



## POLICY BRIEF

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### *Inclusive Policy for Students with Disabilities*

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2017

#### **About this brief**

This policy brief discusses the findings of a doctoral research project conducted between 2013 and 2015 at the University of the Free State and the University of Venda. The brief is intended to be of use to policy practitioners, university management, staff and students in South African higher education, by providing insights and recommendations into the complexities of the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. This is important in light of the South African government's imperative to increase access to higher education for students with disabilities as part of its broader equity and transformation agenda. The brief exposes some nuances around taken for granted understanding of inclusive education.

#### **Policy challenges**

There has been an increasing international promotion of and commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UN, 2016). Transformation in South African higher education has focused primarily on race and gender issues, and disability has been overlooked despite the fact that South Africa is among the few countries in the world (164 as of 2017) to have signed and ratified one of the most acclaimed global conventions on disability, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) in 2007.

It has been a decade since South Africa signed and ratified the CRPD. The convention is an international human rights treaty that is supposed to protect the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. But not much seems to have changed or the nearly 2.9 million South Africans – around 7.5% of the total population - who live with some form of disability. For example, people with disabilities make up less than 1% of the total student population admitted at South African higher education institutions. At the time of the research study, there was no national policy for students with disabilities in South African higher education. As such, there were ad hoc approaches to disability issues both at and within these two universities and at one of these universities there was no written disability policy.

Moreover, the research shows that the few students that are admitted at South African universities still feel excluded in relation to: *accommodation, class and timetable arrangements; access to spaces; teaching and learning; assessment; attitudes of staff and students; and funding arrangements.*

## Methods

A qualitative research study was conducted at the University of the Free State and the University of Venda. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 students with disabilities, focusing on their experiences with impairment and their perceptions regarding their needs at university. Field observations were also incorporated into the study, to expand understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities. Relevant university policy documents, e.g. disability, assessment and residence procedures were reviewed in order to understand how the two universities deal with disability-related matters.

## Key findings from the Evidence and Analysis

- 1- Although finance is important, money alone is not enough to guarantee full inclusion and success for students with disabilities in higher education. Certain policies and practices at the two universities are unjust for students with disabilities. For example, *at one of the universities, a blind student was staying off campus because he was told that he could not be accommodated on campus because most rooms are shared and that his guide dog would 'inconvenience' other students.*
- 2- Most students with disabilities face challenges at universities as opportunities to do what they have reason to value are constrained. While students with disabilities at universities do face common challenges, not all barriers are the same and students with disabilities respond to these challenges differently. They either adapt their needs to lower their expectations, or develop abilities to counter the challenges.
- 3- Students with disabilities identified key opportunities that they need in order to be fully included and succeed at universities. These include:
  - *being treated with respect;*
  - *being able to socialise and participate in a group/ groups either for learning purposes or pleasure;*
  - *to be understood and, be able to speak and use your preferred language [esp. sign language];*
  - *being able to choose one's identity and not have it imposed by others;*
  - *being able to move easily and safely from one place to another;*
  - *having a voice to participate effectively in the university, individually or collectively;*
  - *being able to persevere despite overwhelming challenges;*
  - *being able to gain knowledge in one's field of study;*
  - *being able to aspire to a better future;*
  - *being free from the traps of cultural practices;*
  - *being able to participate in religious activities.*

## Policy Options

1. Students with disabilities are not all the same. Although they face common challenges, they also have different needs and preferences. They come to the university with different endowments of resources owing to their backgrounds and contexts. As such, it is important to develop policies that recognise both the uniqueness and sameness of matters around the lives of students with disabilities. Policies should aim to fully include students with disabilities in all the spheres of the university. Depriving students with disabilities of the opportunities to do what they value is unjust; the adaptations of their needs to lower levels by the students with disabilities are a reflection of an unjust system. For students with disabilities who develop abilities to counter challenges, higher

education institutions must not make the mistake of pointing at them as ‘success’ cases whose stories should ‘inspire’ others to succeed under unchanging and unjust circumstances.

