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**Opening up education through academic support for Students with Disabilities**

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Open Distance Learning (ODL) universities are required to make policy provisions for students with disabilities (SwDs) to have full benefit of open access to higher education. Despite access to further education being a Constitutional imperative in South Africa, some programmes offered in ODL institutions are structured in a manner that disregard SwDs. This paper explores the experiences of ODL academic staff on dealing with the learning needs of SwDs. The qualitative study was conducted using in-depth and telephonic interviews. The results gathered indicate non-disability sensitive learning material and environments as hindering academic accessibility for SwDs. The ODL nature of learning requires the technological environment to be accessible, but, on the contrary, the study revealed that SwDs are unable to fully learn online due to technological barriers. The paper goes further to recommend inclusive approaches that can be employed to open education for SwDs.

Keywords: access, academic support, inclusion, students with disabilities

## **Introduction**

Opening education is important in the international and national policy agenda for many reasons. In the OpenEdu study by Inamorato dos Santos, Punie, and Castaño-Muñoz (2016), opening education is deemed important as it allows for the reduction or removal of access obstacles to education (e.g. requirements for cost, geography, time and entry). As a result, it enables students to develop skills or re-skills in a cheaper and flexible manner. Inamorato dos Santos et al. (2016) further assert that opening education helps modernize higher education around the world through digital technology. Lastly, it can bridge non-formal and formal education by making it simpler for institutions of Higher Education and other certified organizations to recognize learning achievement certificates (Christie, 2008; Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2007; Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world need to expand their student base by attracting and opening up education to minority groups who were largely excluded in the past. This has led to institutions not only being open to ethnic minorities, but also increasing the participation of students with disabilities (SwDs). Institutions that want to be recognized as being 'open' or more inclusive require a proactive strategy that cuts across the institutional setting. Such strategy must address a variety of obstacles encountered by SwDs in an integrated manner. Thus, opening up education could include the physical structures and access to campus locations, the affective and academic support, the methods of teaching, assessment and information dissemination, as well as the socio-cultural or attitudinal climate defined by mainstream students and staff (Disability Management Services, 2011; Matshediso, 2007; Mutanga & Walker, 2017; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2014).

## **Literature review**

South Africa has gained substantial ground in the inclusion of SwDs in higher education since 1994 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018; Matshediso, 2007; Morrison, Brand, & Cilliers, 2009). Despite significant efforts to prepare countless codes, guidelines and white papers related to disabilities, reality remains that very little has been done in the country to ensure holistic progress in disability integration. South Africa's higher education system faces several other main issues, including the following expressed in the report by the Council on Higher Education:

- attitudinal barriers at school level, where SwDs are not considered to be higher education material and are therefore inadequately prepared for higher education participation; the inadequate provision of services for SwDs at many HEIs;
- the neglect of teaching and learning procedures specifically concentrated on improving the learning capacity of learners with disabilities and
- the lack of integration of support services for SwDs into the core functioning of HEIs (Council on Higher Education, 2005).

Some tertiary institutions in South Africa have responded to the above issue through the establishment of Disability Units (DUs) to provide special facilities that will promote access and inclusion of SwDs. The philosophy underlying the creation of DUs is to encourage the equal participation of SwDs in all areas of university life and to eliminate unlawful discrimination against disabilities, including disability-related harassment (Moses, Van Der Berg, & Rich, 2017).

Services supplied by disability units include the conversion of printed material to braille and large print, audio-recorded textbooks, additional examination time, computer centers with unique software such as JAWS for Windows (unique screen-reading program), mobility training, sign language interpreters and much more (FOTIM, 2011; Howell, 2005; Matshedisho, 2010). Disability unit staff were also expected to play a mediating role as they had to communicate the needs of SwDs to the faculty (Tugli, Zungu, Ramakuela, Goon, & Anyanwu, 2013). In addition, they advocated for these students and helped them with the day-to-day challenges on campus (Matshedisho, 2007; Mutanga & Walker, 2017).

