

Perceived challenges of serving students with disabilities in a historically disadvantaged tertiary institution, South Africa.

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Abstract

For students with disabilities in tertiary educational institutions, lack of necessary support services can render them socially and academically excluded and overly dependent. The study explored and described the perceived challenges of the staff of the Disability Unit at the University of Venda. A quantitative approach using semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from two participants who served in the unit. The work and physical environment were assessed. Though all the participants had disability related training coupled with 5-27 years' working experience in a disability environment, they indicated that they were overwhelmed with work pressure. In addition, the participants reported the institution being grossly understaffed. Disability prevalence in the study setting was 2% of the total student population. Most of the disability categories served included 34% (physically disabled) and 22% (partially sighted). Some of the challenges expressed by the participants included appalling sanitation conditions, poor and un-adapted facilities, and harsh physical environment. These results indicate that staffs at the Disability Unit at the University of Venda are overworked as a result of inadequate resources, shortage of staff and poor support systems. There is an urgent need for increased staff complement and support services.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, historically disadvantaged tertiary institution, challenges.

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Introduction

Disability in any form or shape is a phenomenon that has social, emotional and resource implications for individuals who are classified as functionally disabled. For many people with disabilities, assistance and support, including special services or care givers are prerequisites for their full participating in society (World Health Organisation: WHO, 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2011). According to Ramakuela and Maluleke (2011), integration of students with disabilities into higher education institutions presents

a number of physical, social and attitudinal barriers at various level of their education.

Prior to April 1994 in South Africa, the provision of education for students with disabilities has been shaped by the realities of the past socio-economic policies which denied marginalized groups including people with disabilities access to educational opportunities (Dube, 2005; Department of Higher Education and Training: DHET, 2012). As a result, students with disabilities have been identified in various governmental policy documents as being historically disadvantaged and deserving of special attention (Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM), 2011).

In tertiary institutions, the dynamics that militate against students with disabilities are multidimensional. Besides the fact that tertiary institutions are not initially and purposely built to accommodate students with disabilities like special schools, these students do face challenges in terms of gaining physical access to infrastructure, negative attitudes from others, lack of appropriate services and programmes (Johnson, 2006; Obiozor, Onu & Ugwoegbu, 2010; Zisser, 2011). Other critical and wider issues pertain to the curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, progression and social integration as well as the trauma of coping and managing their various disabilities (Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson, 2004; Obiozor, Onu & Ugwoegbu, 2010). These demands of a tertiary institution, therefore, place an enormous strain on both the institution and the student; hence if these students are not assisted or supported in a proactive way, their educational expectations will be unattainable. According to the Department of Education, Training and Employment (2012), it is pertinent to provide an array of special programmes and services to support students with disabilities with significant educational, health and social support needs within and outside the learning environment.

In South Africa, a number of tertiary institutions ranging from the most advantaged (University of Cape Town, University of Johannesburg and University of Pretoria) to the historically disadvantaged ones such as University of Venda and University of Zululand have embarked on establishing Disability Units (DU) to address issues affecting students with disabilities. According to the University of Free State (2012), its DU offers reasonable accommodation for students in the following categories:

- Visual impairment (partially sighted and blind students)
- Hearing impairment (deaf, deafened and hard of hearing students)
- Physical/mobility impairment (e.g. amputation, paraplegia, cerebral palsy)
- Learning impairment (e.g. dyslexia, attention deficit disorder)
- Speech impairment

- Mental/psychological impairment (e.g. psychiatric illness / condition)
- Others (e.g. epilepsy, chronic illness such as diabetes, arthritis etc.)
- "Temporary" disabilities (e.g. fractured arm or hand, back injury, some post surgical conditions etc.)

The philosophy behind establishing the DUs is to promote the equal participation of people with disabilities in all spheres of university life and to eliminate unlawful disability discrimination, including disability related harassment (Department of Education: DoE, 2005).

