



The Experiences of Higher Education Students with Disabilities in Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article Info

Received: December 2, 2021

Revised: January 18, 2022

Accepted: February 10, 2022

 [10.46303/jcve.2022.6](https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2022.6)

How to cite

Dube, N., & Baleni, L. (2022). The Experiences of Higher Education Students with Disabilities in Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 5(1), 59-77. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2022.6>

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ABSTRACT

Although institutions of higher learning had been gradually exposed to blended and online methods of learning, most of them still preferred and utilised traditional, face-to-face learning for various reasons. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that caused lockdowns in countries worldwide, blended or online learning became more important to enable continuity of education. The inevitability of change during the pandemic and the hurried paradigm shift from traditional methods of learning came with different implications to institutions of higher learning. Online learning experiences have been extensively researched, however, they have not been adequately focused on students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are expected to be accommodated in learning environments at institutions of higher education. Using the Social Model of Disability, the study elucidates the experiences of students with disabilities of an institution of higher education in South Africa with online learning. The study is crucial in that it determines the extent to which online learning promotes inclusivity. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The study concluded that online learning has both advantages and disadvantages for students with varying disabilities. Students with mobility and visual disabilities preferred online learning, which allows them to study in the comfort of their residences while students with intellectual disabilities preferred traditional/contact methods of learning. Most participants indicated that their online lecturers are not aware of their disabilities and thus, their methods of instruction and assessment are not as inclusive.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; disability; students; online learning; blended learning.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, most countries implemented lockdown measures that heightened the need for online and blended learning methods in higher education. Due to the nature of some studies, the institution incorporated blended learning (face-to-face instruction combined with online instruction) for some of its students who are mandated to engage in practical classes in laboratories, hospitals, schools, and communities. However, although 'blended learning' became the perfectly fitting phrase to describe the institutional method of instruction during the COVID-19 lockdown, most instruction and assessment was done online. Therefore, this study explored the experiences of students with disabilities in online learning specifically during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Disability is a word used to explain the socially created system of norms that categorizes and values 'body minds' based on concepts of ability and inability conditions (Schalk, 2017). In recent years, the idea of disability as only a physical and individual problem has been critiqued as inadequate. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) advocates for a shift in the recognition of disability as only a clinical and social welfare matter to seeing disability as a human rights matter. Thus, disability has been re-defined as a social construct consisting of social, cultural, political and environmental barriers that are seen to be more disabling than the cognitive and physical challenges (Schalk, 2017).

From the more than a billion people in the world, about 15% are said to have some form of disability (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Of this percentage, 150 million disabled people are young people and 80% of them reside in less developed countries (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2011). 90% of children in developing countries and living with disabilities do not receive education, according to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] (2014). Those that start schooling usually have a high dropout rate. As a result, continued attendance in school results in a curriculum that is not specifically tailored to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and educators are usually unaware or unprepared to meet those needs (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). From the few students with disabilities that complete their primary education, very few progress to higher education. This is a result of barriers that learners with disabilities face as they navigate through the education system even from the lower levels (Mutanga, 2017).

Having any form of disability can be extremely marginalising in one's life. From time immemorial, people with disabilities have and still struggle to have productive lives as societies are characterised by stigmatisation, discrimination and environmental barriers (Hiranandani, 2005). Education, with its core function of empowerment (Ashraf & Farah, 2007) should be the ideal platform for the inclusion of people with disabilities, although challenges of implementation are inevitable (Hayes & Bulat, 2017).

Institutions of higher learning are gradually realising the need to achieve total inclusion including that of learners with disabilities (Dalton et al., 2019). United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (1990; 1994) paved way for educational inclusion

worldwide and emphasized the urgency of discussions of the inequalities in the education systems. Various policies advocated by UNESCO (1990; 1994; 2000; 2009) drive the need for access to education by all persons, promote equity for all in terms of educational opportunities and rights, and endorse the right to get secure accommodation and support for students. In line with the aforementioned, there is a need for educators and the support staff at institutions of higher learning to professionally acknowledge the need for inclusion (Dalton et al., 2019).