The University of South Africa is no exception as it has created policy provisions for SwDs, including a well-resourced ICT library to encourage access to teaching materials and a disability unit to facilitate access to university equipment (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2013). It should be observed, however, that the majority of HEIs that are intended to meet SwDs' learning requirements have infrastructural difficulties, educational, administrative and support employees with no or restricted disability skills. This calls for more careful consideration of the equity issues and the barriers within universities, which restricts full inclusion, and participation of SwDs.

### **Academic Support**

Despite the increasing number of SwDs entering colleges and universities post their matric (Dong and Lucas, 2016), SwDs continue to lag behind compared to their non-disabled peers on issues pertaining to outcomes such as grade point average (GPA), persistence, and graduation rates (DaDeppo, 2009). Although there may be various reasons for the poor outcomes for SwDs at tertiary institutions, one explanation could relate to the inadequate academic support or lack thereof.

Student support for SwDs can be formal (provided by HEIs) and informal (provided by family, friends, colleagues). The need for acceptable support for SwDs in ODL is necessitated by, amongst others, the criticism pointing at inadequate university's support structures and online programmes as these are major reasons for high dropout rates (Mukhari and Mathipa, 2017; Lee and Choi, 2011). Student support services are "the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL" (Tait, 2000, 289). Student support services can also be divided into academic and non-academic support services. Academic support as a component of student support is mandated by the need for SwDs to adapt to the academic demands of higher education, including coping with their lack of suitable academic skills, and must be able to organize their time in order to meet deadlines (Heiman, 2006). This imperative obliges universities, including those in South Africa, to implement the policy of supporting SwDs within the diversity rights framework (Matshedisho, 2007). Subsequently, ODL institutions embark on academic support interventions to avoid the catastrophic dropout rates that would kill their reputation (Rumble, 2000).

Nevertheless, academic support for SwDs is a broad concept. Matshedisho (2010) identifies the following namely, tape-recorded reading material, Braille, sign language interpretation, alternative assessments as well as assistive technology such as text to voice converters as constituting academic support services. According to Makoe (2012), academic support is more concerned with the development of cognitive and learning skills. In investigating academic support and performance of SwDs in higher education, it is reported that scholars typically study the following: aptitude and cognitive factors such as SAT scores and high school GPA scores (DeBerard, Spielmans,

and Julka, 2004; Hall and Webster, 2008); metacognitive abilities, affective factors (i.e., self-concept and self-worth), behavioral factors, locus of control and adjustment, and level of self-determination (Dong and Lucas, 2016).

The literature indicates an improved academic performance of SwDs especially when they are adequately supported. Dong and Lucas (2016) state that SwDs who receive academic support are more likely to demonstrate improved performance. A similar finding was reported in Troiani, Liefeld and Tranctenberg (2010) that SwDs who regularly attended an academic support center had higher overall grade point averages and graduation rates.

In one study, it was indicated that SwDs in South Africa often blame lack of academic support by their lecturers as contributing to their failure (Mutanga and Walker, 2017). This supports Crous (2004) who mentioned that a few professionally trained lecturers who are suitably qualified to work with SwDs exist. It is no wonder a question was posed in a report on *Embedding success: enhancing the learning experience for disabled students*, "... who supports the support staff"? (The Higher Education Academy, 2006: 22). The above views suggest a need to support academic staff for the inclusive agenda to be realised. However, the challenge in South Africa is that support structures for SwDs are not an integrated national effort. Institutions of higher learning have been offering support services at their own discretion and within limited means (Matshediso, 2007).

