



## POLICY BRIEF

### *Enhancing capabilities and functionings of university students with learning disabilities*

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2021

#### **About the policy brief**

This policy brief is drawn from a three-year research study (2018-2020)<sup>1</sup> that explored the experiences of students with learning disabilities at the University of the Free State (UFS). The aim was to examine how a university can foster the formation of capabilities of students with learning disabilities. The brief is relevant to the UFS Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS), the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Student Affairs office, faculty managers, lecturers and other university units interested in addressing diversity.

#### **Context**

Learning disabilities are commonly misconstrued in educational contexts; they are invisible and can manifest in ways that are stereotypically associated with laziness and intellectual inferiority. They can affect the development of skills that are crucial in undertaking academic activities, such as reading, writing, comprehension and executive functioning and organisation (Hall, McGregor & Oleson 2017). Students face challenges that include negative physiological responses to stressful conditions, impulse control, high distraction levels, and short concentration spans which emanate from processing information differently – a common clinical feature of learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities can under-perform when conditions are not supportive. For example, overcrowded and noisy lecture halls, tight timetables, fast-paced lectures and inflexible assessment methods can limit students' potential, creating discrepancies between a student's intellectual ability and her academic achievement. It is important therefore for pedagogical and other institutional practices to take account of invisible disabilities and thus ensure that students with learning disabilities are not disadvantaged. Thus, the UFS, through CUADS, has instituted measures of support that include (the mostly utilised) adjusted test and examination conditions where students with disabilities get a separate soundproof test venue, extra time, individual cubicles and scribes (for those with difficulties that require a more enclosed working space). This study explored how these arrangements affected the learning engagements of students with learning disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> See N Manase (2021). Narratives of capability formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of the Free State.

## **Theoretical framework**

The Capability Approach (CA) was used to analyse students' academic engagement. The CA is a normative framework for human development that focuses on developing and expanding people's capabilities (individual freedoms), wellbeing and the achievement of what people have reason(s) to value. Capabilities are understood as opportunities leading to what students can possibly do or become through disability support and also through university education. What students manage to achieve are functionings. In education, the CA advances social justice - that no student should be deprived of opportunities to learn and attain valued educational achievements due to a disability. However, students face challenges in learning – conceptualised as conversion factors within the CA (which can be personal, environmental or social). Integral to the research is therefore how university arrangements affect students with learning disabilities' educational trajectories towards the achievement of valued outcomes in both academic and personal domains.

## **Methodology**

The research included perspectives from students with learning disabilities, lecturers, staff members from CUADS and CTL, and an analysis of university documents relevant to disability and teaching and learning. Students' personal experiences of learning were analysed alongside insights from different members of staff and institutional policies to achieve a better understanding of how experiences are shaped by circumstances.

## **Key findings**

**Policy perspectives** – There are certain teaching and learning arrangements that constrain learning and the achievement of satisfactory academic results for students with learning disabilities. Existing UFS teaching and learning policies generally commit to addressing diversity but disability is mentioned only in passing. The gap between actual constraints and institutional policy commitments raises questions about the practicalities about how to address the academic needs of students with learning disabilities. In catering for the needs of students with learning disabilities, the university responses are mostly reactive and support is informed by requests based on individual needs. Moreover, the UFS disability policy is yet to be implemented.

**Lecturer perspectives** – Lecturers are not always aware of students with learning disabilities in their classes, which makes it difficult to consider them pedagogically. Lecturers also lack the skills to address the academic needs of students with learning disabilities. Thus, academic support to students with learning disabilities during contact teaching is fragmented and based on individual lecturers' attitude and capacity. In addition, lecturers claimed that big classes create heavy workloads that undermine efforts to provide extra academic support to students with diverse needs.

**Student perspectives** – Students valued passing, obtaining a degree and accessing employment, even though they appreciate intrinsic personal developments acquired from experiencing university

education. Students' academic performance (mainly satisfactory grades) and personal growth (for example, confidence) were enhanced through the disability support they receive. Thus, students acknowledged the importance of CUADS and appreciated the various support especially the supportive environment created through adjusted test and examination conditions.

