they would come with a paper, especially if they were diagnosed in high school, they would come with a paper, and then the paper would say what they needed. They would not usually say what disability....

I: Oh I see!

P2...because that was part of the issue. Whatever accommodation could be made...

(Pause).

I: Do you think these accommodations, do they advantage the student in any way? Or...

P2: You mean, over other students?

I: Ja.

P2: No, I think it just levels the playing field.

I: So, in general, do you think that, that if a lecturer knows that a student has had extra time or has used a word processor to do their exam, do you think they would mark any differently?

Pause.

P2: Um, I don't think so, because we had instructors that did not know a lot it but they knew that some students needed extra time on a test, but, um, I never observed them marking them harsher. They might have been resistant to it, you know "oh they shouldn't have it, that's not fair, you know, but I don't think they actually marked it differently.

I: I know there is a practice that I have picked up what they do in the UK, is that they use a sticker system, so, their exam script will have say... a yellow sticker, and then the lecturers are alerted to the fact that they must maybe, ignore spelling, that type of thing, because the person maybe has got some kind of dyslexia, and their spelling and grammar might be confused, and they should ignore it.

P2: That is interesting

I: What do think of that kind of practice?

P2: Um, I think that is fair.

I: It's a little bit different in *(identifying data removed)*, hey, because its, I mean, it's a language and is spelling quite important there, I mean, if you are just marking an exam script how important is the spelling in a language?

P2: Yeah, I mean, we are actually teaching things like spelling, and I know that like, on the *(identifying data removed)* and standardized tests, spelling counts against students. I wonder what *(identifying data removed)* does in terms of learning disabilities?

I: yes, I was wondering how it worked in *(identifying data removed)*, because I can understand maybe other faculties saying well, ok, spelling is not an issue for us, because they are learning about politics or whatever it is, but in *(identifying data removed)*,, I was not quite sure if you made accommodations like that?

P2: I mean, I have only been here a couple of years, and I haven't actually experienced a student with a learning disability myself, so I honestly don't know what teachers have done.... Um, I am trying to think of what we have done, if there was spelling issues. Well, it depends on what you are teaching, because, um, if you are teaching spelling (pause), actually, in the States we didn't teach spelling so much, we taught more – how to use spell check to your advantage, and more grammar kinds of things, because, I mean, rarely we are left alone to spell, usually we are using s spell check, you know – programme, so that's been less and less....

I: So would all the students use a spell check?

P2: (Nods yes).

I: Okay. It isn't only those maybe with a learning disability?

P2. Uh aah (no).

I: So if a student maybe with a learning disability was allowed to use a spell check and a grammar check in an exam, I mean, do you think that is fair over the others?

P2: Well, that...that is a little bit more fringy. That is another accommodation, we did allow people to use um, a dictionary, for some disabilities. Um, the thing is that you can get more from a dictionary than just spelling. You know, you can get definitions for words. So maybe if there was a special dictionary that only addressed spelling, that could be ... (pause).

I: Useful?

P2. Yeah. Um, but again, I am sort of of the mindset that if you allowed everyone to use a dictionary, then you are helping students with disabilities and it's a resource that can be used for the whole class. You could just design the test so that they could have some critical thinking, or other skill that they are using, whereas the dictionary is just there for support for everyone.

I: Ja, that really levels the playing field?

P2: Yeah, that is fair for everyone.

I: So do you know anything about universal design?

P2: No.

I: I have jumped around my questions a bit. Okay, so we have spoken about reasonable accommodations, you seem to know what they are. Um, (looking through interview guide), by default I have covered most of my questions. What do you think about students disclosing a disability, a learning disability, do you think it leads to labeling in any way? Or, what do you think of disclosure? Should a student disclose?

P2: I mean, that is a tough one, because if they disclose, it will help them receive more benefits, perhaps, if that system is in place that allows for that, then... the thing is, it could lead to labeling. That is why I have been drawn to inclusive school practices, because, um, by addressing an entire class as if someone could be disabled, you don't have to worry about that as much.

I: You eliminate the need for disclosure?

P2: yeah. Um, 'cause I know in the States for sure people use it as labeling and they can get quite nasty.

I: What do you know about Wit's support services for students with disabilities?

P2: I know they have them! (laughter). I have walked past the Offices! But I honestly don't know what they offer.

I: Do you know if there is a policy at Wits?

