

# The Needs of Students with Disabilities for Academic Success at the University of Limpopo: A Humanistic Perspective

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**Abstract:** The year 2017 marked a vexing protest at the University of Limpopo by Students with Disabilities. Amongst the issues that inspired the protest were contextual factors such as scarcity of resources appropriate for students with special educational needs and inaccessibility of buildings for such students. These are pivotal barriers to the academic success of Students with Disabilities hence the uprisings. Though many South African universities stipulate commitment to this constitutional right, little is practically done to improve the inadequate existing support services rendered to Students with Disabilities in these universities. There is a gaping gap which must be bridged with speed between policies on inclusive education and their implementation. This paper seeks to investigate the needs of Students with Disabilities for academic success in South African universities by using the University of Limpopo' BA Languages undergraduate students as a microcosm of such institutions. This study is grounded on a Humanism theory of education. A phenomenologically designed qualitative research approach was adopted in this study. Data, which was purposively sampled, was collected through interviewing undergraduate BA Languages Students with Disabilities in their residences at the university. This data was analysed by using a thematic content analysis (TCA) technique. The pressing needs of Students with Disabilities were identified, analysed and discussed, and proactive recommendations provided. The results of the paper indicated that academic success of Students with Disabilities relies heavily on addressing their basic special needs.

**Keywords:** Constitutional rights, Inclusive education, humanism, Special needs, Support services

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## 1. Introduction

The post-apartheid South Africa ushered in policies and strategies which seek to protect and develop Persons with Disabilities and maintain equality for all citizens. Section 9(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa obligates the state to the success of equality while Section 9 (3), (4) and (5) obliges the state to non-discrimination. These sections are predominantly significant for protecting all students including those with special needs (Department of Education, 1999). In addition, the Department of Education (2001) outlines that Persons with Disabilities should be afforded equal treatment within communities. They should also be provided with services which should facilitate educational success. Although the constitution and the policies advocate for equality, these legislative pieces do not match reality in that implementation is found to be deficient in almost all respects. This unsavoury scenario has resulted in numerous unrests by Students with Disabilities in several South African institutions of higher learning, including the

University of Limpopo (UL). The major grievance was that their academic needs were violated. The situation imposes restlessness in that it inhibits their academic progress (Naidoo, 2010; Mantsha, 2016). The needs of Students with Disabilities for academic success should be regarded as a priority that requires immediate attention in that Students with Disabilities struggle to do things that appear easy to able-bodied persons. This historical disadvantage must be redressed in order for Students with Disabilities to accomplish their academic dreams unhindered. The lingering challenge is lack of awareness about Students with Disabilities among members of the university community which usually results in total negligence. This misunderstanding further leads to negative attitudes, isolation and exclusion which contradict the spirit which is enshrined in the inclusive education policies (Post-School Education and Training System (PSETS) (2018). It is this gap which has prompted the researcher to investigate the needs of the Students with Disabilities for academic success at the University of Limpopo in order to ensure equality in higher education.

## 2. Theoretical and Legislative Framework of the Study

The following theoretical and legislative framework buttresses this study:

### 2.1 Theoretical Lens of the Study

This paper is underpinned by the humanism theory of education. This theory considers learning as a holistic entity by first recognising a student as a human being and secondly, as a learner. It is relevant to this study because it appreciates students' diverse needs, their differences and their learning environment in order to develop them on how to learn and continue to learn (Khatib & Hamidi, 2013). The fundamental goal of this theory is to offer meaningful learning based on the following principles:

- to offer supportive learning environment.
- to consider students' basic needs.
- to acknowledge students' individual differences.
- to develop students' learning motivation.

The needs of the Students with Disabilities for academic success will be understood through a humanistic view of education which involves the interaction between environment, the needs, motivation and the behaviour of the affected students. Environment stimulates learning needs which motivate behaviour. The humanistic view of education emphasises that if the needs of the students are not met, it is difficult for effective and meaningful learning to take place (Saeednia & Mariani, 2013). This emphasis resonates with students with special needs as they need support services and assistive devices in order to progress in their learning.

