

# Promoting Support Services of Special Education Units for Enhancing Educational Achievements of Students with Disabilities in Tanzanian Universities

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## Abstract

*This study examined support services offered by special education units in promoting quality education for students with disabilities in Tanzanian universities. It employed a qualitative approach under multiple case study design. The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam at the University of Dar es Salaam (Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere Mlimani Campus and Dar es salaam University College of Education). Two disability specialists and ten students with disabilities were purposively sampled. Findings revealed shortage of trained disability personnel and disability specialists were more committed to handling academic and administrative duties rather than social and psychological roles. Thus, support services offered by the special education units should expand beyond traditional educational and administrative roles to address social and psychological needs of students with disabilities.*

**Keywords:** *special education units, students with disabilities, support services, university*

## Introduction

In recent years, more and more tertiary institutions have been focusing on the mainstreaming of students with disabilities worldwide. This is due to the call for increased inclusivity within universities with the claim that it should be the university's responsibility to respond to the needs of all students (Morina, 2017). Initiatives for inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream of tertiary institutions involve making reasonable adjustments and providing support services for students with disabilities to ensure full participation and equal opportunities in learning (Mbuva, 2019). In order to respond to the diverse needs of students with disabilities, units have been established to offer specialised support services

to those students (Al-Hmouz, 2014; Kija, 2017; Mbuva, 2019; Mgumba, 2018). Units coordinating support services for students with disabilities in higher education institutions (HEIs) have been given a variety of names including Disability Unit, Special Education Unit and Disability Support Unit (Bhalalusesa, 2012; Fakoya & Fakoya, 2015; Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM), 2011). Mbuva, 2019). This article uses the name *Special Education Unit* to refer to the office responsible for provision of special support services to students with disabilities in HEIs.

In America, postsecondary support services began to increase after World War II with the advent of a disability resource programme at the University of Illinois to assist veterans who needed rehabilitation (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), 2006; Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2002). However, the expansion of resources for students with disabilities in universities occurred after 1973 following the emphasis on the implementation of Rehabilitation Act which required institutions receiving federal funding to provide non-discriminatory equal access to programmes and facilities for individuals with disabilities (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2002). Most campuses experienced a significant growth in the number of students with disabilities. Consequently, the field of disability resources was developed to accommodate the influx of students with disabilities (Evans et.al.2017). At the beginning, disability services were housed in students' affairs. Other campuses chose to house the office in an academic department such as psychology, counselling, special education, or education (Evans et.al. 2017).

FOTIM (2011) surveyed the functions of special education units in South African HEIs. It was found that, functions of special education units varied greatly. The longer the unit had been in existence, the broader the scope of services to students with disabilities. Common responsibilities undertaken by special education units (though not all were offered in all institutions) included: policy development; awareness raising; auditing physical accessibility and assisting when access issues arose; provision and maintenance of assistive technology devices; changing learning materials into accessible formats; sorting out compensatory time for examinations and tests; assisting with applications for governmental bursaries and grants; counselling; negotiation when conflicts arose; acting as an accessible social hub for students to interact and socialise; as well as acting as diversity champions and change agents.

In Tanzania, Education for All (EFA) has been of great concern in the discussion of support services for students with disabilities. In 1994, the Government of Tanzania ratified the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. The Salamanca statement proclaims that every child has unique

characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs. Therefore, education systems and programmes should be designed and implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs in regular schools. In 2009, Tanzania ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability and its Optional Protocol. Article 24 of the convention recognises and emphasises on equal opportunity to education for persons with disabilities without discrimination. It calls for governments to provide a reasonable accommodation of the individuals' requirements and support services required within the general education system (United Nations, 2006). By ratifying those conventions and declarations, Tanzania committed herself to removing barriers in infrastructures, materials and educational services offered to students with disabilities. In that respect, the Government of Tanzania is committed to two goals: First, to ensure that systemic and structural barriers that obstruct certain groups of Tanzanians from realising their right to access, fully participate, learn, and complete education in all levels are removed; Second, to ensure that in all levels of education, all learners do learn together regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have (United Republic of Tanzania-URT, 2021). To realise these goals, the government of Tanzania has taken measures to address disability issues by formulating various policy guidelines and strategies such as the National Policy on Disability of 2004; Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010; the national strategy on inclusive education (2009-2017); the National strategy on Inclusive education (2018-2021); and the National Strategy for inclusive education (2021/2022-2025/2026).

