

NARRATIVES OF CAPABILITY FORMATION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis that I herewith submit for the Doctoral degree of Philosophy in Development Studies in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of the Free State is my independent work and I have not previously submitted it, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another institution of higher education. I also hereby cede copyright of this work to the University of the Free State.

Signature:



Date: 30/11/2020

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ACRONYMS AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

Acronyms

•	ADD	—	Attention Deficit Disorder
•	ADHD	—	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
•	CTL	—	Centre for Teaching and Learning
•	CUADS	—	Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support
•	ICF	—	International Classification of Functioning
•	Stats SA	—	Statistics South Africa
•	UFS	—	University of the Free State
•	UN	—	United Nations
•	UNESCO	—	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
•	WHO	—	World Health Organisation

Definition of terms

Capability

A capability is a potential achievement or what a person can possibly do or become. It also refers to opportunities to lead a life that one has reason to value.

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach is a normative framework for human development that accounts for individual real freedoms and the achievement of what people have reason to value.

Capability formation

Capability formation is the development of students' potentials or capability sets.

Capability set

A capability set is a range of achievable functionings or opportunities to function well.

Disability accommodations

Disability accommodations constitute any modifications or adjustments to the environment that will enable a student with a disability to have equitable access and participation at a university.

Flourishing in and through higher education

Being able to undertake learning and life activities well with minimal dissatisfaction.

Functionings

Functionings are the actual beings and doings or what a person has managed to do or become.

Higher education

Any tertiary education that leads to the attainment of a degree. Where not attached to specific literature, higher education is loosely used to mean university education in this thesis.

Institutional arrangements

Institutional arrangements are referred to in this study as any university system, structure, practice or policy that affects students with learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities

Umbrella term for disorders that affect the way a person receives, processes, transmits, stores or retrieves information to hinder the ability to learn.

Learning experience

Learning experience refers to any interaction at the university where knowledge is produced and shared.

Universal Design for Learning

An educational framework that guides the development of learning environments to be flexible enough to be accessed and used by anyone without special and separate support.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is the wellness of a person's state of being or being able to function in ways that are valued.

ABSTRACT

Students with learning disabilities who undertake academic tasks without support have a high risk of failing and dropping out of university. Universities, internationally and in South Africa aim to create equal opportunities for students with disabilities by offering disability support. The common disability support available to students with learning disabilities is adjusted assessment conditions which are generally recognised to be instrumental in promoting academic performance since learning disabilities can affect the ability of a student to successfully complete his or her studies. These adjusted assessment conditions have proved to have a positive effect on students' academic trajectories as students progress well in their studies because the adjusted environment enables them to demonstrate their abilities fully. The Social Model of Disability that emphasises the removal of barriers to students' university engagements informs university responses to disabilities. This study argues that even though these adjustments to assessments enable students to articulate assessments well or expand students' capabilities, they pathologise students with learning disabilities. They sustain students' condition of disability where students' academic success can depend on special arrangements. Besides, understanding disability services as *support* for students to perform well academically can perpetuate inflexible university systems and forces students with disabilities to conform and contend with normalised learning and assessment systems and conditions that disadvantage them.

The study further argues that framing disability response actions within the Social Model of Disability constitutes an overly narrow approach if these actions only serve the purpose of enabling students with learning disabilities to succeed academically through good grades. Adjusted assessment conditions that the Social Model recognises, also do not prepare students to function well in a system with no adjustments. The Capability Approach that I use to

complement the Social Model of Disability regards each student as a subject of justice and encourages practical opportunities (capabilities) that contribute to students' wellbeing (that is not limited to academic performance). Learning arrangements from a Capability Approach perspective would encourage the transformation of the education system to be inclusive for all and discourage separate adjusted conditions for students with learning disabilities. The Capability Approach encourages a university to expand students' capability sets or to avail a range of opportunities to function well towards the achievement of what they have reason to value in and through university education. This study therefore explores ways in which a university can contribute to the formation of students' capabilities, drawing from the narratives of fifteen students with learning disabilities at the University of the Free State. Students' narratives are complemented by semi-structured interviews conducted with five support staff, eight lecturers, and the review of ten university policy documents aligned to disabilities and teaching and learning. Nine capabilities were deductively identified from students' narratives. Five of these (capability to display full potential, capability for confidence, capability to aspire, capability for care, imagination and empathy, and capability for emotional integrity) are associated with disability services and four (capability for professional and self-knowledge, capability for economic opportunities, capability for resilience and capability for affiliation) with experiencing university in general. The capabilities illustrate how university arrangements affect the academic engagements of students with learning disabilities. The study concludes that even though the adjusted assessment conditions pathologise students with learning disabilities, they simultaneously enhance students' capabilities.