According to humanism theory, basic needs to be taken care of involve the psychological need, safety need, belonging need and the self-actualisation need, which are influenced by the state of the learning context. The psychological need refers to the need for survival, safety need is a need for protection based on law, belonging need is a need to be loved or the feeling of worthiness while self-actualisation need refers to the need for personal growth and exercising of potentials through learning (Jingna, 2012). In the context of this study, basic needs are

understood as the support services and assistive devices for Students with Disabilities to survive and progress in academia.

### 2.2 Legislative Pieces

This study is grounded on the following legislative pieces:

#### 2.2.1 *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996*

The Constitution prescribes that South Africans need to cultivate an inclusive, caring and humane society for all citizens to live and thrive in. It is aimed at redressing the imbalances of the past and founding a society which is based on fundamental human rights, democratic values, and social justice. It, furthermore, seeks to have an open, democratic society in which the Law equally protects every citizen. Central to the Constitution is the improvement of the quality of life of every citizen as well as freeing the potential of everyone.

Section 29 (Bill of Rights) is the essence of South African democracy which embodies the rights of all South African citizens. It, furthermore, affirms the democratic principles of equality, freedom and dignity for all human beings. It stipulates that every citizen has the right to "basic education, which includes basic adult education and higher education which government should provide. Thus, every citizen should enjoy equality before the Law as well as the right to security and life, privacy, psychological and bodily integrity, dignity, freedom of opinion, religion, assembly, belief, expression, association, residence, movement, trade and profession, occupation, healthcare, housing, food, culture and language, and education. No citizen must be exposed to forced labour, servitude and slavery. Access to information should be regarded as a fundamental right of every citizen. The state is obliged to promote, protect and respect the rights which are encapsulated in the Bill of Rights. In other words, the state should not discriminate against anyone in any form. This, inevitably, includes Persons with Disabilities. All these rights go with responsibility. They also have some limitations as well.

#### 2.2.2 *Consultative Paper 1 on Special Education*

Building an Inclusive Education and Training System. First Steps (Department of Education, 1999). This Consultative Paper is aimed to achieve an inclusive, seamless education and training system that

involves all students. Equality, human dignity and non-discrimination are the hallmarks of this Paper. Colleges, early childhood and adult learning centres, and universities must implement this special and remedial education. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, Section 1 (a), which talks about the advancement of freedoms and equality, and the achievement of human dignity, has informed the conceptualisation of this Paper. The Paper further calls for the establishment of Education Support Services (ESS) to cater for causes and effects of learning difficulties and resolutions of challenges faced by learners with special characteristics and needs.

### **2.2.3 Education White Paper 6**

Special Needs Education; Building an Inclusive Training System (Department of Education, 2006). This policy advocates for a paradigm shift among people in respect of learners with learning disabilities. It endeavours to de-stigmatise special needs learners within communities. It seeks to strengthen and improve special schools by accommodating learners with severe disabilities as part of inclusivity in the education system. Physical and professional resources have to be developed in tandem with this venture. In this way, special needs education would be successfully made non-racial and integrated in the South African education system.

Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (Department of Education, 2011). These guidelines deal with Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to promote learner diversity in the classroom. The primary reason is that curriculum is regarded as the main barrier to learning which usually occurs through classroom organisation, pace of teaching, language, teaching methodologies, content, and time available to complete the curriculum, teaching and learning support materials, and assessment. A practical solution to these hindrances can be achieved through differentiation in curriculum delivery to enable access to learning for all the learners.

## **3. Inclusive Education**

The policy on inclusive education stresses that all students should be accepted into the mainstream education. It operates according to the following virtues: skills, knowledge, attitudes and values (SKAV). The conceptual knowledge of inclusive education

contends that when the facilitator is skilled and knowledgeable about students' learning and assessment differences, it is easier for him/her to assist and understand them better. Moreover, knowledge awareness enables educational practitioners to maintain meaningful learning and help in shaping their attitude towards students with special educational needs (Gous & Mfazwe, 1998).

