Kinds of Support Offered by the Disability Unit to Students with Disabilities at Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda
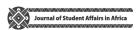
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Abstract

More and more tertiary institutions are now focusing on the mainstreaming and inclusion of students with disabilities. Some higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have established so-called Disability Units (DUs) to offer specialised services to students with disabilities, to facilitate access and integration of these students at their institutions. For many students with disabilities, the DU services are the first point of contact. These units work to facilitate access and ensure participation in the university for students with disabilities. This involves making "reasonable adjustments" and providing support for students with disabilities to ensure full participation and equal opportunities. Students with disabilities who will need support and alternative arrangements range from students with hearing impairments, visual impairments, physical impairments, health impairments (such as chronic illness), learning impairments, or psychiatric disabilities. Although universities, both locally and internationally, may systematise support in slightly different ways, many universities follow similar trends to accommodate and support students with specific disabilities as per their needs. Appropriate support systems in teaching and learning are vital in ensuring equal access for students with disabilities. The commitment of the institution to facilitating support and participation depends on its willingness to change admission, curricular and assessment procedures, as well as physical accessibility of the institution. We have seen from the literature that support for students with disabilities varies from country to country (Lane, 2017; Mantsha, 2016). We followed a qualitative research approach and adopted a case study research design to understand the phenomenon of student support better. We used classroom observations, document analysis and focus group interviews to collect data. Ten students with disabilities participated in the study. The study found that the DU of the university played an important role in supporting their studies. However, the students did not receive adequate additional support from their lecturers such as tutorials and differentiation of the curriculum. Shortage of learning materials specifically adapted for students with disabilities was mentioned as a weakness. The study recommends that lecturers should be trained on how to teach and support students with disabilities as this will enhance the quality of teaching and learning for these students. Other recommendations include that the DU should establish an online interactive portal for its registered students to increase communication between students and the university.

Keywords

disability; educational support; higher education institutions; inclusive education

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Introduction

In the past two to three decades, there has been a large influx of students with disabilities into institutions of higher education worldwide (Crous, 2004). In South Africa, information on the intake of students with disabilities was not recorded in the past three decades as services of this kind were not institutionalised. More and more tertiary institutions are now focusing on the mainstreaming and inclusion of students with disabilities. Some HEIs in South Africa have established so-called Disability Units (DUs) to offer specialised services to students with disabilities, to facilitate access and integration of these students at their institutions (Mayat & Amosun, 2011).

For many students with disabilities, the DU is the first point of contact. These units work to facilitate access and ensure participation in the university for students with disabilities. This involves making "reasonable adjustments" and providing support for students with disabilities to ensure full participation and equal opportunities. Students with disabilities who will need support and alternative arrangements range from those with hearing impairments, visual impairments, physical impairments, health impairments (such as chronic illness), learning impairments, to psychiatric disabilities (Crous, 2004).

Although universities, both locally and internationally, may systematise support in slightly different ways, many universities follow similar trends to accommodate and support students with specific disabilities as per their needs. Cheausuwantavee and Cheausuwantavee (2012) argue that appropriate support systems in teaching and learning are vital in ensuring equal access for students with disabilities. The commitment of the institution to facilitating support and participation depends on its willingness to change admission, curricular and assessment procedures, as well as physical accessibility of the institution. We have seen from the literature that support for students with disabilities varies from country to country (Lane, 2017; Mantsha, 2016).

In South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg seems to be ahead in supporting students with disabilities (University of the Witwatersrand, 2010). Besides their outstanding Assistive Technology services, some of their best practices include continual quality checks of scanned or edited student material, continually looking at adding to or improving their services and technology or adaptive devices, and annual evaluation forms to be filled out by their Disability Unit students. Moreover, what is quite impressive is the sensitisation and empowering of their students. For instance, the Disability Unit hosts teaching workshops to sensitise and educate university lecturers about teaching disabled students, organises a disability awareness week to create awareness amongst the University population, encourages Disability Unit students to introduce themselves to and liaise with their lecturers (using a letter of accommodation as a starting tool), and encourages Disability Unit students to attend various university workshops (e.g. CV-writing workshops) to aid them in their personal development.

