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DISABILITY: CONTINUED MARGINALISATION!

“We have a moral duty to remove the barriers to participation, and to invest sufficient funding and expertise to unlock the vast potential of people with disabilities. Governments throughout the world can no longer overlook the hundreds of millions of people with disabilities who are denied access to health, rehabilitation, support, education and employment, and never get the chance to shine”¹

Prof Stephen Hawking

Abstract

This paper will explore equal access in the higher education environment in South Africa and how equal access is spread (or not spread) throughout society. Although higher education institutions have begun to improve access and ensure equitable participation for students with disabilities, South African society needs to address disability equity more holistically. While some advances have been made regarding policy formulation, the majority of people with disabilities still face many challenges related to equal access, which leaves the disabled in a vulnerable position.

The conscience of a nascent democracy demands that past injustices be addressed, but genuine redress occurs in stages. In South Africa, huge strides have been made to redress race and gender issues, but access for disabled people remains a challenge. While legislative changes have been in place for 10-15 years, the questions remain: have the necessary changes taken place to reflect the intent of the legislation? What is required to allow for a seamless transition into an inclusive society? This needs to be questioned in light of the low number of students with disabilities in the South African higher education system. The paper will address these issues and present the findings of a recent study on disability in higher education in South Africa.

Disability in South Africa

During the South African Census 2001, a total of 2 255 982 people (5% of the population) reported that they had some kind of disability that prevented them from full participation in life activities. The majority of these disabilities are physical and visual. Of these people, 30% have no schooling and only 18% are employed.

In South Africa before the advent of democracy, the majority of people with disabilities were excluded from education and employment. Moreover, the disadvantages that such

¹ World Health Organisation. *World Report on Disability*, 2011. Foreword.

people suffered were exacerbated by attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes that viewed them as dependent.

Since 1994, however, stronger emphasis has been placed on human dignity and equality. This implies that all citizens should be given equal access - and be valued as members of a barrier-free society and are treated with the dignity and respect that is every South African's right.² Equal access is a basic right of ALL people. The idea of human rights begins with a fundamental commitment to the dignity that is the birth right of every man, woman, and child.³

Despite major initiatives that have been undertaken in recent years, informed policy and decision making and the improvement of the welfare of disabled persons remain a major challenge. As indicated in the 2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices⁴ the law in South Africa prohibits discrimination on the basis of both physical and mental disability. Despite this law, discrimination in employment of persons with disabilities in both government and private sector most certainly still exists, even though the law requires employers with more than 50 workers to create an affirmative action plan with provisions for achieving employment equity for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities constitute 3.4 % of the general population, but only an estimated 0.02 % of the public service workforce. The Employment Equity Act provides guidelines on the recruitment and selection of persons with disabilities, reasonable accommodations and the proper handling of employee medical information but enforcement of this law remains limited. The law also mandates access to buildings for persons with disabilities, but such regulations are rarely enforced.

Disability in Higher Education in South Africa

In 2009, the national Department of Education was split into two ministries, Basic Education and Higher Education and Training. Each ministry is responsible for its level of education across the country as a whole, while each of the nine provinces has its own education department.⁵ Minister Blade Nzimande is the current Minister of Higher Education and Training in South Africa. At a recent symposium⁶, Nzimande stated that "for far too long, disability issues have surfaced in our national and institutional policy documents and plans without meaningful action being taken to address the challenges which exist".

The importance of accessible schools that lead to further and higher training, and allow for people with disabilities to participate in the economic environment of South Africa is clear.

² Human Rights Commission, *6th Annual Report April 2001 to March 2002*, 2002, 4

³ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, 2010, 34.

⁴ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 34

⁵ South Africa.info. *Education in South Africa*,

<http://www.southafrica.info/about/education/education.htm#ixzz1eQzbzGQb> (accessed 22 November 2011).

⁶ Blade Nzimande, *Address by Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande* (speech presented at the Gala Dinner of the HEDSA Symposium, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein September 28, 2010).