In the same line, educational institutions at all levels have developed programmes that aim at supporting students with disabilities in realising their right to access, complete and benefit from the education system. The University of Dar es salaam (UDSM) with its constituent colleges is the pioneer in establishing the special education units at tertiary level dating back to 1978 when two students with visual impairment were enrolled (Kija, 2017). The units offer specialised support services to students with disabilities. These support services include: assistive technology support services; transcription and production of materials in accessible formats; ensuring test accommodation during examinations; sensitizing students with disabilities and the community on disability issues; purchasing and managing special facilities and materials for students with disabilities; providing technical support to university lecturers on issues related to teaching students with disabilities; rendering counselling services to students with disabilities; and ensuring social and physical accommodation for students with disabilities in learning (Harbour, 2009; Mbuyha, 2019; UDSM, 2022). Students with disabilities range from students with hearing impairments, visual impairments, physical impairments, learning disabilities, to those with emotional and behavioural disorders (Mantsha,

2016). UDSM has been and is serving students with hearing, visual, and physical impairments (Kija, 2017; Mgumba, 2018; UDSM, 2022). Special education units ensure that students with disabilities are enrolled in their academic programmes, attain reasonable accommodations, and have access to key services necessary to enable them achieve their academic and social goals. The Units are also expected to pioneer equality and equity for students with disabilities including disability mainstreaming in all policies and practices at UDSM (Kija, 2017; UDSM, 2022).

Best practices of UDSM in supporting students with disabilities worth noting include the outstanding services in the provision of material and human support to students with disabilities; maintenance of quality scanned and transcribed student material; and the use of modern assistive technology in the learning process (Kija, 2017; Mgumba, 2018). To ensure that students with disabilities get the appropriate services and in accordance with the university plans, UDSM has developed a policy on disability and special educational needs with five key objectives which aim at ensuring that prospective and current staff and students with disabilities are not discriminated during provision of services; anticipatory action is taken to provide inclusive access to University facilities and services; reasonable adjustments are put in place for staff, students, prospective staff and students with disabilities to enhance their productivity; equality of opportunity for students and staff with disabilities is established to promote their recruitment, retention, and progression; and, a positive working and learning environment for students and staff with disabilities is promoted (UDSM, 2022).

However, studies have indicated that in supporting students with disabilities, special education units are faced with a number of constraints. They include resistance from management and some faculty staff members; unavailability of disability policies; inadequate assistive technology and devices; lack of knowledge on assistive technology and special needs education to supporting staff; inaccessible infrastructures; transport constraints; communication barriers, unfriendly working environment and Health constraints (Al-Hmouz, 2014; Mbuva, 2019; Tungaraza, 2010; UDSM, 2022). Institution's leadership and staff play essential roles in providing effective special education services in the universities. They can not only accelerate inclusivity of students with disabilities in the mainstream learning environment but also expand knowledge of special needs education among members (Sun & Xin, 2020).

Various studies (Bhalalusesa, 2012; Kija, 2017; Lyakurwa, 2018; Mgumba, 2018; Rushahu, 2017) on provision of support services for students with disabilities in Tanzanian HEIs have been conducted. These studies revealed constraints that students with disabilities encounter when interacting and studying in HEIs.

However, little information is documented on support services offered by special education units in HEIs and the extent to which those services meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities in Tanzania. Thus, this study examined how support services offered by special education units can promote quality education for students with disabilities in Tanzanian universities. Specifically, the study explored barriers encountered by special education units, as well as psychosocial roles of the special education units in enhancing quality education for students with disabilities in Tanzanian universities.