From my experience, Wits is currently using the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA) as a forum for benchmarking best practices for DUs in South Africa. Many services available at Wits are now available in other universities as well, though it must be borne in mind that services differ from institution to institution.

Several studies have identified the types of services provided in postsecondary institutions (Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik & Whelley, 2005; Pingry, 2007; Michail, 2010), and these are summarised below.

Students with disabilities encounter more academic, attitudinal, and physical barriers while attending lectures than students without disabilities. Specifically, they are more likely than their non-disabled peers to have difficulty in the following areas: study/test skills, note-taking, listening comprehension, organisation skills, social skills, self-esteem, and reading/writing deficits (Pingry, Markward & French, 2012). Students also have concerns about the ability of the institutions to modify classroom environments to meet their needs. In this regard, students with physical disabilities, especially those who use wheelchairs, have considerable difficulty negotiating many campus environments/ classroom accommodations.

Classroom accommodation allows for student physical accessibility. Accommodation provided may include preferential seating, accessible seating, table-top desks, lap boards, and requests to academic departments for a class to be relocated to an accessible location. This was emphasised by Greyling (2008) when she stated that lecturers needed to consider external environmental conditions such as well-circulated ventilation for students with asthma, extra space in the classroom to manoeuvre wheelchairs, the desk size and level, and the seat itself to ease writing, especially for those using laptops to write notes. Accommodation may also provide students with disabilities the option to take frequent breaks or the ability to stand up or lie down during class (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2005; Mole, 2012; Pingry, 2007).

Most buildings that were built prior to 1994 are not easily accessible to those with disabilities and institutions are building ramps and lifts to make the buildings more accessible. According to the social model, a building should be designed in a way that it is accommodating of people with different abilities. The social model sees the disabling practices of society as the cause of disability rather than the individual with the impairment (Oliver, 1998; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1996). Where society puts up barriers, like stairs for wheelchair users or exam time constraints for people with learning difficulties, it produces disability. If educational institutions design spaces, lectures or activities to incorporate people with impairments, then these people will not be disabled but included. Thus, unsafe environments for students with disabilities are deliberate in this model according to Becker, Martin, Wajeeh, Ward and Shern (2002).

Reasonable accommodation includes accessible residences for students with disabilities. This is only a problem in the old buildings which were built before the enforcement of the building regulations. For the inaccessible buildings, students who need assistance in the performance of activities of daily living are afforded the opportunity to participate in training to improve their knowledge and skills in independent living. They are empowered by the responsibility which they share with the residential administrative team for hiring, training, scheduling, managing, and evaluating personal attendant staff. In my university, not all residences are accessible and that leaves students with disabilities with limited choices in terms of where to stay. Ultimately, there are residences for students with disabilities or where

a certain category of disability is dominant. The new approach (Social Model) to service provision requires providers to change their approach. Instead of looking at students with disabilities and seeing a deficit that needs to be accounted for by providing accommodation and negotiating different treatment (Medical Model), they are now looking at the campus and learning environments as factors for disablement. They need to be knowledgeable about physical, instructional and curriculum barriers (Mole, 2012).

Transportation services should provide accessible university transportation to students with disabilities through the university disability office (Pingry, 2007). I have seen the importance of adaptation of university transport as part of supporting students with disabilities. In many instances, students with physical disabilities, especially those who use wheelchairs, are likely to be excluded from educational tours because university transport has not been adapted to their needs. Educational tours also include Work Intergrated Learning (WIL) which is compulsory for all students.

In terms of adaptations, Mole (2012) argues that a key tool for implementing Social Model approaches to disability service provision is the concept of Universal Design (UD). UD is an architectural paradigm that provides seven principles of design. She further says, the design of products and environments should be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational approach to teaching, learning, and assessment that allows us to respond effectively to individual student differences (Wilson, 2017). This idea takes UD in the physical space to a teaching and learning level. UDL concepts have become more common in higher education. At its core, UDL encompasses three principles that lecturers should abide by in order to provide students with multiple means of representation, expression and engagement. This means that, to the extent possible, lecturers should provide content or materials in multiple formats, give students multiple ways to show what they know, and use multiple methods of motivating students (Kelly, 2014). Wilson (2017) adds that UDL acknowledges the unfairness of using one teaching approach, one form of assessment, or one type of curriculum that tends to privilege one type of student.