Minister Nzimande believes universities must improve access for students and staff with disabilities to enable people with disabilities to enter the labour market to their full potential. He expects the higher education sector to "lead in this challenge".⁷

A report by the Commission for the Employment Equity indicates worryingly low levels of participation of disabled people in the mainstream economy. Minister Nzimande said of the report: "Systemic exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people is a poor reflection on the sector." He concluded that the situation requires bold decisions and initiatives to address both the need to increase access to post-school opportunities for disabled people and also to change negative views about the competence for study and work of people with disabilities. Fears about the competence of people with disabilities and the support required for fully effective participation in the workplace were reminiscent of many other types of discrimination.⁸

To address challenges facing people with disabilities successfully, it is essential that relevant and reliable information on the prevalence of disabilities and their impact be obtained. This, in consequence, lends paramount importance to research aimed at enhancing insight into disability-related issues, including students with disabilities.

To be able to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities, universities should be committed to the provision of quality and equal education for all students. In general, universities in South Africa offer assistance and deliver services to students with disabilities in accordance with the guidelines set in the National Plan for Higher Education and other legislation. Most universities have formal Disability Policies, which serve as a written commitment to admit and to support eligible students with disabilities. University services usually include the provision of study material in alternative format, addressing access issues and other concessions needed for equal access to the learning environment.

Based on the need for benchmarking and agreement on what constitutes best practise, a national body, HEDSA (Higher Education Disability Services Association) was established in November 2007 and represents all universities in South Africa. HEDSA aims to ensure equal opportunities for all students with disabilities by stimulating dialogue and critical reflection; promoting equity, diversity and inclusivity; networking and cooperating with national bodies and facilitating collaboration at a national level.

FOTIM Report on Disability in Higher Education

The Disability in Higher Education Project⁹ was mandated by the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) and made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation. The project, conducted during the 2010 academic year, was an exploratory study which aimed to describe and analyse the role and function of disability units at South African tertiary institutions. Both the *Council on Higher Education* and the *Department of*

⁷ Blade Nzimande, *Address*

⁸ SAPA Newswatch, *Varsitys must improve disabled access*, September 29, 2010.

⁹ FOTIM, *Disability in Higher Education: Project Report*, 2011.

Higher Education and Training expressed their support and interest in the findings of the Project.

Project Overview

Traditionally, limited attention has been placed on addressing issues of access, retention, progression, and participation of students with disabilities at tertiary institutions – this despite the numerous governmental policy documents that identify students with disabilities as being historically disadvantaged and deserving of special attention. In order to facilitate access and integration of students with disability, some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have established Disability Units (DUs) to offer specialised services these students.

The staff of these units were generally receptive to the Project and perceived the research as valuable since the findings could be used as objective evidence to substantiate their existence.

The Project intended to document the current role of DUs and focus on potential areas of improvement. Although the focus of the study was on the units, it did not aim to detract from the importance of the responsibilities of students themselves in ensuring their success when studying at an HEI. The student, DU, faculty and institution ultimately all have a role to play to ensure positive outcomes and a successful learning experience. The Project confirmed that factors impacting on disability inclusion go beyond things under the direct control of HEIs. The schooling system (and its ability to produce learners with disabilities that can enter the tertiary sector), parenting and other support systems all have an impact.

Aim

The Project intended to assess disability units, gauge what was working well and provide generic pointers to the essential features of a DU, with the aim of assisting established units to improve their services and provide new units with a framework on which to build their future activities.

Objectives

- Explore the roles, responsibilities and effectiveness of DUs at Higher Education Institutions
- Determine the challenges faced by these units in translating inclusive policies and legislative demands into practice;
- Establish baseline data for monitoring change over a period of time
- Develop broad guidelines on the characteristics required for the effective functioning of DUs.

Areas of investigation

- Staff at the DUs and their Key Performance Areas (KPA's)
- The functions of the DUs, services offered to students with disabilities and perceived shortfalls

- Placement of DUs within broader institutional structures
- Institutional policies (teaching, learning, assessment etc.)
- Monitoring systems
- Funding
- Reasonable accommodation
- Assistive technology
- Student experiences and perceptions.