After apartheid was abolished in South Africa in 1994, an investigation of discriminatory practices in the education system was conducted to ensure a total clean-up of Apartheid discriminatory practices (Dalton et al., 2019). This promoted inclusion of the poor and the disabled in education as well as access to education for previously underprivileged groups. Although policies are implemented at the national level with regards to educational inclusion, there are challenges thereof (Nel et al., 2016). These challenges include inadequate training of educators on inclusion, insufficient support in learning institutions and the absence of community engagements. Thus, although policies are put in place for inclusion purposes, implementation realities are a stumbling block (Dalton et al., 2019).

The Strategic Disability Policy Framework in the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system was implemented in 2018 (DHET, 2018) in the South African higher education sector, advocating for support of students with disability support post-basic education schooling. The framework states that "...Although much has been done in the post-school education and training system, the management of disability rights in post-school education and training remains fragmented and separated from that of existing transformation and diversity programmes at institutional levels" (DHET, 2018, p.2). These programs may have a negative impact on students with disabilities. The South African Ministry of Education (2003) proposed to increase the enrolment rate of students with disabilities in higher education institutions through its white paper on post-school education and training (2013). Although efforts of inclusion are visible, they have been rather inconsistent for students with disabilities due to different variables of disability (Dalton et al., 2019).

Students with disabilities were experiencing difficulties with online learning at the University of Cape Town (UCT). These challenges included the limited availability of enough assistive technology software to support their access to online learning and the lack of internet connectivity at home (Dalton et al, 2019). Although the university took steps to alleviate these barriers, the university staff acknowledged that the universal design for learning (UDL) was initially focused on building inclusiveness in the education system. Had the UDL been implemented timeously, these challenges would not have surfaced. The suggestion was that the university needed a systematic change in its entirety as a response to inclusion challenges. As a result, units such as the library, disability services, the information technology unit and academic programmes started working in collaboration to address matters of online accessibility at home (Dalton et al., 2019).

At Stellenbosch University (SU), a study was conducted on students' experiences regarding inclusion and exclusion. The study exposed both the strengths and weaknesses of the disability support system at the university. The challenges revealed that faculties and staff members are not always aware of disability due to its multidimensional nature, and thus, they lack adequate planning for inclusion. The advantages include the university's provision of assistive technology to students with disabilities through the disability unit and the efficiency of the disability staff in engaging students and staff in the event of difficulty and the provision of awareness, training and support systems in the university. Currently, SU has adopted a policy for 'designing for all', not only focusing on people with disabilities, a cost-effective way in the long run that also caters for other groups other than the persons with disabilities. The 'design for all' policy is used by SU in engagement with the Stellenbosch Municipality not only for students but also staff, Stellenbosch residents and visitors. It includes a friendly construction of spaces such as car parks and pavements (Dalton et al., 2019).

Research questions

The following research questions were sought to answer to guide the research procedure.

- What is the nature of experiences of students with disabilities in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at a selected institution of higher learning?
- How does the institutional Disability Unit assist students with disabilities for inclusion purposes?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do lecturers' knowledge and institutional support assist students with disabilities in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications on Learning and Teaching

The lockdown and social distancing measures adopted by most countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of institutions of learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Globally, learning and teaching were drastically altered by the COVID-19 pandemic (El Said, 2021). "The pandemic created the biggest disruption of education systems in human history affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries" (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021, p. 133). As a result, education systems across the world opted to abruptly switch to online or blended learning (Bordoloi et al., 2021; El Said, 2021). The transition from 'chalk and talk' to largely online teaching and learning was inevitable and the only possible way to meet the needs of learning during the pandemic. However, it was mostly hurried, unplanned and posed as a challenge not only to students but educators, as the speed at which the shift was done was a transitional shock (Crouse et al, 2018; Bordoloi et al., 2021). Remote learning is a challenge to some due to the digital divide affecting most developing countries as well as other challenges

related to using online gadgets for persons with disabilities. Therefore, although a move to an online/blended approach was unavoidable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, institutions of learning needed a well-planned and proper roadmap to implement it, not an abrupt shift in response to a crisis (Crouse et al, 2018). Therefore, in the process of adapting to new changes, the preparation of students and staff needed to be carefully evaluated and supported continuously (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