By incorporating UDL into lecturing, higher education lecturers can create learning space and online learning environments that are more inclusive of all students. UDL strategies often include but also go well beyond accommodations for students with disabilities, which become part of a larger strategy to meet all students' learning needs by providing materials in multiple formats (Pacansky-Brock, 2013). For example, captioned videos support not only students who are deaf and hard of hearing, but also English Language students. Many students value having access to multiple formats, as demonstrated in a study of community college students. When gathering information about students' preferences for consuming course content, Pacansky-Brock found that 40 per cent chose to read the lecture, 15 per cent listened to the lecture, 30 per cent did both (often at the same time), and 15 per cent toggled between reading and listening throughout the semester (Pacansky-Brock, 2013).

Studies (Pingry, 2007; Dell, Newton & Petroff, 2011) argue that accommodating students with learning disabilities provides them with the option to receive alternative format tests or assignments. Examples of alternative format testing or assignments may include an essay examination as a substitute for a multiple-choice examination, or a written paper as a substitute for an oral presentation. Alternative service includes converting study material into a more accessible format, scanning and editing of material, and conversion into Braille and electronic format (Moon, Todd, Morton & Ivey, 2012). If altering the test format fundamentally alters the nature of the course, this accommodation is not appropriate. In this regard, academics need to be trained on how to modify tests by not compromising the quality of the test. For example, if the test has a map that needs to be labelled, the question should be framed in such a way that it gives the same answer for both sighted and blind students (Mole, 2012).

Vogel, Leyser, Wyland and Brulle (1999) find that most faculties had no or very limited training around disabilities, and almost half indicated that they had limited knowledge and skills to provide requested educational support for students with disabilities. Interestingly, despite the limited knowledge base, a large majority of faculty expressed a supportive attitude towards students with disabilities by indicating their overall willingness (behavioural intent) to facilitate needed classroom accommodation in their courses. In fact, almost three-quarters of the faculty indicated that the average time they spent in accommodating disabled students was less than 30 minutes per week. It might be argued, therefore, that the limited time spent in accommodating disabled students is all that is necessary to meet the needs of students who requested such adaptations.

Where UDL is not implemented, there will be a need to provide distraction-reduced testing environments to students who have significant difficulty with concentration, or are highly distractible, or to avoid employing test strategies that may be distracting to those around them (Crous, 2004). Pingry et al. (2012) suggest that students with disabilities may greatly benefit from settings that minimise extraneous stimuli, and this may be especially true for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and mental disorders. Some students with physical disabilities may need a separate room to lie down or stand up to manage pain or muscular conditions. In my institution, we provide separate venues for tests and exams, and these venues are fully accessible.

Distraction-reduced testing accommodation allows students with disabilities to have an extended amount of time to complete tests. Extended time is recommended for students whose performance is compromised by a physical or cognitive disability that causes significantly slower reading, writing, recalling or organising. Students may be eligible to receive time and a half, double time, triple time or unlimited time. Not all students with disabilities need extra time. Bell (2013) states that students with hearing impairments are often eligible for additional time during assessment/examination periods. These arrangements may include extra reading time (usually 10 to 15 minutes per hour). In my institution, students get this kind of support. In most cases, they are given fifteen minutes per hour. From my experience extended time has its own challenges in that some students may require more than the postulated time depending on the type of disability.

Pingry et al. (2012) conclude that students whose disabilities fluctuate (depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes) may request a test date or an assignment date change so that they can complete the assignment/test when interference from their condition is minimal (Pingry, 2007). Students are expected to complete the assignment and tests within a reasonable amount of time from the test date and to notify the lecturer of the request in a timely manner. I think this still requires some training for academics to show them how to be flexible with regard to due dates for assignments and tests given to students with disabilities. The practice in HEIs is that if students miss test dates, they should apply for a special test provided they have a medical report or evidence for the absenteeism.