Inclusive education system further acknowledges students' diversity in terms of their learning needs and abilities. In other words, it does not approve of exclusion, isolation and segregation in the education system. Rather, it hoists collaboration and support in education by creating a non-threatening and enabling environment which is devoid of contextual restrictions. This debunks the myth that people born with different abilities are usually disabled by the environment to achieve their goals. This perspective denotes that a conducive environment can turn disability into inability which implies that disability should not necessarily be regarded as an individual's impairment but as a social one if social conditions are not properly addressed (Mantsha, 2016). This inclusive education position is ignored by many South African institutions of higher learning, University of Limpopo included, in that environmental restrictions are visible in many of these institutions in which stairs serve as the only means of access to high buildings. It appears as if authorities forget or ignore that there are wheelchair-bound and also blind students who rely on elevators for access.

Inclusivity in education argues for equal access and a sense of belonging for all students in academic contexts. It strives to accommodate and make provision for all students at the same time by acknowledging their differences. For instance, needs such as allocation of extra time when writing examinations and assignments completion, provision of special seats in lecture halls, extra tuition and extra lessons for students with special needs in the mist of mainstreaming education (National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET), 1997). In essence, this type of education advocates for equal treatment and fair provision of services to sustain successful education for all. In other words, consideration of knowledge awareness in inclusive education can enable the academic community understand Students with Disabilities' differences to maintain their support and equality in the classroom (Department of Education, 2001).

#### **4. Educational Support Services**

Support services include all kinds of assistance provided to students to enhance academic success. The primary role of support services for students with special needs is to avert obstructions and maintain success in learning. These support services play a key role of ensuring that all affected students have equal access to education. The amalgamation of support services and special needs helps students with disabilities progress in learning (Department of Education, 1997). In the context of this study, assistive devices can be understood as any instrument or device required by Students with Disabilities for learning purposes, while support services can be described as maintenance and provision of assistive devices in terms of their efficacy to assist needy students. Support services include accessibility of academic material, buildings and the availability of assistive devices while assistive devices for students with special needs encapsulate mobility aids such as wheelchairs, canes and crutches, communication aids such as hearing aids, noise reducing headphones and lenses, and technology aids such as computers for alternative and augmentative communication, screen readers, magnifiers, texts in audio format (Department of Education, 1997). All these devices are the basic needs for students with disabilities to succeed academically which most of South African institutions of higher learning are paying lip-service to in terms of procurement and implementation.

Mantsha (2016) conducted a study on educational support offered to students with disabilities whose findings indicated that although institutions of higher learning offer support to students with special needs, such support is wanting in many respects. For instance, the study established that environments are normally hostile to most physically handicapped students, and disability knowledge awareness is stunted. It is instances such as these which provoke students protest. This assertion is supported by Naidoo (2010) who postulate that when special needs are not met, academic interruptions such as delays in completion of qualifications and the increasing rate of drop-outs occur. In addition, the study by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2010) indicated that provision of sufficient educational support for students with disabilities is still limited. Such inadequate educational support is manifested in the acute shortage of educational material, infra-structural facilities and distasteful attitude towards Students with Disabilities by different university

communities. The study further highlighted that the interviewees and academic staff averred that lack of skills and knowledge awareness about Students with Disabilities contribute to the misunderstandings of individual differences. Thus, participants in the study suggested that disability awareness should be fully implemented in order for these gaps to be bridged.

A similar study on the perceptions of academics towards admission of disabled students which was carried out by Mayat in 2011 unveiled that the distance between academic staff members and students with disabilities causes confusion and misunderstandings between and among them. Lack of knowledge and information on Students with Disabilities makes it difficult for academic staff members to accept, accommodate and assist these students in their academic journey (Mayat, 2011). Misconceptions about Students with Disabilities shape the misbehavior and the negative attitude of an individual towards them. In essence, advocacy campaigns about Students with Disabilities will help raise people's awareness about differently-abled people. This can serve as a panacea to all educational challenges faced by Students with Disabilities.