Key terms: learning disabilities, higher education, capability formation, university arrangements, disability support, narratives, university students with learning disabilities, learning experiences, social model of disability, adjusted test and examination conditions

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the learning experiences of university students with learning disabilities. It uses the Capability Approach framework propounded by Amartya Sen (2009) to examine how university arrangements affect students with learning disabilities' academic engagements or how a university can contribute to the formation of students' capabilities. The study involves full-time students at the University of the Free State (UFS), Bloemfontein campus, who have registered a learning disability and are receiving disability support from the university. In the existing literature, learning disabilities are defined mainly in medical terms as different disorders that affect the processing of information by the brain, resulting in the under-development of skills such as listening, writing, reading, speaking, spelling, or mathematical abilities (NILD 2016; NJCLD 2016). The UFS (draft) disability policy recognises learning disabilities (interchangeably referring to them as learning difficulties) as "clinically recognised and measurable conditions (e.g. dyslexia, ADHD, dyscalculia) that may significantly influence the ability of a student to successfully complete his/her studies without support" (Section 1.7.2).

This study attempts to expand these views by getting perspectives on what it is like to have a learning disability from students who have declared a learning disability and recognised by the UFS' Disability Unit. By this, learning disabilities can also be understood through students' accounts of the opportunities to attain wellbeing (rooted in the Capability Approach), not just in medical terms. Therefore, a capability informed understanding of learning disabilities would integrate the physiological and social aspects of disability with a consideration of how a student interacts with the environment within which he or she operates.

Since learning disabilities can manifest in ways that affect academic engagement (for example, adverse reactions to overcrowded lecture halls and poor reading and writing pace), universities ought to have institutional arrangements that do not hinder any student from learning well and succeeding in ways that they value. Hence, this study's focus on students' educational trajectories and the conditions within which they learn. Universities worldwide respond to learning disabilities by offering what is commonly known within disability studies as reasonable disability accommodations because students with learning disabilities may not engage well with learning due to underlying conditions. At the UFS where the study is based, the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS) offers adjustments to test and examination conditions where concessions are made in the presentation (e.g. use of scribes), setting (separate venue), timing and scheduling (extra time) of tests and examinations. The adjusted conditions are informed by the Social Model of Disability, which emphasises removing barriers to academic engagements.

The study explores how universities can promote the formation of students' capabilities and enhance their wellbeing. Capability formation refers to the development of students' potentials or capability sets (Broderick 2018). A capability set is a range of achievable functionings or opportunities to function well (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco 2020). The formation of students' capabilities can be useful in identifying inequalities in institutional arrangements (Walker 2008b). Students' experiences thus reflect the different opportunities or capabilities to engage well with learning, and also their wellbeing. Such an understanding of students' experiences is not common as research mostly focuses on studying barriers to academic success without considering their capabilities. This study therefore argues that understanding university responses to learning disabilities within the Social Model of Disability is limiting because it does not acknowledge capabilities, what students value, and is weak in assessing the factors

that interfere with a student's ability to convert the availed resources into valued achievements. The Capability Approach further encourages the expansion of students' capabilities through socially-just institutional arrangements for students to succeed, not only academically, but to lead lives that they have reason to value, and flourish as human beings. This study therefore expands the conceptual understanding of the value of higher education¹, addressing how both instrumental and intrinsic rationales are put into play in students' trajectories.

1.1 Research aim and questions

This study seeks to analyse and understand how university arrangements can contribute to the formation of students with learning disabilities' capabilities. The study is guided by this overarching research question; How can a university foster capability formation for students with learning disabilities? The following sub-questions support this central research question:

- i. What do students with learning disabilities value in and out of their university education?
- ii. How has the University of the Free State constructed and implemented interventions that target students with learning disabilities? How do these interventions meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?
- iii. What and how do conversion factors enable or inhibit the formation of valued capabilities for students with learning disabilities?

¹ In this thesis, higher education is loosely used to mean university education.

1.2 Rationale of the study

This study is motivated by the need to address existing empirical gaps within the study of learning disabilities in the South African higher education context. Little is known of the learning experiences of university students with learning disabilities as existing literature focuses more on physical disabilities. Therefore, the introductory information presented in this chapter builds more on an examination of physical disabilities than learning disabilities. While scholars focus more on how universities should respond to disabilities and less on how students experience university interventions to reflect their wellbeing, this study adds knowledge to an under-researched field of learning disabilities in higher education.

This study is also motivated to address conceptual gaps within the study of learning disabilities in higher education. The Capability Approach framework adopted in this study is not commonly applied in existing studies that investigate learning disabilities. The most widely used theoretical framing, the Social Model of Disability, focuses more on the removal of barriers to learning than on how students experience the disability services availed to them. This study thus supports the idea that the question about removing barriers to education should not only focus on the social arrangements of universities, but should also address students' voices to consider their abilities to convert these disability services into valued achievements and general wellbeing. Consequently, this study analyses the experiences of students with learning disabilities as capability formation, building onto other scholars' work who have examined disabilities using the Capability Approach lens, but with a focus on learning disabilities in higher education. By viewing students' experiences as capability formation, the study offers a broader understanding of the effects of the disability services and what students

gain from university education. This study therefore addresses empirical and theoretical gaps within the field of learning disabilities in higher education.