Principles

The Project was exploratory in nature and did not aim to provide an exhaustive picture of the functioning of DUs or provide accurate figures of the number of students with disabilities enrolled at South African tertiary institutions.

The research was dependent upon the voluntary participation of institutions. Of the possible 23 HEIs, 15 participated in the study - a 65% participation rate. Participation was influenced by both the pressures of the academic year and research fatigue (students had seemingly been participating in a number of research initiatives).

Student participation was invited and ethical research guidelines were followed.

Core findings and associated recommendations

From the research it is clear that functioning and operations vary greatly among individual units, and different levels of sophistication exist in service rendering. The core findings and recommendations of the Project Report¹⁰ are:

i. Definition of “Disability”

Findings

No single definition of “disability” exists within the tertiary sector and institutions all have their own way of classifying students with disabilities. The definitions used suggest that a medical model of disability remains predominant, but there is a move towards the recognition of other external factors required to ensure full inclusion, such as reasonable accommodation.

Recommendations

The sector should develop a common definition of disability. This will support future data gathering and monitoring processes. The definition must express the fluid nature of disability as the concept, yet have elements against which an individual can be assessed. These elements must be functional, impairment and barrier based.

ii. Fragmented Approach

¹⁰ FOTIM, Disability in Higher Education: Project Report, 2011.

Findings

Disability is still managed in a fragmented way at many institutions, and the units are often reactive in their approach. Strong policy frameworks are not in place or, alternatively, not known to support the integration of students with disabilities. Disability issues are largely managed as separate from other diversity and transformation imperatives. The business case for disability inclusion is still little understood at HEIs.

Recommendations

Rather than perceiving disability as a costly expense, institutions should create a consumer-driven, individualised support system that has a financial benefit. DUs need to become drivers in the promotion of the disability agenda and herein lies a specialisation to their future multifaceted role.

The results of the study can be used to develop guidelines and standards for how DUs should function and what services should be provided for students with disabilities. Senior management at the different HEIs must support initiatives in this regard and must put appropriate institutional arrangements (such as funding) in place to support the working of the DUs. It appears that the sector is now in a position to formulate a list of services to be offered by the DUs and define the attitudinal, skills and knowledge competencies of staff employed by such DUs to provide appropriate services.

Various role-players in South Africa will need to work together if the cycle of marginalisation is to be broken. With the relevant support, children with disabilities can finish their schooling and enter into tertiary education, then the workplace, thus becoming contributors to society who are not reliant on government grants and support.

iii. National Framework

Findings

A strong recommendation to promote standards and adherence is the formulation of a National Disability Policy and Strategy Framework for HEIs. This could then be adopted and customised by individual institutions. Strategic goals, aligned with short, medium and long term objectives, will serve as a benchmark to measure progress against. Senior management at each institution should take responsibility to oversee its customization and implementation.

Not all HEIs address all the different types of impairments. The more established and larger DUs tend to provide services for most impairment needs, while the newer and smaller DUs tend to provide services primarily for visually and mobility disabled students. This is usually a strategic decision based on the availability of staff and funding for the DU. The fact that many universities serve mainly visual and mobility impaired students may also partly be attributed these groups of students being more conspicuous and visible than other groups with less “traditional”, and may also more readily present themselves for service delivery in terms of needs which can be met in a logical way. Services to students who are deaf, hearing and cognitively impaired remain limited.

Reasonable accommodation needs of students vary greatly, but the provision of learning materials in accessible format and the need to remove physical infra-structure access in the built environment were often cited.

Recommendations

The Department of Higher Education might be best suited to lead the formulation process. HEIs cannot by themselves overcome the obstacles faced by them in achieving disability inclusion and putting the recommended measures in place. Many have serious resource constraints that impact on their ability to respond to service delivery demands. The Department of Higher Education has a critical role to play from a policy writing perspective, to a monitoring and evaluation perspective to a support perspective. Funding and resources must be made available to assist the HEIs in driving the disability agenda. Services, accommodation, definitions and the categorisation of disabilities should be standardised on a national level. The needs of all types of disabilities should be addressed.