In the light of this, the staff of the DUs is expected to serve all students with disabilities and to ensure that disability issues are managed in terms of the available resources, rights and policies in the various tertiary institutions. Among key disability services that staffs of DU are purported to provide include:

- Awareness raising
- Auditing physical accessibility and assisting when access issues arise
- Provision and maintenance of assistive devices and equipment
- Provide academic and personal support
- Assist with applications for governmental bursaries and grants
- Ensure full inclusion of students with disabilities in all campus programs.
- Provision of specialist services etc (FOTIM, 2011; Anoka-Ramsey Community College, 2013).

According to Naidoo (2010), the first point of contact for many students with disabilities is the DU. In a study to explore the perceptions and experiences of learners with disabilities with regard to support in learning within the context of a DU at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Naidoo (2010) found that lack of resources, disproportionate ratio of staff to students and lack of funding impacted negatively on the academic success and development of students with disabilities. Naidoo (2010) also reported that lack of permanent staff at the DU resulted in delays in students receiving study and examination related materials.

In another study to explore the role, responsibilities and the current effectiveness of DUs in institutions of higher education in South Africa, FOTIM (2011) found that a number of DUs indicated that inadequate budgets affected their operation to service students with disabilities. For the staffs of the DUs, the main challenges facing them included lack of accessible office space, lack of permanent staff posts, and lack of commitment from management and academic staff to prioritise disability issues (FOTIM, 2011).

Another area of challenge to staff of DU pertains to voluntary disclosure of disability on the part of the students especially among those with hidden

disabilities. Tinklin et al. (2004) and Weedon et al. (2008) in their studies identified that disclosure and acceptance of the label of 'disability' was problematic for some students. One obvious reason for non-disclosure of disability status was to avoid labeling and social stigmatisation (Obiozor, Onu & Ugwoegbu, 2010).

Though the DUs and their staff are in an especially valuable position to help students with disabilities to attain their highest potential, they also encounter challenges in their quest to fulfill their institutional mandate pertaining to service provision for their clients (students with disabilities). It is against this background that this study sought to explore the challenges of serving students with disabilities by staff of the Disability Unit at the University of Venda, Limpopo Province.

Methodology

Study design

A descriptive quantitative design was adopted to explore the perceived challenges and experiences of serving students with disabilities by staff of University of Venda Disability Unit in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Population and sample

The study targeted the staff of the University of Venda DU. However, at the time of the study, only two were serving at the unit, hence all were recruited to participate in the study.

Instrument and data collection

A questionnaire was designed based on a range of literature and inputs from experts. The instrument was divided into five sections where section one was based on demographic information including disability profiles of students in the data base of the DU, section two focused on extracting information on various challenges encountered including work related challenges, sections three and four were based on assessment of the environmental conditions and services respectively. Section five solicits information on the experiences of the participants. The data collection approach used mainly self-administered and semi-structured questionnaire with Likert scale with closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaires were personally handed to the participants and collected at pre-arranged date. To ensure validity, the instrument was pre-tested on some staff members from other departments and their inputs were used to modify the instrument.

Ethical consideration

Prior to the start of the study, permission was obtained from the DU. A briefing session was held to explain the nature and scope of the study to the participants including the head of the unit who consented to participate in the study. Besides adhering to the principles of voluntary participation, the participants were also guaranteed confidentiality of their responses and anonymity of their identities.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were descriptively analysed and presented in percentages. Microsoft Excel was used to perform the analyses. In addition, qualitative responses to open-ended questions were also grouped and presented.

Results

The staff comprised 1(50.0%) male and 1(50.0%) female with 5 – 27 years of experience working in disability environment, respectively. In addition, one participant has a visual impairment. Figure1 gives a distribution of the various disability categories serviced by the staff of the DU. Most (34.0%, n=48) of the participants belonged to the category of physically disabled students who need no support, and followed by the partially sighted (22.0%, n=31).