When looking at the support offered by the Disability Unit, one cannot ignore the use of Assistive Technology. Assistive Technology is available to students to maximise their ability to effectively complete course requirements. Dell et al. (2011) define Assistive Technology as any item, piece of equipment, or product system, modified or customised to increase functional capabilities of students with disabilities. Some of the adaptive resources and services include adaptive computers, tape recorders, talking calculators, sound amplification systems, television enlargers, voice synthesisers, specialised gym equipment, calculators or keyboards with large buttons, switches, and technology assessments and evaluations. Text conversion is also classified under this category. Text conversion includes the provision of textbooks and other course materials in an alternative format such as electronic/audio text, enlarged text, Braille, and raised graphics.

I have noted that e-learning is gaining momentum in HEIs nationally and internationally. Kahiigi (2013) defines e-learning as any learning method that uses Information Communication Technology (ICT) to support students in achieving their learning outcomes. Kahiigi comments that e-learning and disability in higher education is evaluating current practice and exploring the tools, methods and approaches available for improving access to online learning.

Most people working within the higher education sector understand the importance of making e-learning accessible to students with disabilities, yet it is not always clear exactly how this should be accomplished (Seale, 2013). Seale mentions lecturers, professors, classroom designers, learning technologists, student support services, staff developers, and senior managers and administrators as the key stakeholders that should be involved in e-learning. UNIVEN has state-of-the-art Adapted Technology laboratories within the DU.

One of the most prominent findings that emerged from Giangreco, Prelock and Turnbull, (2010) was that classroom assistants were in close proximity on an ongoing basis to students with disabilities. Evidence of this is seen in by (i) the classroom assistant maintaining physical contact with the student (e.g. shoulder, back, arms, hands) or the student's wheelchair; and (ii) the classroom assistant sitting in a chair immediately next to the students. This accommodation applies to students who require an in-class assistant or an assistant at the campus library to complete course requirements. Classroom assistants may include a scribe, reader, lab assistant, library assistant or mobility assistant. A library assistant for students with disabilities is available at UNIVEN and there is a special designated area

where students can access adapted technology. Classroom assistants should be provided with competency-based training that includes ongoing, classroom-based supervision by academics.

Classroom assistants can also include tutor and study skills assistance. This service provides one-to-one weekly, biweekly or, as needed, appointments with the learning disabilities specialist to work on strategies for test preparation, test-taking, reading comprehension, written expression, organisation, goal setting and achieving, and problem solving/crisis management (Peña, 2014). UNIVEN is using mentoring and tutoring systems to support students with disabilities.

A note-taker service is another form of classroom assistance. Faculty members may provide students with a copy of their personal lecture notes. When faculty members are unable to provide notes, the DU or the professor should recruit individual note takers – ideally, teacher assistants or other students in the classes. Faculty members are notified of students' eligibility for note takers in the form of accommodation agreements, which are mailed or student delivered. Requests for this service must be supported by appropriate professional and reasonably current documentation.

Interpreting services are available to students who have a documented profound hearing loss or deafness. These services are available in the classroom and for university-sponsored events that require an interpreter. Bell (2013) argues that registered students with a hearing impairment at Stellenbosch University do not make use of the South African Sign Language (SASL) but this changed in 2017 when the 2016 Language Policy of Stellenbosch University included Sign Language as a medium of communication for deaf students who have Sign Language as their language of learning. Since 2017, there are two SASL interpreters for two deaf students who use SASL as the language of learning (Muller, 2017). My observation is that students with deafness find it difficult to access HEIs in South Africa because of their poor matric results. To improve the situation, the Limpopo Department of Education is offering training on SASL to special school educators. At present, students who are accessing HEIs are those with profound hearing loss and who have attended regular classrooms.

Counselling services are also an important part of academic support and classroom assistance in HEI settings. This service includes student participation in individual counselling and/or support groups provided by the university disability office. Support groups are available to students with ADHD, learning disabilities and students with mental disorders (Greyling, 2008). These support groups meet on a regular basis and provide students with support, social interaction and problem-solving strategies.