A national state of disaster was declared by the President of South Africa on March 5, 2020, which led to the lockdown regulations that included the closure of all education centres in March 27, 2020. On June 1, 2020, the initial strategies to open learning institutions were introduced in phases (DHET, 2020). However, other institutions opened as late as August 2020 due to different reasons and challenges. The opening of institutions of higher learning came in phases; students were allowed on campus at different stages and learning was done online or through blended means. This posed a lot of challenges as some students had neither the online learning devices required nor internet and network connectivity at their homes. On the 30th of September 2020, the South African government announced the measures it put in place to mitigate the challenges faced by students (DHET, 2020). These included ensuring connectivity to more than 320 TVET campuses and distributing learning devices (laptops/tablets) to National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funded students who indicated their need for the devices. In spite of measures put in place by the government as well as institutions of higher learning at large, students continually experience challenging situations when engaging in online and blended learning at South African institutions.

Online Learning for Students with Disabilities

Disability is a human right issue (Pokhrel & Chhetri 2021), however, research on the accessibility of online learning for people with disabilities is limited (Cinquin et al., 2019). Although online learning was initially expected to be a critical tool in access to education and fostering social inclusion (Cinquin et al., 2019), Dalton et al, (2019) argue that online learning platforms have a potential of excluding students with disability as a result of the costs of assistive devices, extensive support needs and sometimes inaccessible internet designs. Technological advancements in the learning space were anticipated to offer an increased access to education yet it contains exclusion possibilities particularly for learners with physical challenges such as visual impairments. "In order to ensure equity of access in higher education, universities and other post-secondary institutions must consider physical and programmatic access, content readability, personal usability and appropriate individual and system-based supports in order to achieve the goal of inclusive education" (Dalton et al., 2019, p. 3). This article explores the experiences of students with disabilities when participating in online learning. Furthermore, the paper aims to gain insights on how they adapt to, and participate in the higher education environment and to determine the factors and processes that may inhibit or promote their participation in the current pandemic environment. This study is thus deemed with high

relevance as there is no known research conducted on the impact of the sudden uptake of online learning on students with disabilities.

The Social Model of Disability

In the 1970s people with disabilities, coined the Social Model as they considered disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. The model defines disability as caused by physical, institutional and attitude barriers that can be changed or eliminated. Thus, the model deviates from society's position of blaming a person with a disability for their shortcomings to acknowledging that disability will always be present in any society and therefore the only sense-making strategy is to organise society and create environments that include rather than exclude persons with disabilities (Lisicki, 2015). The model identifies the key barriers such as attitudinal barriers, physical barriers and communication/information barriers to learning (Lisicki, 2015). Attitude barriers are social perspectives and they breed assumptions about individuals with disabilities to clarify, legitimize and sustain bias of segregation and avoidance in the public eye; for instance, presumptions that individuals with specific disabilities cannot do certain things. Physical barriers are hindrances connected to the physical and assembled climate and cover an enormous scope of obstructions that forestall equivalent access, like steps, limited passages and entryways, broken lifts or inaccessible housing/learning facilities as well as public spaces. There are also barriers to communication/information due to a lack of hearing induction loops and information not being provided in different formats like the large font. Shakespeare (2006) states that the Social Model of Disability is indispensable due to its usefulness at identifying barriers in the building of an environment implicitly aiming for a barrier-free dreamland that is impossible to realize. Since people with disabilities face intrinsic limitations, they should be emancipated by providing resources to overcome these limitations rather than merely limiting discrimination. By exploring the innovative pedagogies developed around the social model of disability, reflective practitioners in institutions of higher learning may find better ways to offer individualised support to students. Therefore, the adoption of the Social Model of Disability in this paper seeks to emphasize the role of institutions of higher learning in understanding the nature of disabilities and outlines the drawbacks that need to be redressed at the institutional level to better the lives of students. By exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in online learning during this COVID-19 pandemic, this paper adds to the discourse that advocates for the inclusivity of disabled persons in campus designs and online pedagogies.