1.3 Understanding learning disabilities

According to Sleeter (2010) between the 1950s and 1960s, some middle-class white Americans could not understand why their children could not read and write well as others of the same age group. Their children were exposed to all the environments and conditions that supported the development of important academic skills, but still, they did not show the competence that was expected of them. Hence, rather than calling their children low achievers, they took a political stance to view their children as having learning disabilities (Sleeter 2014). In other debates, socio-demographic characteristics are predictors of having a learning disability among learners in the United States of America (Shifrer, Muller & Callahan 2011). Students from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically Blacks, are classified more as having a learning disability than Whites, as identification is made based on socio-economic characteristics than cognitive abilities (Shifrer et al. 2011). African-American students are therefore put in classes for special education based on a label than a proper diagnosis through a holistic approach that also include clinical assessments while Whites receive accommodations in the mainstream classes (Blanchett 2010). White students therefore have higher chances of being knowledgeable of disability accommodations when they enrol at a university than Blacks. Thus supporting McGregor et al. (2016) and Riddell and Weedon's (2006) claim that students from advantaged backgrounds register learning disabilities and receive accommodations the most. Besides, it is common in many contexts, including Africa to refer to students with learning disabilities as low achievers who need to be educated under special conditions (Abosi 2007). People can misperceive students with learning disabilities as

mentally incompetent or intellectually inferior to undertake and be successful in academia (Riddick 2009) where there are norms about performance, achievement and behaviours that are formed with little or no consideration for learning disabilities.

Conceptualising learning disabilities in terms of academic (in)competence can induce negative labels that associate students with sub-normality (Terzi 2008). Negative labels can affect students' abilities, for example, to display confidence around educational activities when others regard them as intellectually inferior. However, there have been conceptual developments where notions such as mental retardation or brain damage are no longer commonly used (Terzi 2008) as people prefer to call them learning difficulties [Australian context (Skues et al. 2019)] or specific learning disorders [German context (Maehler & Schuchardt 2016)]. Within the South African education context, the coding framework of the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA²) terms them specific learning disabilities, with intellectual, communication, language and speech disabilities as part of the descriptors. The UFS subscribes to HEDSA and follows its dictates, including how it currently conceptualises learning disabilities. Due to the contested understanding of learning disabilities, Cluley, Fyson and Pilnick (2019) suggest an ontological turn by asking those with disabilities what it is to be a person with a learning disability rather than asking what a learning disability is. This study builds on the perspective of Cluley et al. (2019) by understanding students' experiences of learning disabilities. It uses their first-hand accounts in conjunction with an examination of university policies and perspectives from academics to establish how learning disabilities are regarded. Nonetheless, this background information is important to understand how students

² A voluntary non-profit organisation that is recognised and endorsed by the South African department of higher education and technology to manage disability services in higher education.

with learning disabilities are subject to social prejudices within the education context and to advocate for inclusive educational arrangements.

This study follows the terminology of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that uses ‘persons with disabilities’ because this terminology does not define people by their disabilities. I thus use the term ‘students with learning disabilities’, not in a derogatory way, but positively acknowledging and focusing on their condition as students. Therefore, the term ‘students with learning disabilities’ is preferred with an understanding that a learning disability is what a student has, not what a student is (Gable 2001). As such, I refrain from using terms like learning disabled or dyslexic students unless if it is a direct quote from the participants or other authors.

1.3.1 The knowledge gap

Although learning disabilities are the most commonly recorded disabilities in higher education globally (McGregor et al. 2016), they are not given much attention in Disabilities Studies, both internationally and in South Africa. Students with learning disabilities are referred to as ‘an invisible population’ in higher education (Grimes et al. 2017) because there is a high possibility of them not revealing that they have a disability or being recognised as such by others. This gap is also noted within the African continent as available knowledge on disabilities shows a concerted focus on physical disabilities. Furthermore, conclusions in many studies are generalised to all forms of disabilities. Examples of this are findings by Mosia and Phasha (2017) on access to the curriculum for students with disabilities in Lesotho; Emong and Eron (2016), on disability inclusion in higher education in Uganda; and Hugo (2012) and on the responses of higher education institutions to the needs of students with disabilities in Namibia.

Although these studies point to the fact that students with disabilities' needs are not being met, focusing mainly on physical disabilities creates a gap in knowledge on other forms of disabilities that are not visible. The invisible nature of learning disabilities can also contribute to learning disabilities getting unrecognised in teaching and learning, as shown in the study findings.

Within South Africa, Mutanga (2015; 2019) explores the experiences of students with disabilities at two South African universities. Mutanga's work is instrumental in understanding the university experiences of students with disabilities in South Africa within the Capability Approach theory. This study thus builds on Mutanga' (2019) work to identify the capabilities for students in Chapter 8. There are also a few studies on learning disabilities in South Africa that inform debates in this study. These studies, including Nel and Grosser (2016), Chow and Skuy (1999), as well as Molteno, et al. (2001) are mainly located within the schooling system. Scholars thus show more concern for the learning needs of the primary and secondary school children than university students, probably because basic schooling up to grade nine is compulsory in South Africa (Fleisch & Shindler 2009). Yet, learning disabilities are chronic (Wajuihian & Naidoo 2011) and can still affect the learning engagements of university students. The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) also acknowledges that learning disabilities are not given much focus at institutions of higher learning (SA Strategic Framework 2018). This study therefore contributes to the developing field of research on learning disabilities by expanding insights on how university students with learning disabilities engage with learning, highlighting how university arrangements can constrain or expand opportunities to achieve wellbeing.