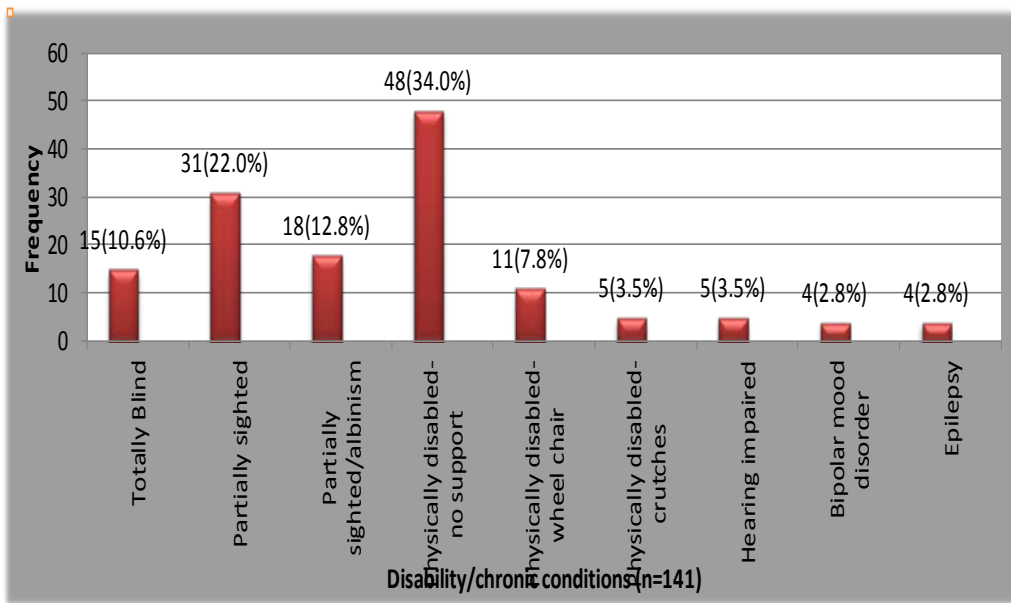


Figure 1: Various types of disability-categories served by the participants in the institution.

The participants maintained that they were overworked while the unit was understaffed. The staff/learner-with-disability ratio was 2:141. The participants reported facing the following challenges as a staff of the unit:

- Under-reporting of disability status to the unit by some students with disabilities.
- Reported cases of verbal abuses from students with disabilities perpetrated by non-disabled students and academic staff.

Participants’ assessment of the environmental conditions

The participants were asked to rate some key conditions in the learning environment which could be critical in the lives of students with disabilities. As shown in Table 1, the two areas with least rating (1=very poor) by the participants were sanitation and safety.

Table 1: Participants’ rating of the conditions in the study environment (N=2)

Conditions in the study	Highest rating	
	Participant 1	Participant 2
Environment	Participant 1	Participant 2
1. Physical environment	2(Poor)	3(Fair)
2. Buildings	2(Poor)	3(Fair)
3. Residence	2(Poor)	3(Fair)
4. Sanitation	1(Very poor)	1(Very poor)
5. Interior design	4(Good)	2(Poor)
6. New buildings	3(Fair)	2(Poor)
7. Safety	1(Very poor)	1(Very poor)
8. Equipment	2(Poor)	2(Poor)
9. Support	3(Fair)	2(Poor)

Participants rating of services provided to the students with disabilities by the DU.

Though there were small differences in the participants’ rating of disability and counseling services (Table 2), the major difference was in welfare service where the first respondent’s rating was “1=very poor” and the second rating was “5=very good”. Education and social services were equally (4=good) rated by both respondents.

Table 2: Respondents' rating of services provided in the study environment (N=2)

Services in the study environment	Highest rating	
	Participant 1	Participant 2
Education	4(Good)	4(Good)
Welfare	1(Very poor)	5(Very good)
Counselling	4(Good)	5(Very good)
Disability	3(Fair)	4(Good)
Social	4(Good)	4(Good)

Participants' responses to open-ended questions

Comments pertaining to physical barriers:

- “sheltered paths should be constructed.”
- “buildings not accessible. Lifts are absent or not working....”
- “in F4 Available showers are not accessible and in F3 only 2 baths are available.....”
- “classes conducted in foundation site are not accessible to the wheelchair bound during rainy days.”
- “students not informed in time about the constructions that obstruct the path ways.”
- “the whole campus does not have adapted toilets for disabled except in the Disability Unit building, F3 & F4 residences.” Comment pertaining to campus sanitation and hygiene:

- “during the weekends the dwelling place is very dirty.”