METHODS

The study uses a qualitative approach, an ideal method for exploring human experiences. Participants were conveniently selected and each participant was presented with an informed consent letter. Out of the 66 students registered with the institution's Disability Unit (DU), only 4 participated in the study and thus limited the intended respondents targeted for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from students with disabilities at a

selected institution of higher learning to understand their experiences with online learning including the advantages and disadvantages, assistive devices used, lecturers' roles and other institutional services offered to them. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the semi-structured interviews were held both via Microsoft teams and physically, depending on the preference and ability of the participant. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Ethical considerations

The POPIA Act (2021) was observed in the study. Pseudonyms were used to conceal participants' identities. Key ethical considerations for this study were: a) Informed consent, b) Beneficence – Do not harm, c) Respect for anonymity and confidentiality, and d) Respect for privacy. The validity of the research was observed by asking interview questions that relate to the research questions stipulated in this paper. The ethical clearance to conduct this study was issued by the University's Ethics Committee which provided assurance that standards were adhered to.

RESULTS

Nature of disability

Although understanding participants' nature of disabilities was never a key focus in the study, understanding students' different encounters vis-à-vis their diverse types of disabilities is crucial. Of the four participants interviewed, two had physical disabilities, one had a visual disability and one had an intellectual disability. They explained their disabilities as follows:

Participant 1 (Female student):

My disability is a bit difficult to explain because I have certain deformities and they affect me physically, so I cannot say 'this is the name of my disability'. So, I have several deformities. 1 leg is shorter than the other and I have a problem with my spine. So, they are like different deformities.

Participant 2 (Female student):

I have a sight problem. I'm partially short sighted. It's mainly because of the condition that I have, which is albinism. It affects my eyes. Even if I wear spectacles, they just help with the intensity of light. Because of the type of disability I have, there is motion in my eyes that I cannot control. When I'm looking at something for the longest time, reading a book, an article or something, I start feeling that motion and it gets strenuous. So, the spectacles aid with the intensity of light so that it won't affect me badly.

Participant 3 (Male student):

I have a physical disability. I had a stroke in 2018. My right side is not working, both my right hand and right foot. Luckily, I have always been left-handed. The stroke started in 2018, I was already a registered student at this institution. I stayed in the hospital for about 5 to 6 months. I had to come back and continue studying.

Participant 4: (Male student)

I have problems with motor and psychological coordination. I see illusions... I'm easily distracted and I take time to grasp the content of what I'm learning, compared to other learners.

The role played by the institutional Disability Unit (DU) to assist students with disabilities for inclusion purposes.

Most South African institutions of higher learning "...have established DUs at their campuses to offer specialised services to students with disabilities, to facilitate access and integration of these students at their respective institutions" (Mbuyha, 2019, p. 57). In the same vein, the institution under study has a Disability Unit (DU) for the same purpose. In order to determine the organizational support offered by the DU to students with disabilities, participants were asked to specify the support they get from the DU. Participants commended the DU for assisting them in terms of giving them access to designated areas, assisting with residence allocation and financial aid application.

Participant 4 said:

By becoming a member of the Disability Unit, you are given an access card for places such as the library to access computers designed for students with various forms of disability.

Assistive devices used for learning ever since the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown

With the epidemic of the COVID-19 virus in South Africa, different institutions of higher learning adopted different teaching and learning methods in adherence to the lockdown regulations. The institution under study adopted the blended learning method. However, although 'blended learning' became the perfectly fitting phrase to describe the institutional method of instruction during the COVID-19 lockdown, most instruction and assessment was done online. This study, therefore, explores the experiences of students with disabilities regarding online learning (specifically) during the COVID-19 lockdown. In this regard, participants shared the assistive devices they used for learning during the lockdown. Participant 2 shared the following:

My spectacles are of help and now that we use computers a lot during the pandemic, there is a computer at the library meant for student with eyesight problems that has a big screen that magnifies the smaller computer screen. So, I usually use it when doing my school work, it helps me a lot... The computer is user-friendly and even if there are challenges, the librarians are always there to help.

Participant 3 said:

I use a normal computer although I can't use my right hand. It's really a disadvantage. I would have loved to get a computer designed for my condition. I also wanted a printer so that I print my reading material. Reading from a computer is sometimes difficult, my only functioning hand gets tired easily.