### **Research problem**

Research studies suggests that SwDs, in particular, face the challenge of limited access to ODL (Mokiwa and Phasha, 2012; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2013). Most teaching and learning environment(s) are designed without careful consideration of the learning needs of diverse learners. Consequently, the barriers experienced have led to the visible problem of a high number of SwDs that struggle to complete their qualifications. Although it is a recognized imperative to implement the policy of supporting SwDs within the diversity rights framework in South Africa (Matshediso, 2007), ODL institutions in the country have not made much progress in teaching and supporting SwDs. The main problem, therefore, is that not enough effort has been made to understand how learning can be designed to open-up higher education in order to facilitate positive learning experiences for SwDs. This papers offers recommendation on how ODL institutions can develop learning design strategies that enhance accessibility for SwDs.

### **Research methodology**

The study sought to understand how learning design and technology can be used to effectively integrate accessibility in an ODL context to support SwDs. As a result a qualitative case-study approach was adopted to enable the researchers to make sense of the experiences and social situations of the lecturers in their real world and natural settings (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

### **Case selection**

The study was conducted at the University of South Africa (Unisa), within the academic and learning support units. A purposive sampling method was used to select information rich participants. By allowing a researcher to select a few information rich and critical cases, purposeful sampling enhances understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2012). In the context of this study, the researcher selected lecturers from all seven teaching colleges at Unisa. These include the College of Human Sciences, College of Education, College of Science, Engineering and

Technology, College of Economic Management Sciences, College of Law, College of Agricultural Sciences and College of Accounting Sciences. The sample comprised of nine members of the academic teaching staff who responded to the initial invitation to participate in this study, and all of these were subsequently interviewed. Five participants were female and four were male. The participants ranged from junior lecturers to senior professors.

### **Data collection**

The data was collected using in-depth interviews through face-to-face and telephonic interviews. In-depth interviewing allows for conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on an idea, program, or situation (Boyce, 2006). Although telephone interviews are not always useful as a data collection tool due to the lack of physical contact between the researcher and the participants (Farooq, 2015), this tool has proved useful in the ODL scenario where staff are geographically dispersed at various campuses. Interviews were arranged with each of the respondents. Each interview lasted between 30 and 80 minutes and were digitally recorded for later transcription. The interviews began with an open question about experiences. The interviewer encouraged each participant to talk freely about their experiences and thoughts with minimal interruption. Then lastly the findings of the study were shared with the participants and the accessibility advisory team through face-to-face and electronic means so that together the researchers and the stakeholders can design an intervention. To ensure thoroughness, data was gathered until saturation occurred.

### **Data analysis**

Analysis of the data was carried out using thematic analysis. This data analysis method was considered suitable for analysis because it allows the identification, analysis and reporting of themes (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). To increase the sense of familiarity with the texts, the transcribed interviews were read several times. Line-by-line coding was used to generate tentative descriptive labels for each line of transcript data, as a means of ensuring that the text was thoroughly considered and providing a basis for the researcher to identify emerging analytical categories and broader themes.

### **Research findings and discussion**

Findings are organised into four themes: awareness, accessibility, lack of accommodation for disabled students and institutional factors.

#### **1. Awareness**

Studies report that lecturers lack disability awareness. Crous (2004) found that 67% of students with disabilities believed that their lecturers had inadequate knowledge of disability. The lack of awareness was also emphasised by Mayat and Amosun (2011) who explored the perceptions of academic staff on admission of students with disabilities.

Under awareness, the lecturers in the current study are mostly unaware of the resources available to help disabled students. The lecturers report a lack of professional training in dealing with disability issues. This contributes to the lack of awareness, and ultimately, to their ignorance and negative attitude towards disability issues which is seen in the quotes below:

*“For now, I haven’t seen any. Unless they have computers with amplifiers, for those who cannot read”*  
(Male Academic Staff 2, College of Human Sciences).

*“I am not aware of any”* (Female Academic Staff 1, College of Science, Engineering and Technology)

*“Uhh... as far as someone who’s a... (long pause) struggles with, has no sight (long pause) someone, uhm... who has no vision at all, uhm, I’m not sure about the braille form, I don’t know if UNISA still does it, convert study material into braille. I’m not sure. I guess audio recordings is a thing”* (Female Academic Staff 4, College of Education).