Bell (2012) and Mantsha (2016) consent that Students with Disabilities experience poor academic progress due to a number of barriers related to accessibility and availability of educational support services. They make it difficult for disabled students to make positive strides in institutions of higher learning. The study on funding and inclusion of students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning stipulated that usually, financial support does not cover all the basic needs of special needs students. Additionally, institutions of higher learning should provide barrier-free environment to maintain equal access to resources by all students (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019). This study further noted that Students with Disabilities encounter accommodation challenges in these institutions. Blind students are tormented by delays of having to convert and transcribe study materials from normal typing and audio gadgets before they submit their assignments. This challenge frustrates and overwhelms them into even considering giving up on their studies. Disability-unfriendly buildings usually demotivate wheelchair users and other physically impaired students to attend classes. They lose appetite for education (Nkosi, 2017). The findings of the above studies agree that before learning can take place, at least the basic needs of Students with Disabilities should be met.

## **5. Method and Materials**

This paper employed a qualitative research approach to attain in-depth knowledge as well as to ascertain and understand the key feature of the study, which is investigation of the needs of the Students with Disabilities for academic success (Marshall & Rossman 1999:33). Phenomenological research design, whose aim is to explain the individuals' experiences about the phenomenon under study, was used in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Four (4) participants (three physically impaired and one blind student) out of ten (10) participants (six physically impaired and four blind students) from undergraduate BA Languages classes were purposively sampled and interviewed. Data from the interviews was transcribed and analysed using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). TCA helps identify, discuss and analyse the findings in order to check whether or not the objectives of the study have been fulfilled. In other words, data was identified and thematically analysed with report patterns of meaning in line by using the TCA techniques by Braun and Clarke (2006:402). Results and discussion were aligned to the objectives of the study.

## **6. Results and Discussion**

Researchers conducted interviews with respondents using a recorder. Researchers then transcribed the recordings after the interviews. Respondents were categorised using numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4. The needs of students with disabilities were grouped under three major themes which are availability and effectiveness of assistive devices, accessibility of academic resources and buildings, and service providers. The themes were generated based on the objectives of the study.

### **6.1 Availability and Effectiveness of Assistive Devices**

Students with Disabilities mainly require assistive devices as part of support services for them to progress with their academics. As noted earlier, assistive devices include mobility aids such as wheelchairs, canes and crutches, and communication aids such as hearing aids, noise reducing headphones and lenses, and technology aids such as computers for alternate and augmentative communication, screen readers, magnifiers and texts in audio format (Department of Education, 1997). The four purposively sampled respondents (three

physically impaired and one blind student), stated the following assistive devices:

#### **6.1.1 Mobility Aid Devices**

All the respondents stated that mobility aid devices such as wheelchairs, angle cabs and canes were the basic needs for both physically impaired and blind students. Respondent 1 who needed an angle cab could not get it while respondents 2 and 3 who needed wheelchairs and respondent 4 who needed a cane received them. Respondent 1 who could not get an angle cab complained of walking mobility around the campus, from the residences to the library. This adversely affected her study duration particularly in winter. She said "the fact that I am able to walk does not mean that I don't need mobility aid. My legs are not the same and that makes them to be sensitive when walking on rocky pavements, and it is worse during winter". This comment reveals that every student's need matters; no need preponderates over the other.

#### **6.1.2 Communication and Technology Aids**

Communication and technology aids such as voice recorders, braille materials, laptops, and computers with jaws were required as special needs for academic success. Respondent 2, who was not provided with a mobility device, opted for a laptop as an alternative to reducing up and down movement. That laptop was never provided for her. In contrast, respondent 4 managed to get all the basic devices needed for her condition, such as a voice recorder to record lessons in lecture halls, computer with jaws and braille for independent writing purposes.