Participant 4 said:

I do not have any assistive device that I'm using right now, the only thing that could be useful for me is sufficient time to interact with the course material because I take time to grasp... I once applied for a carer (helper) because the time I use for washing and cooking, if that could be diverted to study time that could be helpful. My application was however not successful.

Students with varying disabilities require different services and devices from the institution. Some participants indicated that although they have some form of disabilities, they do not need assistive devices from the institution due to the nature of their disabilities. One participant indicated that disability is a complex phenomenon, assistive devices are not enough as he needs a carer to relieve him of his daily chores as he has an intellectual disability that requires an elongated time to study. Other than the user-friendly computers with magnified words and symbols for the visually impaired students, there were no other institutional assistive devices mentioned by participants.

Advantages of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Participants were asked about the advantages of online learning vis-à-vis their different disabilities to determine how they benefitted from online learning. The following were their sentiments.

Participant 1 mentioned that:

The advantage is that at least I don't have to walk to campus anymore as I struggle with stairs and the distance. For instance, when we are on campus, the venues that we use, the other one is at Elco building and others are at Nkuhlu department, so that distance is too much for me as I easily get tired when I walk. I don't have to walk the distance from one venue to another now that we are learning online. So, attending online is an advantage in that regard.

Participant 2 said:

Online learning is advantageous for me firstly because when we were attending traditional classes, I used to have difficulties e.g. I had difficulties in my maths class, the lecturer used to write on the board and it was a big class and there were so many students. So, I had difficulties in seeing what was on the board and it was also difficult for me to get a seat at the front row. So now that we are using online learning, it's much better because I'm always on my screen, it's just in front of me. It's easier to see everything. At least I don't have to go to class when the conditions are unfavourable for me because once it's hot, I literally turn blind and cannot see anything. So now that we are doing things in the respective places of our comfort, I'm very productive.

Participant 4:

Nothing much has changed, but I prefer online learning since walking to class is a struggle for me.

Although online learning comes with its own challenges, it is somewhat preferred by students with mobility disabilities. They prefer to study at their residences without having to walk to lecture halls or use stairs. With regards to mobility problems, Participant 3 said:

Here at the institution, most buildings require one to use steps. There are very few ramps here. For instance, imagine how steep those offices at the faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities are. I get stressed when I think of going up those stairs. Buildings here are mostly not user-friendly. There are lifts here in some buildings, but they are not working. For instance, almost all of our classes were held at Henderson Hall and at that building we use steps. I always think of how I would attend if I was using a wheel chair? There isn't a way for a person using a wheel chair at that building. I would ask to be pushed every time. So, all in all, most buildings are not user-friendly at all.

Even the buildings and streets that have wheelchair ramps, the ramps are too steep. There is a ramp there on your way to bursary offices, it's so steep. So even if the idea of ramps was thought of, constructors make them steep. So sometimes people think they are inclusive yet their inclusiveness is not good enough. I'd suggest that when constructors are building something, they should also cater for persons with disability, they should also get guidance from people with disability or people who have knowledge on disability matters... Therefore, because of these challenges and my kind of disability, I honestly prefer online learning.

Disadvantages of online learning

Participants were asked about the disadvantages of online learning in respect of their unique disabilities in order to determine its shortfalls for students with various disabilities. Participant 1 said the disadvantages of online learning in her opinion are universal with abled students. She stated that:

It's been difficult for me to transition from traditional/physical learning to virtual just like the 'abled' students. In traditional learning, it was somewhat satisfying to be in the same venue with your lecturer and listen to him/her speaking. So, this transition has been a bit difficult. Some of the things affect everyone else and are not only restricted to persons with disability. For instance, network and Wi-Fi problems affect everyone.

Participant 2 mentioned that:

The disadvantage is that I'm always on my computer screen. So, it eventually affects my sight. Just a week ago, I was at my optometrist to register for eye drops for my sight because my eyes are sore, they get swollen.

Participant 3 said:

Honestly this online learning requires one to have assistive devices, even Wi-Fi is a challenge here at school sometimes. Sometimes you feel the need to study from home and the data easily gets depleted...