These recommendations were echoed by Minister Nzimande who, in his address to Disability Practitioners, reported that regardless of the amount of work and significant changes that have taken place in recent years to improve services to students with disabilities in universities, there are still considerable challenges to be overcome. This includes a lack of coherence in the higher education sector as to what comprehensive disability support entails, which reflects a lack of commitment from some higher education institutions to ensure the right environment for learning and working for students and staff with disabilities. The continued neglect of services to disabled students and staff is surprising because policy commitments are clear on this matter. Minister Nzimande concluded that education stakeholders should work together to begin a discussion about the introduction of sector-wide minimum levels of conditions for education of those with disabilities.¹¹

iv. Legislative approach

Findings

An erroneous perception seemingly exists among some HEIs that current legislation does not create enforceable rights for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

Based on the international experience, a specific disability anti-discrimination act (incorporating a section on education) can raise the profile of disability issues and bring increased disability integration in the sector. This legislative approach is worth pursuing further together with other governmental role players.

It is recommended that advocacy should be formalized as a clear and important deliverable of the DU's. This advocacy should not merely address the social responsibility and morality perspectives but should equally demonstrate the value adding impact of students with disabilities on the institution and on mainstream students, thus portraying them as equal

¹¹ Blade Nzimande, *Address*

players and contributors rather than as persons needing continuous assistance. This traditional approach is patronising and demeaning.

v. Levels of representation of students with disabilities

Findings

The proportion of disabled students is roughly estimated to be less than 1% of the total student population at the participating institutions. The number of disabled students at the different institutions varies from 21 – 400 as reported by interviewees. This is not intended to be an accurate estimation of enrolled students with disabilities currently at HEIs in South Africa. It merely reflects the number of students making use of the services of the DUs at the participating institutions. It does, however, give some indication of the levels of representation of students with disabilities within the tertiary environment.

Recommendations

It is suggested that a proper disability prevalence study needs to be conducted, with appropriate documented proof of disabilities.

vi. Staff component

Findings

The type and number of staff in the DUs range from a part-time administrative person or a single DU coordinator to a highly developed DU structure with a number of permanent staff, specialist functions, volunteer students and assistants. Their skills and competency profiles also vary. The staff complements are generally perceived as not being adequate except for the larger and more established DUs, but competencies are generally viewed as being adequate.

Recommendations

It is difficult to be prescriptive about the staff component at institutions, but employing a core component of full-time staff members is advisable.

vii. Funding

Findings

Funding for the activities of the DUs is in most cases limited.

Recommendations

Different funding options require investigation, and include:

- Student bursaries
- Per capita allocations to institutions for enrolled students with disabilities
- Incentives for the number of students with disabilities completing degrees
- Funding can be allocated to institutions for disability related research. Where such research is published additional funding can also be secured from government. This type of research benefits the students in the form of improved service delivery and the institution as both their publication reputation and service rendering are improved.

viii. Services provided by DU's

Findings

Services at the DUs are similar; the number of different services provided varies across the institutions, with some DUs only providing a limited number and the more established DUs providing most of these services. The longer established DU's, the longer the list of services rendered. Typical service offerings include:

- Facilitation of additional exam time
- Production of study materials in accessible format (for example Braille)
- Computer labs equipped with special software (such as Jaws and Zoom Text)
- Facilitation of student funding
- Counselling services
- Volunteer buddies and tutoring,
- Assistance with registration procedures
- Mobility training
- Facilitation of housing on campus
- Awareness raising
- General academic support
- Sign language interpreters and induction loop systems (limited)
- Support for cognitive and psychosocial disabilities (limited).

Recommendations

A future service delivery model developed by role players for DUs needs to be built on the premise of human rights, universal access design and consumerism approaches.

ix. Rating of services

Findings

Although students reported many unmet needs, they still rated the DUs services as satisfactory and adequate. Much appreciation seems to exist amongst students in most cases for the work done by the DUs and overall positive responses were received.