1.4 Background information: Disabilities and inclusivity in higher education

Globally, there is a call for institutions of learning to be inclusive with the intention to promote equal participation, equitable acceptance, access, support and success for all learners (UNESCO 1994). Even though the UNESCO debates are mainly located within the schooling system, they apply to higher education. The 1994 Salamanca Statement or the UNESCO Framework of Action on Special Needs Education, which is the root of the Education for All campaign, considers inclusive education as a right for everyone, including those with disabilities (UNESCO 1994). Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) honours the right of people with disabilities to education (UNCRPD 2013). The mandate of the UNCRPD is rooted in the principles of equality, dignity, autonomy, independence, accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities at all levels in society (UNCRPD 2013), including at all levels in the education system. The same principles are inherent in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which calls for equal access to affordable technical, vocational and higher education. Target 3 of SDG 4 encourages inclusive, equitable and quality education for all by 2030, and the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education (UNDP 2018). Hence, there is a growing realisation of the marginalisation of people with disabilities in many social spaces, resulting in attempts at inclusivity in different spaces including higher education.

In South Africa, there are calls for the social inclusion of people with disabilities as the democratic government encourages the transformation of exclusionary systems that the apartheid³ regime encouraged. Specific to post-school education, the (1997) White paper 3 and

³ A system of institutionalised racial segregation that South Africa was under from 1948 to 1994, but the effects are still visible (Maylam 2017).

the (2001) White paper 6 require institutions of higher learning to be transformed and inclusive to accommodate those with disabilities. However, the common narrative on (unspecified forms of) disabilities and education is that there is a parity difference in accessing higher education between those with disabilities and those without.

Howell (2018) focuses on the participation of students with (unspecified) disabilities in South African higher education and reports that there is only a 0.6% participation rate of students with disabilities in higher education in South Africa, out of the 7.2% of the total population of people with disabilities in the country, which is pegged at 2.8 million people (Stats SA 2014). Of the few who are participating in higher education, they have a very low chance of obtaining a qualification such that only 5.3% of people with disabilities⁴ obtain a higher education qualification (Stats SA 2014). The (2020) South African Individual Deprivation Measure reports that 78.9% of people with disabilities are deprived across all education dimensions including educational level, functional literacy and functional numeracy. The reasons contributing to these disparities are not well documented, but the political history of South Africa might have a bearing on the status quo, as discussed next.

1.4.1 Disability and education during the apartheid era in South Africa

The apartheid regime in South Africa is known for advancing racial divisions with the resultant effect of disadvantaging those who were considered socially inferior (SAHO 2016). Following the 1959 Extension of University Education Act 45, which forbade students of different races to be educated together (SAHO 2016), many black people failed to receive quality education

⁴ The figure refers to unspecified severe disabilities.

at the much better resourced ‘white’ institutions (CHE 2016). They were confined to under-resourced ‘historically disadvantaged schools and universities’ that offered inferior course programmes compared to the ‘historically advantaged universities’ (Bozalek 2013). The apartheid era discriminatory policies thus limited access to education for non-whites (Moodley 2017). The racial discrimination was evident in the general schooling system where better-resourced schools were meant for Whites only. Black⁵ children could only access schools that had limited budgets and fewer expenditure per pupil, poorly resourced and maintained, and had inadequate Black teachers (Walker & Archung 2003). The quality of education was poor and many could not get past the four years of schooling (Christie and Collins 1982). The education system was structured in a way that protected White privilege at the expense of other races (Walker & Archung 2003). The 1953 Bantu Act stipulated that Black people should receive ‘Black’ education in Black languages to fit the Black way of life (Christie & Collins 1982). Black students were therefore schooled to hold subservient roles in society (Walker & Archung 2003) as the Apartheid government declared that non-Whites should not be educated above certain forms of labour (Christie & Collins 1982). Hence, at some point, only 2% of blacks were enrolled in post-primary school (Christie & Collins 1982).

Political developments, including the removal of the Apartheid government in 1994, led to the de-segregation of the education system and non-Whites could access better education without limitations associated with ethnicity or location. However, students from low-income backgrounds still face challenges in accessing better education (in the post-Apartheid era) to attain university education (Walker & Mathebula 2020). Most students from rural schools do not even know how to use technology to find information about university operations

⁵ Blacks refers to all non-white ethnic groups.

(Czerniewicz & Brown 2014) as they have little or no navigational capitals to manage the challenges associated with university student life (Walker & Mathebula 2020). Therefore, those who manage to get to university are likely to have little knowledge of university systems because their schools lack proper career guidance to improve students' awareness of what university education entails. Students with disabilities too can lack knowledge of support services they can benefit from.