In South Africa, the transition from the traditional way of learning to virtual or online learning was sudden and stakeholders were unprepared for such an abrupt change. As a result, online learning has its disadvantages at the institution under study and particularly for students with disabilities. Although online learning is generally challenging in South Africa where mobile data and Wi-Fi is averagely expensive and some areas of the country have network coverage problems, the challenges faced by students with disabilities are far deeper depending on the nature of their disabilities. Participants in this study also mentioned the ordinary challenges of online learning faced by an average student in the country, however, a participant with visual problems complained of the strain and pain of having to look at a computer screen for long hours.

Online lecturers' knowledge of their students with disabilities

A practice of inclusive education is to include the participation of all students in the teaching and learning process and to treat them as valuable members of the group (Svendby, 2020). Understanding the issues surrounding the inclusion of students with disabilities is crucial to the understanding of integrated education during online learning in the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Participants were therefore asked if their lecturers were aware of their disabilities. Below are some of their responses.

Participant 1 said:

I would like to think so, but not sure. Most of my lecturers knew before the pandemic, but then we have trainee lecturers now that change every year and now, we are not always on campus, so I don't think they know. At the Disability Unit, we completed forms where we list all our lecturers, so I'm not sure if DU informs them. But most of my lecturers who taught me before lockdown know about my disability but it's the new ones that I'm not sure about.

Participant 2 said:

Not many of them. The few that know, I had to tell them because I had difficulties and needed help... Well, I will tell you that it's not easy to just go to your lecturer and tell them that you have a special need because most of the time, it looks like you are longing for attention. Some of them don't really understand their role in this whole thing. So, I choose who to tell. For example, on my undergraduate degree, I suffered a lot because I had a very stubborn

lecturer, sorry to say. He was very difficult; he was not approachable. I saved myself by just keeping quiet. I suffered most as I chose to keep quiet. To him, it would be like I'm underperforming and then I'm pulling this stunt that I have a disability and he would make a joke about me in front of the whole class. So, I wouldn't even try him, I would just keep quiet. Then I would tell those that I could see that they understood the concept of inclusive education and they would give me the support that I need.

However, this other time during lockdown, my teaching profession lecturer offered large printed notes because he understands that I cannot be by my computer all the time. So, he printed the notes in a different colour print so that I would not have to use the white paper all the time. So that was a break from using a computer.

Participant 3 said:

I don't think so because now we are under lockdown, so we don't meet face to face. The HOD knows me, but even if he knows, there is nothing he does differently to accommodate me or let me say students with disabilities. For instance, I can't write tests in the few minutes they allocate to everyone else. My only wish is to be given extra time to write tests.

Participant 4 shared that:

No, I don't talk about my disability. Even when we write exams, I don't ask for extra time. I perform as other learners do. I receive nothing, I just do what I can to perform... My lecturers are not aware of different students with disabilities. They just disseminate assessments like there is no one with disability in their cohort. So, I have settled with that.

Participants indicated that only a few lecturers were aware of their disabilities, those that were aware, knew of the disabilities before the institution shifted to online/virtual learning. Based on Svendby's (2020) research into Norwegian higher education lecturers' experiences in teaching invisibly disabled students, it was found that there were no formal guidelines, no formal training and no access to pedagogical resources for lecturers with invisibly disabled students. To ensure an inclusive educational environment, the study recommends that higher education institutions should consider their obligations to education accessibility by implementing clear guidelines and providing mandatory training to academic staff in inclusive practices.

Institutional support for students with disability

The issue of disability is very complex and thus, studies on disability matters require background information such as the types of disabilities, the role played by relevant disability units and so on. Now that the background information has been sought in the previous sections, this part

investigates the holistic organisational support received by students with disabilities. All participants applauded the institution for its efforts although there are still shortfalls.

Participant 2 said:

I'd say not enough but there is progress. I have been here for the longest time and there has been progress and great progress I'd say. So somewhere, somehow, they are going to get there, I think. For now, they are doing enough, I have observed the disability awareness that they do at the unit. The building that they have been building (the new student village building) is user-friendly for students with disability. The university is trying by all means not to separate students with special needs with students that are 'normal', in the lack of a better word. One thing about us, we don't really like to be separated. The reality of the matter is that, yes, we can get a special treatment and all of that, but we also have to be around people in preparation for our next stages of life, for example, we are going to go to the corporate world and we have to get there knowing how to blend with other people. So, in as much as the university is trying to accommodate us, it mustn't separate us totally from other students as there won't be a special society for us. We really need to be with other people but the whole environment's conditions must be favourable.