## **Methodology**

### **Research approach and design**

The study employed a qualitative approach to studying behaviour. This approach allows in-depth and detailed understanding of the studied problem by interviewing participants in their natural settings and learning about the problem from their viewpoints (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, the approach allowed social intimacy, direct conversations and discussions between researchers and participants to take place. To effect the study, the researchers employed a case study design. A case study is used to develop in-depth analysis of a programme, event, activity, process, one or more individuals in real-life within a unique instance (Cohen, et al, 2018; Cresswell, 2014). A case study design was used to facilitate in-depth investigation of the operation of the special education units in offering support services to students with disabilities.

### **Area of the study**

This study was conducted in Dar es Salaam at UDSM (MJKNMC) referred to as IST.1 and DUCE referred to as IST.2. These HEIs were chosen because they have well established special education units that support students with disabilities.

### **Participants**

The research sample was derived from a population of students with disabilities and disability specialists. It consisted of 12 participants (six females and six males). Six participants were recruited from MJKNMC and six from DUCE, of whom, two were disability specialists and 10 students with disabilities. Among students with disabilities, two were in the first year, four in the second year and four in the third year. Research participants were purposively sampled based on their experience, expertise and accumulated knowledge on disability issues.

## **Data collection**

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to ask several basic questions while making follow-up to the given responses (Cohen, et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). Interviews were tape-recorded after seeking participants' consent. Thereafter, the researchers transcribed the recorded interviews into ink-print format. Data were subjected to thematic analysis. Themes and sub-themes were coded manually by identifying recurring themes in the transcripts. To arrive at a theme, the researchers categorised data with common elements. Multiple validating strategies including: using rich descriptions to convey the findings, presentation of discrepant information that runs counter to the themes; and, spending prolonged time in the field as proposed by Creswell (2007) were employed to determine the accuracy of study findings.

## **Consideration of research ethics**

Throughout this study, the researchers observed all research ethics including securing research permit from relevant authorities for entrance to the field. On top of that, the respondents signed an informed consent. The researchers ensured the participants on adherence to confidentiality, privacy and anonymity. The participants were free to join or withdraw from the study at any time without any harm or risk. All these ethical issues were considered prior to the field work, during data collection and during writing the report.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study examined support services offered by special education units in promoting quality education for students with disabilities in two sampled HEIs in Tanzania. This section deals with presentation and discussion of the study findings. The findings are presented under the following themes and subthemes. The main themes are: functions of special education units; barriers encountered by special education units; and, social and psychological roles of special education units. The sub-themes are: trained disability staff; adapted equipment and facilities; students' awareness of support services; statistics of students with disabilities; and, screening and assessment of students' disabilities.

## **Functions of special education units**

A special education unit is a section within the university administrative structure established to address the unique academic and social needs of students with disabilities (Mgumba, 2018). The idea is that each HEI must have a unit (be-it a department, centre or unit) that addresses both academic and social needs of



students with disabilities. Two disability specialists were interviewed on the responsibilities of special education units in supporting students with disabilities. The findings indicated that special education units were responsible for developing policies on special needs education; community awareness raising on disability issues; converting learning materials into accessible formats; ensuring physical accessibility; maintenance of assistive technology devices; purchasing, storing and distributing materials for students with disabilities; providing technical support to university lecturers on lecture delivery modes and examinations; guiding first year students with disabilities during annual orientation sessions; provision of psycho-social support to students with disabilities; acting as a bridge between the university management and students with disabilities in all administrative and educational aspects; and, supporting students with disabilities in the field during teaching practice and practical training sessions. Their responses combined social, educational, administrative and psychological roles. Mantsha (2016) notes that special education units offer specialised services to students with disabilities that facilitate their access and integration into mainstream faculties.