The racial segregation and discrimination of the apartheid era existed at special schools for disabilities too. Not many Blacks could afford to send their children with disabilities to special schools and those who could were limited to township schools that lack proper facilities and funding (Soudien & Baxen 2006). Better-resourced special schools were filled with more white than black children (Emmett 2006). This meant double-discrimination for those with disabilities on the basis of colour and disability (Matshediso 2007) since disability on its own is a source of marginalisation. Therefore, disability and race played a role in determining access and participation in education (Moodley 2017) with conditions favouring a race that was considered superior during that time. Another factor that contributed to inequalities in education for people with disabilities is that special schools did not prepare students for university education (Howell 2006). Very few special schools offered tuition up to matric level⁶ that enables a student to qualify for university education (Howell 2006). Hence, there was a blocked pathway to university as opportunities to access it were constrained by a curriculum that did not consider that learners with disabilities can go to university. The current era (after apartheid) is trying to encourage inclusivity, as explained next.

⁶ Final year in high school that determines if one qualifies for university education or other post-secondary education programmes.

1.4.2 Disability in South Africa in the post-1994 period

Since the end of apartheid, many systems in South Africa, including the South African higher education system, has been undergoing social reconstruction and transformation to be more inclusive (SAHO 2016). The South African Council on Higher Education comments, with no supporting statistics, that the post-1994 era has witnessed more students with disabilities enrolling into the mainstream education system (CHE 2016) despite reports of many not pursuing higher education as noted earlier. Presumably, the number of students with disabilities in higher education has increased, but still falls short of satisfying the integration imaginations and expectations that people might hold. The increment in enrolments in South Africa occurred in alignment with other international trends on creating equitable opportunities for people with disabilities, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Canada's five-year (1991-1996) National Strategy for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities (Lightfoot, Janemi & Rudman 2019). Thus, there is a reported upsurge in the enrolment of students with disabilities in post-school education which is also not unique to South Africa's social equity agenda, but to other international trends.

However, the needs of these students are reportedly unmet in many learning spaces (Mutanga 2015). Disability is, therefore, a relevant subject of debate in higher education to better understand how education systems can ensure that all students can learn well with learning conditions supportive of that. Further details on learning disabilities within higher education are explained in the literature review chapter.

1.5 The study context

The study was conducted at the University of the Free State (UFS). The UFS is located in the Free State Province of South Africa. The UFS has three campuses, the Bloemfontein, QwaQwa and South campuses, with 41 675 students altogether (UFS 2020). The Bloemfontein campus is located in the city of Bloemfontein and is a former ‘White univeristy’ (Githaiga, Gobodo-Madikizela & Wahl 2018) where most black students were excluded. There are seven faculties (Economic and Management Sciences, Humanities, Education, Law, Theology and Religion, Health Sciences and Natural and Agricultural Sciences) and there is also a Business School and Open and Distance Learning (UFS 2018). Students from any of these faculties were deemed to be eligible participants for this study.

The UFS’ QwaQwa campus is a former blacks-only university known as Uniqwa that merged with the UFS in 2003 (UFS 2013). It has students drawn mainly from the rural Eastern Free State and Northern KwaZulu-Natal provinces. Hence, the QwaQwa campus caters mostly for students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. The South campus is in central Bloemfontein but caters for students with low admission scores into the degrees of their choice. It therefore offers extended and bridging programmes that allow students to enrol for a degree programme at the university. All three campuses were proposed target populations to capture perspectives from different settings. The UFS was a chosen case study mainly to limit ethical clearance hurdles since I am familiar with its research management system as a registered student who already completed a Master’s research project under the UFS. I am also based in Bloemfontein, hence conducting the research in the Free State was more feasible than having it at a disatant university. In addition, the intersection between disability, race and geographic location that is argued to affect students’ capabilities (Moodley 2017) was interesting to explore

by including students with different demographics from different campuses. However, this was not possible because I ended up with only students from the Bloemfontein campus for the reasons stated in the next paragraph. Below is the map showing the three campuses of the UFS.



Figure 1: Map of UFS campuses

Source: UFS (2020)

There are 120 students who have registered a learning disability with the university (at all the three campuses), which CUADS confirmed is half of the total number of students with disabilities (of any form) at the UFS. Hence, learning disabilities are the most registered form of disability at the UFS. The QwaQwa campus only has one student who is categorised as having a learning disability but I decided not to include the student after confirming that according to the (2019) NSFAS disability questionnaire (currently used to apply for disability funding by students in higher education), the student's condition is considered a psychiatric

condition. There is also only one student with a learning disability on the university's disabilities database at the South campus of the UFS. Arrangements to interview this student did not materialise after students' contact details could not be shared with me in an ethically permissible way (that is with the students' consent). I therefore could only conduct interviews with students at the UFS Bloemfontein campus.

1.6 Chapter outline

The thesis contains nine chapters. **Chapter 1: Introduction** — consists of background information on disabilities and education in South Africa. The chapter introduces learning disabilities as this subject shapes discussions in the whole thesis. The research questions, rationale and the knowledge gap are also included in this introductory chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature review — The chapter gives a detailed discussion of the scholarly work on learning disabilities within the education context. The chapter explains what challenges students experience in learning and what studies have revealed to be the best ways to respond to learning disabilities. The dominantly adopted disability accommodations approach in catering for the needs of students and the topical Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are discussed, pointing out differences in their principal tenets and how they impact students' learning experiences. With the discussions mainly located in the global North context, the chapter exposes the scarcity of studies on learning disabilities in the African context, illustrating why understanding students' learning experiences within the South African context is important.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework — This chapter covers the conceptual aspects of the study with a focus on how disability is understood within the existing models of disability (Medical and Social). Weaknesses in these models are presented before discussing the Capability Approach and its usefulness in complementing the Social Model of Disability that is commonly adopted in higher education. The value of education is also discussed, underscoring the usefulness of the Capability Approach in giving a broader conceptual framework to understand what students can possibly do or become and what this means for capability formation in higher education.