Participant 4 said:

The institution is trying. There was once a disability workshop which I attended which involved disability representatives from different institutions across the country. The workshop was organised for different disability units to share their institutional experiences and collectively roadmap ways of promoting inclusive education, provide better access for disabled learners and to provide an extensive support for them. I think they are doing a good job. I attended that workshop, I observed it and it came to my attention that other institutions still do not have disability units. So, our institution is advanced and they are aiming to improve the services they offer. At least they have already taken a good step.

DISCUSSION

Many disability scholars agree that there is still a long way to go until students with disabilities in higher education institutions are treated equally with other abled students. The lives of students with disabilities on campus continue to be impacted by a sense of exclusion, even though physical barriers and exclusion discourses (Dolmage, 2017; Eunyong & Aquino, 2017). In support of the statement above, a participant in this study mentioned that there are very few ramps on campus and those that are there are very steep, hence his preference of the university's sudden shift to online learning for most courses where he would not have to go to campus. Participants with physical disabilities (mobility challenges) and those with visual

disabilities prefer to study online as mobility is challenging on campuses as a result of the campuses' infrastructural designs and the sun which affects those with visual challenges.

This paper explored the experiences of students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. With regards to the support offered by the institution particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and online learning, most participants indicated that there was no extended support to that cause. Only one participant indicated that her lecturer printed large font-sized notes for her since she is partially blind. It is apparent that most lecturers are not aware of students with varying disabilities in their cohorts in the online learning process, as a result, there is little attempt to foster inclusion on their side. This raises questions of disability disclosure. Although disability disclosure is usually encouraged at institutions of higher learning, it has both advantages and disadvantages (Castrodale, 2015). While institutions of higher learning would prefer students to disclose their disabilities to prepare them for appropriate support (Cunnah, 2015), it is not easy for students with disability to do so (Dolmage, 2017). This is due to various factors such as the uneasiness of disclosure, the thought of being perceived as trying too hard to convince others of one's disability or buying pity (Madriaga, 2007), bad experience with disclosure such as negative reactions (Collins & Wowbray, 2005) and generally the question of how one identifies him/herself. Grimes et al, (2019) state that as a result of different factors, most invisibly disabled students choose nondisclosure. The reasons for nondisclosure are mostly in synchrony with the social model which regards disability as socially constructed by the institutional and attitudinal barriers created by the 'abled'. The model suggests that these barriers can be eliminated or changed if society acknowledges disability as a social phenomenon that will forever exist, and therefore realise the need to create inclusive environments. In the case of institutions of higher learning, awareness campaigns and workshops on disability matters could be made mandatory for all staff members and fellow students.

A study conducted by Mutanga and Walker (2017) on the perspectives of lecturers on students with disabilities at two universities in South Africa revealed that lecturers had little to no knowledge or skills on how to handle students with disabilities and make suitable adaptations for them. In the same vein, Barbour (2010) argues that, one of the biggest challenges faced by teacher/lecturer education programs is the general lack of known models on which to design courses that will support educators in teaching and supporting students with disabilities through online school experiences.

Svendby (2020) also states that there is still so much prejudice, uncertainty and little knowledge regarding disability and ways of adaptations amongst lecturers at higher learning institutions. These obviously worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic where there was a sudden shift from the traditional face-to-face learning to online learning, particularly in developing countries. As a result of the sudden shift, most lecturers teach with no knowledge of students with disabilities in their cohorts and even how to handle them when aware. Online learning even conceals the disabilities of the visibly disabled. Therefore, the need to sensitise,

inform and train staff members, especially lecturers to check students with disabilities in their cohorts and respond to their needs properly, use appropriate designs for teaching and promote the use of assistive devices especially during online learning is increasing. Online learning especially during the confines of the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be extremely challenging for students with diverse needs (both able and disabled students), hence institutions of higher learning need to cautiously lessen these challenges faced by students.