Physical therapy and sports training services provide students whose disabilities significantly limit the effective utilisation of the fitness and recreational resources and programmes which are otherwise available to students, with an opportunity for strength development, physical conditioning and functional training. Through participation in different sporting codes, students with severe physical disabilities are afforded an opportunity

to maximise their functional potential, relieve stress and increase their tolerance relative to the rigorous demands of campus life through the milieu of adaptive exercises. Participation of students with disabilities in different sporting activities is decreasing at UNIVEN. The reason behind this might be lack of staff members who are knowledgeable about different sporting activities that students with disabilities can participate in. Physical therapists and graduate assistants aid students in developing and implementing personal exercise programmes, particularly for developing and maintaining a range of motions, strength and conditioning. Staff can also assist students with a transfer of skills, for example, getting back into a wheelchair from the floor, manual wheelchair skills, and gait training with or without Assistive Technology (Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall, 2004). Supplemental to the active therapy programme, a limited number of physical agents is available for the treatment of acute and chronic musculoskeletal injuries and dysfunction.

There is a critical lack of funds to support students with disabilities in higher education in South Africa, both for the individual student and the institutions. Institutions are currently not meeting their human rights responsibilities because of the high financial cost of supporting students with disabilities. NSFAS is currently the only state funding body in South Africa and, therefore, very few students can access higher education and succeed in their studies (CHE, 2005). NSFAS guidelines are formalised and geared towards the payment of Assistive Technology. The revised NSFAS guidelines do fund human support (scribes, sign-language interpreters and note takers, etc.) to the same value per year that they fund Assistive Technology for students who need these. Intensive lobbying by HEDSA enabled this broader view of support to students, instead of the narrow view that assistance only comes in the form of Assistive Technology.

Methodology

Since we sought to explore the phenomenological experience of how students with disabilities see the educational support they receive from this university, we followed an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach helped us understand the experiences from the perception of the students themselves, based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Thus, rather than looking at generalising the findings (as is the case with quantitative studies), or attempting to produce an objective record of a phenomenon or observation, within this paradigm we adopted an idiographic and hermeneutic mode of inquiry, where we focused on the importance of bringing to the fore their in-depth experiences (Kidd & Kaczmareck, 2010; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005), whilst at the same time attempting to make meaning out of their lived experiences through own interpretation (Smith & Osborne, 2008).

Sampling

To elicit in-depth data from an insider perspective of the educational support offered to students with disabilities, we purposively selected only a small number (10) students (Creswell, 2013). A purposive sampling strategy allowed us to find only a defined group

(students with disabilities) for whom the research problem was relevant and of personal significance. In addition, the strategy allowed us to address (i) interpretative concerns (degree of similarity or variation that can be contained in the analysis of the phenomenon), and (ii) pragmatic considerations (ease or difficulty of contacting potential participants, and relative rarity of the phenomenon) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Moreover, this small number helped us: (i) to do an in-depth analysis of those students who were educationally supported; (ii) to gauge the richness of the individual cases, within the focus group; and (iii) to take advantage of an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals, whilst keeping the amount of qualitative data within reasonable limits.

Data collection

The study used three methods of data collection: observations, focus group interviews, and document analysis.

Observations

We spent some periods in lecture halls where students with disabilities attended lectures to observe how they were supported during these. We began by planning and having informal discussions with the lecturers of the respective modules to explain the project and to familiarise ourselves with the lecture halls and the library. Also, these informational discussions were meant to clarify any misunderstanding of the project. Secondly, it was to encourage the students to feel free to talk. During these visits we observed a variety of activities, including the learning environment (classrooms, toilets, sporting facilities, etc). After the informal discussions, we made formal appointments to visit the classrooms for observation of lessons and interviews with two teachers in each of the four schools. We adopted the participant-observer stance because it enabled us to see how things were organised, prioritised, and how lecturers related to all students in the lecture halls throughout the University. The approach also helped us to become acquainted with their cultural nuances, which assisted us a great deal in easing tensions and making the research process easier and better. Three lessons were observed with each lecturer, and after every observation we engaged the lecturers in unpacking some of the engagements we noted during the lessons and in the physical environment.