Chapter 4: Methodological account — This chapter presents the research methodology and explains the adopted narrative approach as a research framework that suits the exploration of students with disabilities' experiences. The chapter further details how the study was conducted (where, when and with whom), indicating how multiple data sources are an important element of narrative research as they contextualise personal stories. The ethical considerations for the study are included in the chapter. The chapter is followed by the empirical chapters (5,6 and 7) that contain the findings of the study as explained next.

Chapter 5: Policy perspectives — The chapter presents findings from the university policies that were analysed as part of the data. The policies include those associated with teaching and learning, disabilities and the university's strategic documents. The chapter further presents policy perspectives from staff members from the University's Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to give context to students' stories and/or expose any disjuncture between policy and practice. The chapter points out how the university policies (most of which are not yet fully implemented) commit to addressing the diverse needs of students but with little or no practical guidance and

commitment to available resources. This study finds such a status quo as a subtle form of injustice for students whose needs are likely to be unmet.

Chapter 6: Lecturers' perspectives — Academics' voices are presented in Chapter 6, detailing their experiences of teaching students with learning disabilities. Lecturers explain how information on students' disabilities is not communicated to them, such that they just teach assuming that there are no students with learning disabilities. The concerns by lecturers on the impediments that make it difficult to attend to students' academic needs are also noted in the chapter. Therefore, the chapter highlights that the non-recognition of learning disabilities in teaching makes learning difficult for students with learning disabilities. The chapter further explains how lecturers are instrumental in identifying some of the students who require disability support. Lecturers' perspectives mainly reflect poor coordination of teaching and learning functions with student support services, as students are mainly identified as needing disability support after several months into the academic year when there are concerns about their poor academic performance.

Chapter 7: Students' perspectives — The chapter presents students' accounts of experiencing university with a learning disability after presenting the contextual information in chapters 5 and 6. Students raised concerns about the challenges they face in learning against the achievement of a degree they value to reflect learning spaces that are unsupportive. There are, thus, discussions on how students manage learning, noting the different coping mechanisms and social support systems that students benefit from. However, the chapter notes how the adjusted test and examination conditions are instrumental in displaying potentials optimally. The different ways in which students benefit from the adjusted examination conditions are explained in this chapter.

Chapter 8: Theorisation of findings — Chapter 8 presents an analysis of students' experiences within the Capability Approach framework using the key concepts of capabilities, functionings, conversion factors, wellbeing and agency. The chapter presents a set of nine capabilities that were identified from students' narratives, four associated with experiencing higher education and five associated with the disability services that students receive. Discussions on the value of higher education are included in the chapter, showing how the Capability Approach as a conceptual lens expands our understanding of the benefits of education and how it furthers our understanding of capability formation in higher education.

1.7 Conclusion

The introductory chapter contains important information that shapes discussions in the thesis. It provides contextual information that provides insights on why university students with learning disabilities should be given scholarly attention. The concerns over the possible marginalisation of students with learning disabilities appeal to why it is necessary to examine students' education trajectories and how university arrangements affect students' academic engagements. Therefore, by focusing on the learning experiences of university students with learning disabilities, this study contributes knowledge to an under-researched area that is important in expanding debates on inclusive higher education. The literature review chapter follows next.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents debates on learning disabilities, types, how they manifest in students, and associated challenges in teaching and learning. The chapter further discusses how the institutional environment, including teaching practices, affect students with learning disabilities, noting how they induce a sense of inadequacy in students who fail to meet the expected standards in learning. The chapter also presents debates on the forms of support students with disabilities receive, which are reasonable disability accommodations and the Universal Design for Learning. Debates in these sub-sections highlight how universities are expected to cater for the needs of students with disabilities with the main aim of promoting academic performance.

Within the study's aim of fostering an understanding of how learning conditions impact students' academic engagements, this chapter includes debates on the challenges students with learning disabilities face in their academic endeavours and how universities respond to these challenges. Thus, the chapter also includes discussions on the principles that inform responses to disabilities at institutions of higher learning and their implications for students' meaningful learning and success. The reviewed literature in this chapter is mostly from peer-reviewed scholarly work. I also consulted the grey literature, particularly organisational websites (such as Understood.org and the National Institute for Learning Development — NILD) mostly for information on learning disabilities due to the scarcity of studies that address the relevant issue under investigation. Institutional documents (including the UFS Integrated Transformation Plan) are also consulted on policy issues. Some studies, which are concentrated in the global

North, address learning disabilities from a clinical perspective, which was too scientific to support arguments in my study. Therefore, they were not included in discussing the existing knowledge on learning disabilities.