Although the Institutional DU had been applauded by participants in this study for its role in their adaptation and inclusion, this study further suggests that the unit should further facilitate disclosure of students with disabilities to their lecturers. Each university lecturer should be well informed of the students with disabilities in their class, the nature of their disabilities and must also be equipped to implement adequate methods of inclusion.

While the use of assistive devices is one of the most accommodative ways of promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities, other students with diverse types of disabilities require different kinds of services from the institution. In this study, a participant with an intellectual disability indicated that he does not need an assistive device per se for online learning, he needs extra time for his assessments which he does not get online as his lecturers are not aware of his disability. This shows that the needs of students with disabilities are not universal and are extremely diverse, hence the need for institutions of higher learning to promote inclusion by encouraging disclosure, consultations and involve different stakeholders in the inclusion process (DU staff, lecturers and students with disabilities themselves).

Assistive technology has recently sparked a controversial debate especially with regards to education. Studies on special education/disability have proven that the decisions about persons with disabilities are often made by those without disabilities and hence decisions are finalised based on assumptions and generalisations without the involvement of those with disabilities (Ahmed, 2018). Thus, the general assumption made by institutions of higher learning is that assistive devices are enough to cater for the needs of students with disabilities yet other forms of support needed by such students are often overlooked. A participant indicated for instance that the disability ramps on campus are too steep and are likely to have been constructed without the involvement of people with disability knowledge.

Tindle et al. (2016) state that there is very limited research about students with disabilities learning online. Ideally, online learning should be tailored to each student's preferences and needs, especially those with disabilities (Tindle et al., 2016), however, the institution under study has minimal to no 'personalised' kind of learning for students with disabilities. Contrary to this, a participant in this study indicated a very important point, yet subject to debate. She said that students with disabilities do not necessarily need to be awarded any special treatment or separated from other students in inclusion endeavours. The participant said they want to be treated normally in preparation for their next stages of life, where there may not be any special services rendered to them. So, in all attempts of the inclusion of students

with disabilities, there should be a balance between rendering them 'personalised special services' and allowing them to live a real life where they get by without overreliance on aid. In a nutshell, the Social Model of Disability which underpins this study proposes the identification of existing barriers to an inclusive life for persons with disabilities. The model advocates for the limitation of disability discrimination in various ways. In the case of this study, the emphasis is on the role of higher education institutions in understanding the nature and complexities of disabilities and redressing them at the institutional level to make the lives of students with disabilities better.

CONCLUSION

Achieving total inclusion in institutions of higher learning to cater for students with disabilities is an uphill struggle. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa particularly introduced serious implications in the higher education sector where there was an abrupt need to move from traditional learning to online and blended learning. While several studies have been conducted on the implications of a sudden move to online learning by higher education institutions, there is no evidence of a focus on students with disabilities. This study reveals that the institution under study has no tailor-made assistive devices for students with disabilities who need them. Lecturers who teach online are largely unaware of the disabilities of students in their cohorts and hence, rarely employ inclusive learning pedagogies. While it is easy to blame lecturers for their ignorance of students with disabilities in their classes, students usually get reluctant to disclose their disabilities due to factors such as uneasiness of disclosure and bad experience with disclosure. The study concludes and suggests that different institutional stakeholders such as the Disability Unit, lecturers and students with disabilities should all take part in inclusion endeavours. The Disability Unit which has been praised by participants should be the facilitator of inclusion between lecturers, students with disabilities and any other relevant stakeholders. Lecturers should also receive some form of training or workshops relating to matters of inclusion and disability. Although this study aimed at exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the general challenges faced by students with disabilities came out strongly. Participants were eager to share their experiences even if they were neither related to online learning nor the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- The institution should promote a friendly environment for disability disclosure as most students with disability are not registered as such, they do not benefit from services meant for students with disabilities.
- All lecturers should be informed of students with different types of disabilities in their cohorts to pave way for inclusion in their online teaching pedagogies.

- The institution should enforce compulsory workshops or trainings for lecturers on disability matters.
- After careful consultations with students with disabilities, the institution should offer specialised/personalised assistive devices for students with different disabilities.

Limitations of the study

Students with disabilities were not keen to participate in the study, as a result only a few gave positive responses to take part in the study.

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