### **Barriers encountered by special education units in HEIs**

Concerning barriers encountered by special education units in supporting students with disabilities in the sampled HEIs, responses from participants identified five barriers, namely shortage of disability specialists; inadequate adapted equipment and facilities; limited students' awareness of the available support services; poor record keeping of students with disabilities; and, absence of screening and assessment services of students' disabilities in their course of learning. They revealed that IST.1 owned a policy on special needs education that was referred to as a *Policy on Disability and Special Educational Needs*, which was approved in 2022. IST.2 did not have its own policy. However, one participant said, "The institution is in the process of preparing its own policy". She emphasized:

In actual fact, there is no policy that guides the provision of support services to students with disabilities. A committee is formed to steer the preparation of the policy. However, much has been done to support students and staff with disabilities. Currently, students with disabilities receive all educational and social services from the university through the existing special needs education unit. For lecturers with visual impairments, the university has also employed personal assistants whose number is equal to the number of lecturers. Therefore, all lecturers with visual impairments have personal assistants. (Reported by one female disability specialist from IST.2).

The above quotation implies that, whereas the special education unit at IST.1 implemented its functions in accordance with the available policy, IST.2 provided services to students and staff with special needs by responding to the needs as they emerged. However, it was noted that provision of services to students and staff with disabilities in this institution was effective. On top of that, by the time this article was developed, a committee for developing a policy on disability at IST.2 had been commissioned to ensure that there is a comprehensive policy that provides commitments and guidelines on provision of support services to students with disabilities.

### **Trained disability staff**

Findings from interviews revealed that there was a shortage of trained human resources to administer services in the special education units. Both units were running shortage of trained staff such as note-takers, human readers, special education teachers, Braille transcribers and sign language interpreters. At the same time, it was indicated that the units lacked assistive technology specialists, physiotherapists, audiologists, speech-language pathologists, orientation and mobility specialists, sighted guides, ophthalmologists, rehabilitation counsellors and mentors.

One transcriber can save three students with visual impairments and two human readers per student (Kija, 2017). Participants reported that IST.1 had four Braille transcribers, four sign language interpreters and 45 readers to serve 151 students with disabilities. On the other hand, IST.2 had two Braille transcribers, one sign language interpreter, one speech therapist and 23 human readers/note-takers to serve 62 students with disabilities. Analytically, both special education units had a large number of students with disabilities compared to the number of trained staff to save them. The available trained staff, although limited in number were only in two categories: braille transcribers and sign language interpreters. Human readers/note-takers on the other hand, were recruited without any specialised training and worked under contractual bases. Indeed, both special education units experienced a mismatch between the number of students with disabilities and trained staff. Disability staff had a higher working load than the required standard. Studies by Al-Hmouz (2014); Kija (2017); Mbuva (2019); and FOTIMU (2011) affirmed that shortage of human, financial and physical resources has been an agenda for discussion in education for students with disabilities worldwide. Proper allocation of human and financial resources for students with disabilities depends to a great extent on the availability of reliable statistics of students with disabilities; well stipulated disability policies; institutional financial position, priority level, and community member's awareness of disability issues. Interestingly, it was noted that both special education units had moved further ahead by purchasing tri-motorcycles for smooth shuttle of students with disabilities.



## **Adapted equipment and facilities**

Interview responses indicated that the special education units encountered shortage of adapted equipment and facilities such as hearing aids, heavily lined booklets, white canes, crutches, wheelchairs, talking calculators, computers installed with screen readers, perkins brailers, braille/talking watches, closed-circuit televisions, voice recorders, magnifiers, refreshable braille display, braille embossers, scanners, thermoform machines, talking dictionaries and braille books. Since most of these facilities were purchased during the establishment of the units, most of them were outdated and worn out; therefore, they required a serious repair. One participant revealed the extent to which support services in the special education units were affected by inadequate trained personnel and facilities. He explained:

In our university, each student with disability has an assistant employed by the university and most of the materials are transformed in accessible format such as braille, large print and audio. Our university has almost all facilities we need. However, we do not have technicians specialised in repairing those facilities. (Reported by a second year female student with disability from IST.2).

All in all, the importance of adapted equipment and facilities for students with disabilities in HEIs is emphasized by Mantsha (2016) who considers availability of adaptive equipment/technology (adjustable chairs and desks, table lamps, hearing aids, book turners, Perkins Brailers, talking calculators, braille, large print, audio materials) as an important aspect in promoting learning of students with disabilities in HEIs.