Although these unjustified perceptions will likely vary depending on the type and severity of impairment, the issues raised from studies conducted and the finding from the current study makes a case for continued probing from the lecturers’ side on their awareness of available resources and the types of disabilities, which exist. Research has indicated that lecturers’ lack of disability awareness results in them failing to make necessary provisions (Matshediso 2010).

## **2. Academic accessibility**

There is consensus that academic accessibility is about providing SwDs the opportunity to acquire “...same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and equally integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use,” the agreement continues. “The person with a disability must be able to obtain the information as fully, equally and independently as a person without a disability” (McGinty, 2016:5). Some lecturers understand academic accessibility as follows:

*“Having access to (pause) any learning or study material, irrespective of the disability or any other challenge or barrier that one might have”* (Male Academic Staff 3, College of Economic Management Sciences)

Accessible learning design essentially means ensuring that all the learning objectives can be met irrespective of any access needs a student might have whether these are associated with physical, sensory or cognitive impairments (Cooper, 2014). One lecturer shared their approach to ensuring learner support services are accessible to SwDs by stating that:

*“One form of trying to make learning material accessible to SwDs is to make it in plain simple English, you know, which makes it to be more accessible to students”* (Female Academic Staff 2, College of Human Sciences).

Technology has had a huge impact on education in recent times. In fact, this is a period of drastic growth in ODL education as ODL courses become increasingly popular because of the ever-improving technology since after the mid-1990s (Lee and Choi, 2011, 596). One lecturer was reported as saying:

*“Accessibility means having access to technology that, uh, we are currently using as an institution. An example is having access to computers so that one can have access to the study material we are using at the University. Eh. Taking into consideration that there are (pause) so many of our students who are (pause) struggling, and they are based in rural areas, so many attempts, ehh, one would find there is a challenge when it comes to accessibility to computers or technology. I think that’s my short definition of accessibility”*

*“We also need to produce material that our students can be able to access, using their technology, eh, so, basically that is what we are still trying to do”*

Many SwDs are enabled by online education, but it presents accessibility challenges for others. These challenges are not just for the students. New technologies require new pedagogies and different types of teaching activities from those established academics may have been used to (Cooper, 2014). The above confirms Tait’s (2000) and Rao’s (2015) assertions that learner support is multi-faceted, which include a range of service. The above approaches towards academic accessibility for SwDs are a few of a range of approaches, including “training for academic tutors and staff, awareness about diversity and areas of special needs, effective referral services, as well as emotional and pastoral support” (Rao, 2015: 102). Others include converting academic material into accessible formats, for example Braille, tape-recorded reading material, sign language interpretation (Kouroupetroglou and Pino, 2011; Matshedisho, 2010). This means lectures, through literature review and assistance from the university’s learner support centres, need to be aware of the special needs of their students and find innovative ways to package their learning material in a suitable manner.

### **3. Students with Disabilities not adequately accommodated**

Barriers related to teaching and assessment can be attributed to lack of support for teaching and learning. This leads to poor academic achievements. This is consistent with SwDs who are not accommodated because of lack of awareness by lecturers, inadequate support from the university or lack of will. A lecturer reported the following:

*“we are not accommodating SwDs because, I mean like I said, we are still using eh, printouts, we are still making copies...”* (Male Academic Staff 4, College of Law).

*“There’s a lot of students who are lagging behind, who are not getting any assistance because we are not planning for them, we are not doing anything to help them. So, I think as a University or as a department or as a college of education, we are failing, eh, more specially those students who have got disabilities, they are our students as well”* (Female Academic Staff 5, College of Education).

*“I think we’ve neglected SwDs as a department and in the college as well. We don’t have any voice recordings as yet or... braille form for our study material at the moment”* (Male Academic Staff 3, College of Agricultural Sciences).