Comment pertaining to disability support material and assistive devices:

- “the university is currently equipping the Disability Unit with modern assistive technology and lagging behind in the library. Students are supplied with few assistive devices.”

Comment pertaining to dissemination of informationL

- “little or no information is promulgated.”

Discussion

Disability environment can be daunting in the sense that it is not only a question of dealing with human diversity alone; but it also requires dealing and assisting students with disabilities to manage and cope with various categories of disabilities in a learning environment. This is as a result of the fact that besides other duties and responsibilities, the staffs of DUs need to provide other functions such as:

- Auditing physical accessibility and assisting when access issues arise
- Provision and maintenance of assistive devices and equipment
- Changing materials into accessible format

- Provide academic and personal support
- Sorting out extra time for examinations and tests (FOTIM, 2011).

Against this background, it is imperative that institutions of learning should provide an array of special programmes and services to support students with disability with significant educational support needs within an inclusive education framework (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2012).

Although the DU of the University of Venda has a small staff size, it is quite rich in experience in terms of working in a disability environment because their experiences ranged from five to 27 years. It is, therefore, not surprising the participants reported that they were overworked and under-staffed. As found in the study, a staff-student-with-disability ratio stood at 2:141. This current finding corroborates the findings reported in other studies (Naidoo, 2010; FOTIM, 2011). Naidoo (2010) explored the perceptions and experiences of learners with disabilities with regard to support in learning within the context of disability unit at the University of KwaZulu Natal and reported lack of staff and disproportionate ratio of staff to students which had a major impact on the academic life of students with disabilities. In reaction to the disproportionate ratio of staff to students one participant stated:

“.. more than a hundred students and three permanent staff members. It’s just chaotic” (Naidoo, 2010).

FOTIM (2011) concurs with the above claim by stating that staff complements are generally not adequate except for the larger and more established disability units.

Other challenges reported in the present study by the staff at the unit included under-reporting of disability status to the unit by some students with disabilities and cases of abuses against students with disabilities by non-disabled students and academic staff. Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson (2004) and Weedon et al. (2008) in their studies identified that disclosure and acceptance to be labeled ‘disability’ was problematic for some students, especially those with hidden impairments who wanted to pass as non-disabled without being noticed. The reason for this is not farfetched. Obiozor, Onu and Ugwoegbu (2010) argue that a major reason for not disclosing their disabilities could be to avoid labeling and social stigmatization. Social stigmatization and stereotyping disability has the propensity of not only defeating the aim of disclosure but can also contribute to depression and withdrawal of some students with disabilities. In addition, this tendency can subsequently lead to under-budgeting, denial of support and services for the needy students.

Reported cases of abuses and hostility from academic staff and non-disabled students against students with disabilities served by the DU staff go to compound the challenge of serving this group of students. The right not to be abused or discriminated against on the grounds of disability is no longer a moral issue, but it is a legal and human rights requirement. This suggests that the tasks of running the disability unit in this institution are further compounded by resolving social conflicts as well.

Notwithstanding the generally good rating of some of the support services by the staff of the DU, issues of safety and sanitation in the institution were ranked very low. In their comments, participants also raised other challenges such as poor facilities, lack of assistive devices, harsh physical environment etc. These problems should be a concern for everyone especially the institutional managers. Unsuitable environmental conditions, inaccessibility of facilities and shortage of assistive devices can not only deny and deprive these students equal access to learning, but can also place the staff in the DU under severe and stressful working conditions which can dampen their morale.

Limitations of the study

Though the study revealed critical issues in a disadvantaged tertiary institution, it nonetheless, had a number of limitations. In the first place, the study involved very small population which can not be representative of all staff working at DUs in South Africa. Secondly, the study focused mainly on the personal encounters of the staff serving students with disability at only one DU; hence, the findings of the study can not be generalized.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that inadequate resources, shortage of staff and poor support systems are the challenging factors in serving students with disabilities at the University of Venda. There is need to increase staff strength, support services and to provide user-friendly facilities in order to effectively serve students with disabilities in this disadvantaged tertiary institution.

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