Assistive devices are necessary for Students with Disabilities in that they accentuate their learning. Researchers noted that the devices make Students with Disabilities feel independent as they relieve them of relying on other people. Respondent 4 mentioned that "seeking help is good, but it can be a burden at times". Assistive devices, therefore, introduce them to the world of independence which encourages them to continue to learn. These findings concur with the humanistic view of education which states that if the needs of these students are not met, it is difficult to sustain learning (Saeednia & Mariani, 2013).

### **6.2 Accessibility of Academic Resources and Buildings**

The braille material usually comes late and this creates backlogs in students' studies. And when such

material ultimately comes, another challenge, such as a lack of appropriately qualified staff members', rocks up. All these problems cause unparalleled delays in materials conversion for blind students. This further pushes needy students to study under undue pressure and perform poorly in their assessment tasks although lecturers distribute notes on time. Another issue is braille examination material from examination office which almost always comes with errors which lead to loss of valuable marks by students. Additionally, the allocated extra time for examination writing is insufficient for, mainly, blind students who use their hands to read the braille question paper and type their answers on a computer while at the same time listening to a speller through the headsets. Even multi-tasking does not help under these conditions. Moreover, the fact that symbols and pictures are omitted from the braille material disadvantages them in terms of clarity of understanding of the questions: Respondent 4 lamented that "these are the things that the lecturers are not aware of and they conclude that Students with Disabilities, are not serious about our academic work. How is that possible?" She continued: "It is not our intention to settle for less academically, but the situation forces us to". This is corroborated by inaccessibility of some of the buildings to them and the unfriendly wheelchair environment on campus which result in lack of motivation for class attendance. Context-embedded teaching approach used by some of the lecturers in which they teach through pointing is also a liability to blind students as they cannot connect with the lesson because of their condition. The appeal to lecturers is that they should go an extra mile to accommodate these needy students because they feel excluded in such circumstances. The problem is compounded by the fact that almost all academics at the University of Limpopo did not receive any training on how to deal with Students with Disabilities, and Students with Disabilities, at times, misconstrue lecturers' lackadaisical approach to their challenges for negative attitude (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2010).

### 6.3 Service Providers

From the information shared by all the 4 respondents, four (4) service providers who should render support to Students with Disabilities were mentioned. Those were Department of Student Affairs which deal with students' matters; Examinations Department which provides braille and large print examination question

papers for partially sighted and blind students; Reakgona Disability Centre for canes, wheelchairs, borrowing, study notes, braille provision, examination venues, disability awareness campaigns; and Financial Aid Department for wheelchairs, spectacles, recorders, laptops, speakers, tuition, books and meal allowances. Students with Disabilities generally appreciate support services provided by the University in general although the outstanding needs such as creating a wheelchair-friendly environment, provision of appropriate braille material and assistive devices, disability knowledge awareness and more braille staff members, still continue to disrupt their academic life.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the paper indicated that academic success of Students with Disabilities relies heavily on addressing their basic special needs. These needs are, however, partially met in most cases (Naidoo, 2010; Mantsha, 2016). Recommendations which could help assuage the situation are, *inter alia*, fixing of pavements, establishing ramps and elevators for accessibility purposes, constructing wheelchair-friendly lecture halls which are accessible to all students, developing psycho-social support services for disabled students, appointment of braille experts to avoid examination paper errors and delays in the preparation of study material, provision of up-to-date assistive devices by financial aid centre, attendance of disability awareness events by academics as well as revision of current existing extra time allocated to Students with Disabilities during examinations.

"We are experiencing challenges; it is just that we don't have power to raise our voices", said respondent 4. From the above quotation, one may conclude that there is a silent, almost suppressed cry from the students with disabilities that requires immediate attention from authorities in institutions of higher learning. The plea is for them to study unhindered in institutions of higher learning. For this to come to fruition, it requires sufficient support in the form of prioritising their basic learning needs by authorities.

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