### **Capabilities for students with learning disabilities**

The following capabilities were enhanced through the disability support received by students:

- **Capability to demonstrate full ability in learning** – being able to fully display one's ability in academic activities. Students can express the acquired knowledge well in tests and examinations under the adjusted conditions.
- **Capability to have confidence** – being confident to express an opinion, succeed in learning tasks, and being encouraged and supported in learning and not to feel shame, fear or embarrassment in university settings.
- **Capability to aspire** – having the ability to hope for a good future. Satisfactory grades obtained due to the conducive examination conditions enabled students to develop a positive outlook for the future.
- **Capability to have emotional integrity** – being able to express feelings or emotions without constraint or fear of judgement.
- **Capability to develop imagination, care and empathy** – being able to understand the lives and worlds of others, being compassionate, being able to respond to human need and suffering, and being able to deliberate ethically.

Other capabilities that were enhanced by experiencing university education are:

- **Capability to acquire professional and self-knowledge** – being able to gain knowledge of self or a chosen subject, using critical thinking, reflexivity, and imagination for career, social, political, economic opportunities and personal development.
- **Capability to have economic opportunities** – having opportunities for economic gains through university education.
- **Capability to develop resilience** – being able to navigate studies, persevere academically, be responsive to educational opportunities and to be adaptive to constraints.
- **Capability to develop affiliation** – being able to connect or having social interactions that are instrumental in sustaining learning.

### **Conversion factors influencing students' university experiences**

The following institutional arrangements were identified as conversion factors:

- **The low visibility and recognition of CUADS** – students were concerned that not many people at the university are aware of CUADS and the services it offers. Most students undertook their studies without any knowledge of the available disability support for learning disabilities. Except for one, all the students reported that they were not aware of any other services that they might benefit from except for the adjusted test and examination conditions.

- **Teaching practices** – the limited recognition of learning disabilities in teaching and learning deprives students of opportunities to acquire subject knowledge, and ultimately threatens the academic success that students value.
- **The physical learning environment** – overcrowded lecture halls trigger anxiety, induce panic attacks and affect the attention of students.
- **Negative attitudes** – the separation of students with learning disabilities from others to receive concessions to write tests and examinations encourages stigma. Students complained that their peers stigmatise them and think that they are given answers to pass exams. Some lecturers feel that any challenges that students face should be compensated for at CUADS, not in lectures. Therefore, while the adjusted assessment conditions are beneficial, they can pathologise students with learning disabilities.

### Recommendations

- The university should further publicise CUADS and emphasise the value of its services to students through constant communication with prospective and registered students. CUADS should also intensify awareness campaigns to conscientise the university community of invisible disabilities in order to counteract stigmatisation and the lack of attention to learning disabilities in teaching and learning.
- Teaching and learning methodologies should attend to all forms of diversity so that all students engage well with their studies. Alternative pedagogical approaches, such as remote and online learning and alternative assessment methods, can reduce disadvantages that students with learning disabilities encounter in learning.
- The adoption of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in the design of learning spaces, content, teaching and assessment modes is recommended to improve accessibility and usability of learning material for students with diverse needs. The successful implementation of UDL also limits cases of supporting students with learning disabilities separately.
- Mandatory and ongoing professional development for lecturers on how to design and present learning material that is easily accessible and usable by every student is necessary to increase the capacity of lecturers in addressing students' diverse needs.
- Sustainable forms of support for students with learning disabilities are encouraged rather than disability services that only benefit students to achieve academic success. The university can adopt programmes that impart life-long skills that are important in managing life and workplace demands for those with learning disabilities. Most of the students were worried about how they would perform in work situations without support for learning disabilities.

### Useful reference

Hall, J., McGregor, K.K. and Oleson, J., 2017. Weaknesses in lexical-semantic knowledge among college students with specific learning disabilities: Evidence from a semantic fluency task. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 60(3), pp.640-653.