*“Well, the module is designed only for people who can read and write. For SwDs like the blind people I don’t know because there is no voice that is accompanying the learning unit, it’s only text, text, text, text”* (Female Academic Staff 2, College of Human Sciences).

Matshedisho (2007) asserts that support services structures for SwDs in the South African greater education scheme, find themselves in a contradictory conjuncture of rights, benevolence, and disability social model remains true. The move towards equitable access to education at the subject university shows a steady trajectory. Opening up education through open pedagogy and open learning material should be made a priority. The findings of the current study confirm what is highlighted by DHET (2013) when it says despite the strong legislative and policy framework for addressing disability in the education sector, access and support for people with disabilities remains limited.

## **Institutional Factors**

The University of South Africa, Open Distance Learning, Clause 4, Sections 4.1.1 until 4.1.5. pledges comprehensive ODL institution that will augment the participation and access to student support services, opportunities for development for previously disadvantaged communities, this includes the students with disabilities. The policy further pledges support for the students who are struggling academically, keep an eye on retention and throughput and where needs be develop strategies for supportive interventions. It also promises staff development so that the staff is better prepared to teach and support all the students including those with disabilities (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2013). The findings of the current study contradict the policies that have been put place by the institution. Lecturers highlighted ODL specific issues when working with their students. They further spoke specifically about the responsibility of the university to deal with issues regarding disabilities.

*“But because. We are not a residential University where I am able to then, almost have a feel of whether the students understand what I’m saying to them or not, it’s quite difficult to measure or to monitor their impact of the learning support activities, especially where the students are not responding, so you go there, try and engage and you don’t get any, uhm, eh eh eh, so they don’t reciprocate”* (Male Academic Staff 2, College of Human Sciences).

*“So, for me personally so far I’m trusting the institution, to do all the right things to make sure that our disabled students are taken care of.” “Mmm, soo (pause) Accessibility for me, (pause) globally, I think is the University’s responsibility to make sure that there is accessibility, uhm... or accessibility is embedded in in in in, our tuition material, and, uhm, ja, basically”* (Female Academic Staff 1, College of Science, Engineering and Technology).

*“Unfortunately, I think we do not have much of a freedom to decide as to how we design our material. I am not saying this with a negative connotation but I am trying to allude to the fact that even when it comes to the issue of time in designing that material it’s all about, and I’m being honest here, It’s all about meeting deadlines to make sure that your material is there, but to sit down and actually reflect and think that this material that I am preparing now will all my students be able to, I think accessibility we cannot only limiting it to receiving the material but are they able to receive and actually understand and make sense of the content of that material?”* (Female Academic Staff 3, College of Agricultural Sciences).

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 (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2013; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Khoza, 2016; Tugli et al., 2013a; Tugli, Zungu, Ramakuela, Goon, & Anyanwu, 2013b).

## **Implications for practice**

Teaching at a distance and through online means requires careful curriculum design and delivery. SwDs have made significant progress in degree courses within which they receive more academic support. This progress can

be witnessed in the increase in numbers of SwDs successfully completing their qualifications. The progress can also be seen in the increase in SwDs enrolling for their postgraduate qualifications. The university recorded two blind students receiving their doctoral degrees which they completed within the specified minimum period of three years. There is no doubt therefore that if the academic staff can prioritize their awareness of the learning needs of SwDs, more students will complete their qualifications through open and distance learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper sought to explore the experiences of ODL academic staff on dealing with the learning needs of SwDs. Although further education is a Constitutional imperative in South Africa, views by lecturer's at Unisa suggests a need for the management of the institution to play a leading role in respect of opening up education for SwDs. Generally, Unisa lecturers understand academic accessibility but blame institutional constraints, in terms of adequate resources, for the exclusion of SwDs. This shifting of responsibility, wherein the SwDs blame the lecturers as indicated in the literature, and the lecturer's blame the management and support staff, is indicative of a lack of clear and authoritative government policies on opening up education for SwDs.

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