## **Students' awareness of support services**

Concerning students' awareness of support services offered by the special education units, data from interviews revealed that disability specialists used to hold meetings to enlighten students with disabilities on the available support services. However, students with disabilities reported unavailability of accessible written materials about support services leading to their limited awareness. A second year student with disability from IST.2 emphasized the following:

Most of the students with disabilities joined the university with no information on the available services for students with disabilities. As a student with visual impairment, I could not access information in the campus which is in ink print. Even if they displayed information on the notice boards, I could not

access it. I, however, realized later that even the campus notice boards did not supply information on services the university renders to students with disabilities. Therefore, some of the students with disabilities remain uninformed until they are notified by lecturers during lecture sessions.

In critical situations, students with disabilities may present themselves and request for appropriate support services. However, according to Getzel and Thoma (2008) and Matonya (2016), this is always not the case; first-year students may not know which adjustments are available to them at the university. Access to services depends on physical, communication and information manipulation by students with disabilities. All in all, it is the responsibility of the university to publicise and provide the recommended adjustments that will give the student access to quality education.

### **Statistics of students with disabilities**

The findings from interview with disability specialists revealed that record-keeping systems in the studied HEIs were not designed to collect information on students' disabilities, types of support services needed and ways of accessing them. As a result, there was no correlation between the number of enrolled students with disabilities and support services offered. It was reported by the disability specialist from IST.2 that, the special education unit had maintained a register of students with disabilities who received disability related services, but the register was not comprehensive. She emphasised:

We are facing a serious problem in obtaining the accurate numbers of students with disabilities because some of them are reluctant to disclose their disabilities. Worse still, in the administrative structure of the university, there is no officer who tracks students with disabilities during admission time. Because of that, it is not easy to estimate the real demands of services and facilities needed for them to achieve their educational goals successfully.

The situation revealed by the participant in the quotations above is a clear evidence that universities have not established a database for keeping records of students with disabilities leading to ad hoc planning of support services. Ad hoc planning limits proper performance of the special education units. The planning of support services to be offered by these units ought to be collaborative; that is involving students with disabilities and the team of experts from various disciplines. Absence of disability statistics has made special education units more reactive in their approach to provide support services. This means that HEIs start thinking

of students with disabilities after their arrival. They have to adopt a pro-active approach by determining disability affairs in advance so as to create a conducive learning environment prior to the opening of universities (Kija, 2017).

### **Screening and assessment of students' disabilities**

Concerning the screening and assessment of students' disabilities, it was revealed by braille transcribers that their offices did not have experts and facilities for disability testing and screening. It was further stated that university academic and administrative staff relied solely on information communicated to the universities by students themselves during registration. One disability specialist from IST.2 stated:

Students tend to come to our office to report about their learning needs so that they can be supported. The challenge we face is that screening of disabilities is not done in our institutions. What we receive from students are documents that indicate their disabilities with verification from the medical doctors. The whole process took place when they were applying for studies.

The quotation above implies that, if there is no screening of students to determine the degree of their impairment, it is likely that an adjustment that will be made may not match with the level of impairment of the student because screening and assessment are the key to finding out the needs of the learners (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2012). For instance, a student may be given large print while he/she requires braille.

Generally, it was found that both special education units adopted a reactive approach in meeting the desired learning needs of students with disabilities. They dealt with the needs of individual students when needs arose. They never attempted to anticipate and plan for the learning needs of students with disabilities prior to enrolment. This was clearly explained by one participant who said:

Currently, universities deal with students with disabilities on an ad-hoc manner, that is, they are reactive. Universities begin to think of what to provide to students with disabilities after their arrival. They don't plan in advance (Reported by a female second year student with disability from IST.1).

Therefore, planning in advance for expected services to students with disabilities is important. This can only be achieved if there are well organised and furnished special education units with proper coordination and management, policies, guidelines, statistics of students with disabilities and disability awareness programmes.