Focus group interviews

We used the research questions to guide the interview process. Thus, although the research questions were established prior to the interview sessions, we allowed the participants the latitude to supply the depth and breadth of information they were willing to divulge with very minimal interruptions. This form of interviewing enabled us and the participants to engage in a constructive dialogue whereby initial questions were modified in the light of their responses. This also allowed us to probe interesting and important areas that arose, whilst we kept their interest and concerns in mind (Smith & Osborne, 2008).

Document analysis

The document analysis entails a scrutiny of relevant documents, which can be a valuable source of information (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004). Document analysis involved looking at national and institutional policies on disability, the teaching and learning policy, assessment policy, tutoring and mentoring policy, learning materials and timetables. Creswell (2013) points out that one of the limitations of using documents is incompleteness of many reports, statistical records and historical documents, with gaps in the database that cannot be filled in any other way, as well as bias in documents not intended for research. Nevertheless, I used the documents to verify the data collected through focus group interviews and observations. A combination of procedures enabled me to validate and cross-check the findings. Since each data source has its own strengths and weaknesses, the strength of one procedure can compensate for the weakness of another (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis

We used a model of observation to generate the data. The model followed Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theoretical framework. We started by doing a pre-observation conference where we first discussed teaching and learning for students with disabilities with the lecturers and students in the sample. This was then followed by the actual observation and finally a post-observation conference where the observed lessons were discussed. The lessons were video recorded for reflective deliberations. More specifically we observed: first, whether the physical environment was conducive for learning or not. Second, how the curriculum was adapted and differentiated to make the lecture rooms more inclusionary. Third, we wanted to see if lecturers paid any individual attention to those students who experienced barriers to learning.

We used the IPA framework to understand how students with disabilities are supported. Analysing qualitative material using the IPA framework was quite an inspiring activity, although fraught with complexities, and was time-consuming (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Smith, et al., 2009). It allowed us to move between the emic and etic perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). We achieved the latter by looking at the data through a psychological lens, interpreting it with the application of psychological concepts and theories which we found helpful to illuminate the understanding of how the students with disabilities experienced educational support. But, to guard against any form of reductionism, we allowed the data to talk to us. On the other hand, by looking at data from an outsider's perspective, we had a chance to develop a theoretical understanding.

Whilst adopting these techniques, we were cognisant of the fact that within the phenomenological paradigm there are no prescriptive methods for data analysis, since IPA studies are generally context-specific and subject to the research objectives. This allowed us to be inductive (Smith et al., 2009) as we allowed for movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared amongst the participants of the focus group. We also moved from the description of the experience to an interpretation of the experience and strove for commitment to understanding the viewpoints of the different participants in the focus group. Finally, we focused on personal meaning-making within the group.

Within these guidelines, we based our data analysis and interpretation on a seven-step analysis comprising: (i) transcription; (ii) reading and re-reading; (iii) initial noting; (iv) developing emergent themes; (v) searching for connections across emergent themes; (vi) analysing subsequent cases; and (vii) looking for patterns across cases (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), which we briefly outline hereunder.

During the initial step audio recordings were transcribed and textual data were analysed. But, before the actual transcription, we listened to the audio recording of the interview session repeatedly. This enabled us to immerse ourselves in the data and it helped us recall the atmosphere of the interview and the setting in which it was conducted. Field notes we made during the interview sessions were equally incorporated in the transcription process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

The participants were asked to share their experiences on the support offered by their institution/DU. The overall impression was that the services offered by the DUs are well received by students and positive comments about DUs (with some exceptions) were received. Six students with various disabilities agreed that the DU was giving them academic support to succeed in their studies. This was clearly stipulated in the UNIVEN Disability policy draft (2013) in Section 6(e), which stipulates that the DU provides a number of services including computer facilities, Brailled exam papers and notes, and lending Assistive Technology to students with disabilities. The policy further states that the existing levels of service will be maintained within resource constraints and subject to annual reviews.

UNIVEN Disability policy draft (2013) was affirmed by the following statements:

Our university built us a DU that supports us with materials. For instance, they converted my materials from sight to braille. I access the computer whenever I want, during the day. And also, the university understands that I can't stay in a double room, so they gave me a single room. (Participant 8)

Participant 3 commended the DU for the support they give by saying:

DU offers certain devices to all disabled students.