In as much as I try to situate debates on learning disabilities in higher education within the international and local contexts, there is not much literature on this subject matter within Africa and South Africa in particular. Therefore, not many local studies are included in the debates covered in this chapter. There has been a call by Grech (2015) for the decolonisation of disability studies, referring to addressing a lack of disability studies from the global South by global South authors. There is a noted concern that disability debates are located mainly in the global North or are authored by global North scholars using cases and samples from the global South (Grech 2015). There can be a misrecognition, misrepresentation or misinterpretation of disability experiences where a scholar from the global North produces knowledge on the experiences of people in the global South. The literature highlights a lack of research and understanding on learning disabilities in higher education locally, thus reflecting how students with learning disabilities' learning needs can be overlooked. Discussions on the types of learning disabilities follow.

2.2 Definition and types of learning disabilities

As indicated in the introductory chapter, learning disabilities have been defined and characterised as disorders that affect the processing of information by the brain, resulting in the under-development of skills such as reading, writing, spelling, speaking and mathematical abilities that are important for undertaking learning activities (NILD 2016; Lipka, Forkosh

Baruch & Meer 2018; Zeng, Ju & Hord 2018). Learning disabilities affect the way a person receives, transmits, processes, stores, retrieves information in the brain (NILD 2016). They can affect a person's social perception and social interaction (NJCLD 2016) causing poor social competence. A student may also have challenges in controlling behaviour and body movements, difficulties in maintaining a sitting position for long or may react negatively to stressful physical and social environments (Lee Booksh et al. 2010). There are different types of learning disabilities ranging from those that affect literacy, numeracy, concentration, coordination, organisation and others, as indicated in the table below.

Table 1: Types of learning disabilities

Type of learning disability	Manifestation
Dyslexia	Causes difficulties with the sequential naming of letters and words, causing challenges in reading, writing, spelling and understanding written texts. Common symptoms include poor reading fluency, poor comprehension of text, slow writing speed, bad spelling and mis-pronunciation of words that appear simple to others of the same age (Wajuihiana & Naidoo 2011).
Dyscalculia	Dyscalculia affects a person in the same way as dyslexia but causes difficulties in understanding numbers rather than words. People with dyscalculia also experience arithmetic difficulties, telling time, directions and reading measurements (NILD 2016).
Dysgraphia	A writing disorder in which a student finds it hard to identify, form and position letters when writing or typing. A person usually substitutes or omits letters, resulting in poor spelling and reading. For example, tired becomes tried or cloud becomes could (Gvion & Friedmann 2010).
Dyspraxia	Dyspraxia affects fine motor skills, coordination, balance, and organisation. It can also cause difficulties in language, thought and perception. However, dyspraxia does not affect intelligence. Common symptoms include poor balance, poor posture, fatigue, clumsiness, perception problems and problems in remembering and following instructions (NILD 2016; MNT 2020). Students with dyspraxia can thus have poor

Type of learning disability	Manifestation
	study and self-regulation skills (Lindstrom, Nelson & Foels 2019).
Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) ⁷	A student encounters poor concentration, severe inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity (Daley & Birchwood 2010; Lindstrom et al. 2019). Students can have problems completing tasks, meeting deadlines, body control, remembering things, solving problems and establishing relationships (Emmers et al. 2017). ADD is a type of ADHD where a person has only an attention deficit disorder without hyperactivity (Wheeler & Carlson 1994).

Learning disabilities can present with other co-morbidities, making it possible for a student to have more than one disability (Understood.org 2019). For example, most students with dyslexia have ADHD, dysgraphia, executive processing difficulties, slow processing speed, auditory processing disorders and visual processing challenges (Understood.org 2019). Learning disabilities also vary from moderate to severe (Browder, Spooner & Courtade 2020) with some requiring medication, for example, for students to be more attentive for learning. They are also invisible such that they can be misconstrued, misunderstood and mismanaged in teaching and learning (Hadley et al. 2020).

⁷ ADHD classified here as a learning disability following the Higher Education Disability Services Association coding framework that the university under study subscribes to, and the classification of ADHD by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme disability policy as a learning disability.

2.2.1 Conditions associated with learning disabilities

There are different conditions associated with learning disabilities, including visual and auditory perception deficits. Where one has, for example, dyslexia, there can be an auditory processing or a visual-spatial disorder which affects a student's ability to process what he or she hears or the words that are seen (DDAI 2019). A student can see and hear clearly but might not immediately understand what is seen or heard (Denhart 2008). These are known as visual and auditory perception deficits that cause one to misread or mishear words because of language receptive deficits (NJCLD 2008). Poor visual perception can also cause poor hand-eye coordination (causing poor writing skills) (Irlen 2005; Badian 2005). The visual-spatial disorder creates difficulties in recognising words (DDAI 2019). A student can confuse the letter m and w or reverse words (e.g. was becomes saw) (DDAI 2019). These studies suggest that many students with learning disabilities who experience these conditions can find it challenging to undertake academic activities in the same way or speed as others without learning disabilities.