## **Social and psychological roles of special education units**

Regarding the social and psychological roles of special education units in rendering quality services for students with disabilities in studied HEIs, interview responses from disability specialists revealed that, one of the responsibilities of special education units was provision of psycho-social support to students with disabilities. However, it was argued by (75%) of participants (students with disabilities) from both institutions that staff in special education units, were more active and committed to performing academic and administrative duties than social and psychological roles. Participants argued that persons with disabilities need social support in various areas including orientation and mobility, interaction, entertainments, sports and games, disability awareness and counselling. One participant elaborated:

I was told that braille transcribers are specialists in counselling persons with disabilities, but what I realised is that in many cases they supervise readers and distribute facilities for students with disabilities. We are forced to seek counselling support from other people who are not trained on special education (stated by the 1<sup>st</sup> year male student with disability from IST.2).

Another participant added:

I needed advice from the special education unit when I missed a loan. The special education officers instructed readers to send me to the Dean of students for counselling support. I went to the Dean of Students whose officers assisted me to request for the loan board to consider my application once again. Eventually, I received the loan (Reported by the 3<sup>rd</sup> year female student with disability from IST.1).

The quotations above indicate that, unavailability of psycho-social services made the total learning of students with disability more challenging. However, it was noted that in a situation where disability specialists failed to play their social and psychological roles, students with disabilities sought assistance from other offices and individuals including Dean of student's offices, faculty Deans, counsellors, academic advisors and peers. Studying the roles of the special education unit at UDSM, Bhalalusesa (2012) discovered that the aspect of psychological support and counselling to students with disabilities was not given priority by disability specialists. Fangwi (2020) & Mbuva (2019) emphasize that disability specialists have to offer to students with disabilities services that focus on intellectual growth, effective communication, enhanced self-esteem, realistic self-appraisal, clarified values, career choice, leadership development, healthy behaviour, meaningful

interpersonal relationships, independence, collaboration and participation in individual counselling and support groups, interaction, problem solving strategies, physical therapy and sports. This is a broader spectrum of service delivery to students with disabilities by the special education units. Provision of these services has to be guided by a well described policy. Therefore, any accredited HEI must have a policy on disability and special education needs for proper functioning of special education units to promote equal and equitable access to quality education for students with disabilities.

## **Conclusions**

This article examined support services offered by the special education units in promoting quality education for students with disabilities in Tanzanian HEIs. The study findings revealed that special education units encountered some barriers in providing support services to students with disabilities. These include shortage of disability specialists; adapted equipment and facilities; lack of students' awareness on support services offered by the special education units; absence of disability screening and assessment services, and unavailability of reliable disability statistics. Based on the study findings, it can be concluded that despite the constraints revealed by the study, special education units play a pioneering role in ensuring provision of appropriate support services to students with disabilities for their social and academic excellence. With flexibility in designing programmes to support students with disabilities, special education units are expected to ensure that individual differences and needs are equally accommodated by extending services to unaddressed concerns.

## **Recommendations**

- (a) Since educational materials and support services for students with disabilities are expensive; universities have to allocate an adequate budget for special education units' operations.
- (b) The special education units should prepare disability sensitisation and empowerment programmes to students with disabilities and the university community to awaken them on disability issues. For instance, the Units can host training workshops to sensitise and educate university lecturers, technical and administrative staff about teaching and supporting students with disabilities; organising a disability awareness week to university community; and preparing empowerment workshops to encourage students with disabilities to introduce themselves to the university community, liaise with their lecturers and develop the habit of attending various empowerment

workshops that can aid them in their personal development.

- (c) Universities have to prepare policies that stipulate support services and facilities needed to enhance learning of students with disabilities while committing themselves to implement those policies.
- (d) Universities are advised to have a stable and up to date record keeping systems of students with disabilities and services offered by the special education units. Such records can help in planning and budgeting for the future requirements of the special education units.
- (e) Comprehensive screening and assessment centres should be part and parcel of the special education units in the universities. Such centres can help the units to determine the type and severity of disabilities for proper placement and decision on types of services to be offered.
- (f) Support services offered by the special education units should go beyond the traditional education and administration by including social and psychological aspects such as self-determination, sports and games, guidance and counselling services.

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