This was further confirmed by Participant 5 when she said:

I was grateful this year. The DU offered me a pebble handheld magnifier to read any font size that I want to read. So, it makes things easier. They also gave me a PlexiTalk to enable me to record my lecturers. I can play the recorder before I sleep or before I go to the library. I can also make notes of everything that was done in class. I don't rely on other students to get information for me.

Similar comments were uttered by Participant 2:

> The DU is certainly working. They offered me a purple reader, something that I use when studying, like when I can't see the font size. This eases my studies.

Although the service offered by DU is commendable, the early closing times of the lab are a problem to students with disabilities. This was evident in the words of Participant 10:

> I think the Disability Unit offers good service, but my problem is that the lab closes too early. Sometimes you will find that we have many classes during the day, and when you want to go to the lab it's closed. I suggest that the lab times be revised to allow students to do their work. Sometimes it becomes difficult when you want to finish your assignment which is due the next day.

The participants pointed out that there were only two adapted labs on the campus, one in the library and another one in the DU, but they all close at the same time. Participant 1 added that:

> Also the closing time of our library section is not appropriate. The library closes the same time as the lab. They both close at the same time at 16:45. So if the library section can function during the normal library hours it would make the work of many disabled students easier.

Students were then asked to comment on the additional support they would want the institution to offer. They had to identify the gaps in the support offered by DU in relation to their disability needs. Literature showed that "Nothing about us without us" (Fotim, 2011). The participants commented that they needed extra classes in difficult courses, mostly those that involved calculations. Participant 2 shared his experiences:

> Eh, for me because some of us are doing courses like economics, accounting, and they involve a lot of calculation and numbers, I just feel that they should have additional classes for people like us because you can't see what the lecturer is writing on the board, even when we're seated in the front row; it is just a waste of time, really. They must schedule additional classes for us so that they can help us, so that we feel accommodated. What happens to most of us now is that we must rely on our friends or colleagues. Most of the time you have to beg them.

Consultation of lecturers by students with disabilities was raised as another problem that HEIs should also look at. Students with visual impairments cannot access offices as there are no office numbers in Braille. Participant 8 added:

> Ok, let me not complain and say it straight. The offices of our lecturers must be identifiable, ma'am. I don't want to ask someone to read the name on your office, ma'am Mbuvha. I must do it myself. They must write their names also in braille so that I can go to the lecturer any time I want.

Teaching and learning was also identified by Participant 5 as a problem that needs attention:

> Eh, as a history student when you get to the lecture hall, the lecturer will just teach, maybe write some notes on the board and she will say, there are prescribed books, you must go to the library and get them. Ok, as a good student I go there, but only to be told that the books are only three in the library and that they have all been taken. So, you must wait for two weeks for the books to come back. The assignment might be due tomorrow and when you go back to your lecturer to ask for extension maybe she will agree. If she agrees, you go back to the library get the book and you find that the book is scratched, marked and there are pen marks all over the book, so it makes it difficult for you to scan and read the book. So I'd like to suggest that possibly the library should hand over some books to the DU.

Participant 2:

> I think at the beginning of the year you should compile all the books we will need during the first semester and second semesters. Then these books are requested from the library so that when the students want a chapter from the book as prescribed by the lecturer, they get it from here and everything is done here. In this ways, the book will be safe there won't be any torn pages and stuff like that.

Participant 1 added:

> … Or the books should be kept in our library section in the library, since we're the only ones who are allowed to get in there. Knowing that there are students who can't see, our colleagues will not mark these books or tear the pages. They'll keep the books clean at all times.

Participant 5 suggested the following:

> I was suggesting that DU should compile the prescribed books we are going to need. Maybe the students must submit their course outlines to the DSU so that these prescribed books can be brought down here, because sometimes even though they can take it to the books to the lab in the library, you will find that you will have to scan them out in the library and bring them here and it is time-consuming. But when these books are around here I can come to a staff member in the DU and say I need this book and he or she will be able to go take it and scan it.

Participant 8 added:

> … still on the issue of books, it seems to be a big issue all along. I mean the disabled students have been here for more than two decades now, so I think that the DU must not delete the books that have been scanned. The books must be there in the system so that the other students can get the materials. It is also easier that way rather than students scanning the same book every year. If such books are saved, it'll be easier for the students to get them.