P2: No, I assume there is? But I don't know anything about it.

I: What services do you think maybe should be provided? Okay, let's broaden it up, not only for students with learning disabilities, but by a disability unit?

P2: Well, I think it would help if there was maybe some kind of counseling or advising, just to have a resource as to how to survive on a campus that might not be that inclusive.

(Laughter).

P2: And... I think they should advocate for students say, for building ramps, or for access. That is something that does shock me about South Africa, the access... I mean in the US you can't see a building without a working elevator or a ramp, like you just don't see it!

I: It doesn't happen hey!

P2: Yeah, I mean, here at Wits everything is vertical. And I can't imagine navigating this campus with disabilities, physical disabilities. Um, there are a lot of tools, you know, computer technology tools to help. I don't know a lot about them, I just know that they exist. I know that there is magnification screens for computers and text, and um, I think there is other computers for dyslexia. Um, I knew

someone who had a colleague at work that has a special computer for dyslexia. I am not sure what it did or how it helped but apparently it helped with just typing accuracy and reports, you know....

I: Ja there is amazing software now. The same software can be used for the visually impaired and hearing impaired and dyslexia, reading software, it will read what is on your computer or it will allow you to speak then write your...

P2: Good stuff. 'Cause we used to, ages ago, they used to hire students to read textbooks and then have recordings of textbooks....

I: Yes, I remember that, we used to volunteer to do that! (Laughter). I think also the fact that technology is advancing like this, it's just allowing more and more people to actually access higher education.

P2: Mmm mmm (yes).

I: But is just - do our practices allow them to access it?

P2: They could create awareness, lecturers, how to address special needs.

I: Who do you think should be advocating for students with learning disabilities?

P2: Disabilities Office, I think that would be their role.

I: And what do you think your School could do to increase awareness?

P2: That's a good question. In terms of the instructors?

I: Let's say, general disability awareness.

P2: I mean, I think, in-house training would be useful for all the staff and lecturers. And then for students, I mean it could be addressed..... it could trickle down, like maybe the lecturers could increase awareness in the classroom. It's just... I don't know a lot about the perceptions here. I know that in the US, there needs to be awareness because people will just assume that anyone with a disability has mental retardation, you know, just sort of clueless about it. And our disabilities offices deal with mental disabilities as well. So there is support for people with schizophrenia, or various mental diseases.

I: Is there any other experiences you want to share? Or thoughts or ideas on learning disabilities?

P2: Umm, yeah I mean it would be nice to know more about what to do and who the resource people would be, and be willing to talk about issues. I used to work closely with the disability office just to sort of know what to do when a certain issue came about and you know, how to act. 'Cause we had one woman who had a seizure disorder, and I think she had brain damage, so she had some sort of mental impairment. It was really helpful to hear from them what I could do and what I don't have to worry about, it was kind of a relief to know like... am I doing something right, am I going to send her to the hospital (laughter). She would have a seizure every time she had a test! So we had to do something different because... the stress, she just could not handle the stress. So you know, the instructor started giving her one page a day of the exam, just so that she would not be too stressed.

I: (Laughter). That's quite nice!

P2: Yeah!

I: That sounds like a "reasonable accommodation"! (Laughter).

P2: Because it was about learning the language. It was not about, you know, performing in a different way. You know, so...I mean. I just didn't want to send her to the hospital!

I: Oh dear!

P2: yeah, and also, we had some students with mental retardation at that school too, and of course they had trouble learning in an academic environment. But um, there is also the philosophy in the States, I dunno if it is true here in South Africa too, that they have a right to play and engage in adult activities if they want to, you know. And so, they ended up being quite a joy in the programme, because they weren't.... they did not do that well (laughter)... but they were learning and they were, you know, meeting people, and they were really sweet!

I: Oh gosh, that sounds wonderful! I wish we could get to that stage (laughter).

P2: Well it was a community college, so it wasn't like a competitive university. I think there are just different perceptions... (pause).

I: I think it benefits everybody, you know, the other people in the class as well.

P2: Absolutely. And coming from an (*identifying data removed*), Language / teaching background, I feel the same way about that, you know, anything that would help additional language learners is gonna help everyone in the classroom, you know.... It should be about learning, not necessarily about competition.

I: or doing it exactly in a prescribed way!

P2: Yeah, there should be alternative ways, because we do learn in different ways.

(Pause)

I: Okay, let me switch off.....