Recommendations

Minimal accountability should exist through performance appraisals of DU staff or other senior institutional staff against effective delivery on the disability agenda.

It is difficult to measure services without minimum standards. Having a national accreditation body in place would assist in setting standards and measuring services.

x. Learning and teaching methodologies

Findings

Few institutions have put measures in place to ensure integrated learning and education methodologies and processes.

Recommendations

DUs must move beyond the built environment, technology and assistive devices to interrogate the learning and teaching methodologies at their institutions. Staff awareness about disability and how to respond appropriately to specific needs is crucial. Academic staff should be trained in an educational approach for instructing all students through developing flexible classroom materials, using various technology tools, varying the delivery of information and/or adapting assessment methodologies. Incorporating universal design concepts into curricula will ultimately benefit all students in their learning process.

xi. Empowerment

Findings

A strong display of empowerment and commitment was encountered as a trend amongst many of the young people participating in the study. For example, students with disabilities are entering new non-traditional fields of studies across disciplines which previously were inaccessible and out of reach. This opens the door to new opportunities and progression. Hopefully this empowerment and integration will gain further impetus and society will embrace students with different types of disabilities as valued participants within the tertiary environment and, as equal players that benefit society as a whole.

Recommendations

Given the huge disadvantages that many learners with disabilities come with, namely sub-standard education and lack of resources, it is recommended that development programmes, including both academic and life skills, should be undertaken at institutions. Formalised initiatives could be designed and run by certified facilitators from either the institution's teaching or DU staff. Students with disabilities have a responsibility to play their part in actively ensuring their success whilst studying. Training programmes in areas such as self-management, performance orientation and interpersonal skills can assist to drive the correct attitude and behaviour amongst students.

Recommendations of World Report on Disability

The World Health Organisation published a global report on disability in 2011. Several recommendations are made in the report on education.¹² These include:

- clear, national policies to be formulated with the supporting legal framework, institutions and resources need to be formulated
- Data and information needs to be improved and monitoring and evaluation systems put in place
- Strategies that promote inclusion need to be adopted and specialist services provided where necessary.

Although the WHO Report focussed on the education of children, and the FOTIM Project focussed on higher education, the recommendations are remarkably similar, and provide a solid base for future initiative and the way forward.

¹² World Health Organisation, *World Report on Disability*, 2011, 225-7.

Future initiatives

Bearing in mind that different DUs are operating at different levels of sophistication, a phased in approach should be adopted. The broader South African economic context, high unemployment rates amongst the economically active population and resource constraints are all factors that need to be considered. Priorities and attainable time frames will have to be set. A systemic rather than a piece meal approach should be adopted. This means that a universal and holistic picture needs to emerge as the different components and measures are put in place. One cannot haphazardly choose which of the recommendations need to be put in place, but a strategically planned intervention needs to enfold in the sector as a whole.

Although advances and changes are being made and conditions at higher education institutions for students with disabilities are improving, the implementation of policies and standardisation of practices still require urgent attention. Although HEDSA is trying to fill the gap, a national framework supported by the Department of Higher Education and Training should be put into place. If progress is made in meeting the recommendations highlighted in this paper, it will show that the journey to redress disability issues is well underway and the goal of an inclusive society is in sight.

In the words of Minister Nzimande,

“What is clear is that although laudable progress has already been made to ensure disability inclusion, much still needs to be done within the tertiary sector. DUs at the HEIs can and should play an important role in ensuring fair and equitable policies and practices for students with disabilities. Although the final aim should be total faculty integration, reality is that the South African society and the tertiary sector are still in transition and a need exists for a special unit dedicated to disability matters at our various HEIs. DUs have a unique identity but must work in an integrated way with other student services and academic staff.”¹³

¹³ Blade Nzimande, *Address*



Equality! Human dignity! Freedom of expression and the new Constitution *published in Sowetan on 21 Mar 1997*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Our sincere thanks to FOTIM for co-ordinating the Project and to Disability Management Services who conducted the research on behalf of FOTIM.