Participant 2 suggested the following:

> You can also ask the library if possible to ask the publisher to deliver the books with software, link the books (the book in a software format) so that it will be easy for the DSC to access the book without taking the physical copy.

On the question of learning materials, Participant 8 concluded that:

> Because of the use of braille books, I depend more on DU to be more friendly. I take the book there and they are able to braille it. I don't know, maybe our library does not have good ties with the braille service, but what we experienced in my special school is that they had a machine which was able to braille books and they were even brailing books for some schools. I don't know if the university can stretch further and buy that kind of machine and hire a person to braille books because ma'am, blind people find it difficult to access information. I can read a novel if the DU can braille a novel for me.

The participants were asked to comment on the following statement: "Students feel their lives are micro-managed by support services, rather than having service providers focus on individual needs. Student needs must be determined by the students themselves, rather than administrators." Participant 1 responded, by stating the following:

> I think that statement is true; our life and needs are being macro-managed because if a person is going to stipulate what I should do without knowing what I'm going through with my disability, it can be futile at the end of the day because whatever they bring or produce, if it is not consistent or in line with the kind of disability I'm having, at the end of the day whatever they do will be nothing. But if I'm the one who is providing the information to them, telling them what I'm experiencing and I know what can help me, I think I'd become more productive.

It is worth noting that the participants anonymously agree that students are responsible for their learning needs. Participant 8 added that:

> … we as disabled people we are not stagnant, we are not rigid, meaning that if I use braille, I can't just use braille all the time. At some point I might prefer interning; at another I might prefer software. So, as a student, I need to have some space of informing the administrator that today I want to listen and the administrator must try his or her best to give me that device.

The study found that students with disabilities appreciate the academic support offered by the University of Venda DU, and students stated that the support had an impact on their performance. These findings are consistent with those reported by Troiano, Liefeld and Trachtenberg (2010). Troiano et al. (2010) investigated the way 262 students with LD related to their academic support centre, as well as student achievement. Their results showed that students who consistently attended academic support centre appointments had higher rates of success than those who did not attend or who did not attend consistently.

In England, Vouroutzidou, (2011) found that, even though the majority of the students expressed a general satisfaction with the services they receive from the institution, there were some complaints about the DU and about some other members of staff. It was found that complaints were related to the bureaucratisation of the disability services. I think that educational support should be the responsibility of all structures of the university, not just those people appointed in a specialised disability support office. CHE (2005) stresses that the whole campus is responsible for fostering a diverse campus climate and for addressing the students' diverse needs. It should not be the responsibility of the DU alone, although the crucial role they play is appreciated. All the participants spoke highly of the DU and the commitment of the staff. Staff at the DU seem to play a significant role in advocating for students' needs in university services and facilitating communication between the faculty and students with disabilities.

South African researchers (Crous, 2005; CHE, 2005; Greyling, 2008; FOTIM, 2011) found that in many instances, DUs are still playing a pioneering role in terms of academic support for students with disabilities. They found that support offered to students with disabilities may differ from university to university and the support offered might be somewhat similar. However, a flexible design of support will ensure that individual differences and needs are accommodated and support is provided. Results from these studies confirm that HEIs are practising the Social Model of service provision to make all aspects of university life accessible from the onset.

Conclusion

The study found that the DU of the university played an important role in supporting their studies. However, the students did not receive adequate additional support from their lecturers such as tutorials and differentiation of the curriculum. Shortage of learning materials specifically adapted for students with disabilities was mentioned as a weakness. The study recommends that lecturers should be trained on how to teach and support students with disabilities as this will enhance the quality of teaching and learning for students with disabilities. Other recommendations include that the DU should establish an online interactive portal for its registered students to increase communication between students and the university.

I view the present investigation as a preliminary attempt to develop a comprehensive model of inclusive education in higher education in South Africa. Our findings, though not transportable to novel contexts, highlight chronic and cumulative adversity students with disabilities are faced with. These adversities so far lack clear-cut solutions. Medical and diagnostic constructs have not provided adequate answers either (Mole, 2012).

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