2. Although a sense of individual agency is pronounced in students’ narratives, it is important to understand why students with disabilities continue to struggle in a transforming higher education system. Without a broader understanding of disability and disadvantage, it will be difficult to engage with the complex ways in which inequalities emerge and are sustained for students with disabilities in South African higher education.
3. Whilst not denying that some students with disabilities (even non-disabled students) are under-prepared in other ways when they enrol at higher education institutions, simply blaming students with disabilities and their pre-higher education context is wrong and unfair. Each institution needs to undertake a careful, rigorous process of enquiry into how different barriers emerge and are reproduced.
4. In consultation with students with disabilities, there is urgent need for the development of policies and structures which:
  - i. Open up opportunities and freedoms for students with disabilities ‘to do and be what they value.’ Universities should continuously reflect on how their policies, practices and structures are either enabling or hindering students with disabilities to succeed at universities.
  - ii. Cultivate appropriate attitudes towards diversity and the creation of environments where every student (including those without disabilities), has the opportunity to flourish in their higher education endeavours. This can be done through awareness programmes.
  - iii. Promote identified key opportunities, both within and through higher education. This can be achieved by addressing policy areas highlighted in section 5 below.

Policy evaluation to measure the progress of different higher education institutions would then be based on how universities are doing against the list of opportunities valued by students with disabilities mentioned earlier.

### Points for policy consideration

| Area   | Recommended action  |
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| <i>Transition to higher education</i>                  | Government and higher education institutions should collaborate with schools to improve the process of transition from school to higher education for students with disabilities<br>Higher education institutions need to promote and encourage disclosure for students with disabilities and inform applicants about services and support available at each higher education institution |
| <i>Access (physical, study material, social space)</i> | Besides physical space, higher education institutions need to identify and attend to all challenges regarding access-both in and out of class<br>Government need to remove the declaration on section 2.2.5.3 of the Education White Paper 6 and commit itself to include students with disability in higher education  |
| <i>Teaching and Learning</i>                           | Higher education institutions should ensure that all staff have knowledge of the best practice. This could be achieved through sufficient training programmes.<br>Raise awareness through curricula-include disability studies in modules<br>Promote responsive and inclusive pedagogy  |

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| <i>Assessment</i>                | Through a national higher education disability policy as well as institution-based disability policies, introduce proper guidelines on assessment procedures for assignments and exams   |
| <i>Social Support</i>            | Higher education institutions should take steps to address negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. This could be done through positive awareness raising campaigns.   |
| <i>Financing</i>                 | Government needs to dedicate sufficient financial resources to institutions to ensure effective implementation of programmes.  |
| <i>Monitoring and Evaluation</i> | Government needs to incorporate CRPD into domestic laws and develop disability inclusion indicators that are in line with both CRPD and SDGs.<br>Government and higher education institutions should monitor educational attainment rates for students with disabilities, focusing on current laws, and take action to improve the educational success of students with disabilities.<br>Higher education institutions should collect both quantitative and qualitative data on the experiences of students with disabilities, and use the data to develop strategies aimed at improving the inclusion of students with disabilities<br>Students with disabilities should have recognized agency and opportunities to hold government and higher education institutions accountable when their actions breach the CRPD |

## Conclusion

Evidence provided here makes it possible to move beyond evaluating educational outcomes based only on student enrolments, exam performance and graduation rates. Higher education institutions must move beyond measuring inclusion based only on the numbers of students with disabilities whom they admit each year. Instead, they must work to create more equitable and just education and full flourishing for students with disabilities. This can be achieved by focusing on improving the opportunities and freedoms available to each student. Higher education and disability policy-practitioners will then also be able to evaluate the extent to which opportunities for students are being promoted or inhibited within and across different higher education institutions.

Finally, society bears significant economic and social cohesion costs arising from the exclusion of students with disabilities from full participation in higher education. Failing to fully include these students will mean that the commitments made in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be challenging, in particular the goal of leaving no one behind in economic development and eradicating poverty by 2030.

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