Kemp, Smith and Segal (2019) established that poor auditory perception or auditory processing disorders usually cause difficulties in differentiating sounds, where verbal instructions are not executed well, and the speed at which words are spoken and processed can vary greatly. These expressive oral deficits can cause difficulties in placing the right word at the right place in a sentence (Kemp et al. 2019), making it difficult to respond to questions orally with the fluency that people expect one to have (Kelly 2009). Such bio-social processes that students with learning disabilities deal with highlight how students can be challenged in understanding lectures.

Furthermore, Lynn, Gluckin and Kripke (1979⁸) established that the symptoms of learning disabilities can appear in clusters. Thus, disorders that affect visual perception, visual memory, visual integration, or visual motor areas can appear concomitantly. Those that affect auditory perception, auditory integration, auditory memory and language output can also occur as a cluster (Lynn et al. 1979). It is established that students with dyslexia can experience difficulties in processing visual and auditory information correctly, poor memory, poor speaking and writing fluency, and struggles to express thoughts (Lynn et al. 1979). Therefore, dyslexia has been sub-classified into dysphonetic (difficulty connecting sounds to symbols, and sounding out and spelling of words can be challenging) and dyseidetic (good grasp of sounds but problems with word recognition and spelling) (DDAI 2019). Literature thus gives a nuanced picture about how learning disabilities affect people deeper than the poor writing or reading skills that can be easily observed.

There are contested views where some scholars believe that brain activity can change, in what is known as neuroplasticity (Understood.org 2019). It is believed that proper tutoring can change the brain activity of people with, for example, dyslexia (Understood.org 2019). From this perspective, most interventions in the schooling system such as occupational therapy and extra didactic classes are based on remediation (Chapman & Tunmer 2003). Research also suggests that those with dyslexia can become better readers in adulthood (Marshall 2019) mostly through compensatory tricks to remember how to read and spell words correctly (LoGiudice 2008). Such a medically informed perspective regards learning disabilities as something that can be remediated by greater exposure to learning resources, thus suggesting that the quality of education can help to overcome learning disabilities. Wajuihian and Naidoo

⁸ An old, but preferred source because it is very rich in explaining how learning disabilities manifest in people.

(2011) argue that the existence of learning disabilities is not related to educational opportunities. There are thus contested views on how learning disabilities affect students. However, available literature focuses on students with learning disabilities to expose struggles within the education context but hinting at institutions of learning to be considerate in their education systems in light of the challenges students face.

2.3 Teaching students with learning disabilities

Not much knowledge is available on teaching university students with learning disabilities, especially within the South African context. Instead, there is considerable literature (including Heiman & Precel 2003; McCleary-Jones 2007 and Erten 2011) on the academic barriers that students with learning disabilities in higher education face in Israel, United States of America and Canada respectively. However, in the international literature, diverse and inclusive teaching and learning practices are widely encouraged, where classes should be presented by lecturers and accessed by students in multiple ways to include a combination of visual format (e.g. print and video), audio format (including lecture, tutorial, video) or physical format, which include face-to-face discussions (McLean, Heagney & Gardner 2003). Such a blend of teaching methodologies, if accompanied by opportunities for students to participate in educational discussions and generate knowledge without restraint, reduce the marginalisation of students with learning disabilities. Students thus should have opportunities to learn from each other (group discussions) where perspectives of different students are valued (McLean et al. 2003). Scholars, including Biggeri, Di Masi and Bellacicco (2020) find it concerning that many students with learning disabilities are disadvantaged from accessing pedagogies and participating fully in the production of discipline knowledge (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco

2020). Therefore, inclusive learning spaces are important for students with learning disabilities to access, participate and succeed in higher education without being disadvantaged.

2.4 Concerns in learning related to learning disabilities

This sub-section discusses how impairments affect the academic engagements of students with learning disabilities. The main view expressed in the existing literature is that learning disabilities affect learning in a negative way (Lightfoot, Janemi & Rudman 2018). Scholars, including Lipka, Forkosh Baruch and Meer (2018) and Zeng, Ju and Hord (2018) argue that the way people with learning disabilities process information leads to the under-development of academic skills such as reading, writing, communication and maths. These can manifest mainly in a slow reading and writing pace, poor comprehension of text and fluency (Hall, McGrefor & Oleson 2017) or difficulties in understanding a lecture (Dahan, Hadas-Lidor & Meltzer 2008). Mull, Sitlington and Alper (2001) and Cameron (2016) therefore comment that it is common to find students with learning disabilities who are slow to respond to a question even though they know the answer due to decoding and (semantic) processing speed difficulties. “Output deficits” have also been characterised by poor speech production for those with dyslexia — one can stutter, mispronounce words easily and subconsciously (LoGiudice 2008) or just going blank in the middle of a sentence (Lynn et al. 1979). Lewandowski et al. (2013) thus conclude that processing difficulties can negatively impact students’ academic engagements as they may fail to articulate academic activities well.

However, it has also been established that students with learning disabilities can have average to above-average intellectual abilities, but there can be a discrepancy between a student’s

intellectual ability and actual academic achievement (NILD 2016). Processing deficits (Shecter-Lerner, Lipka & Khouri 2019), negative physiological responses to stressful situations (Reidy 2019), poor impulse control, and high distraction levels (Lynn, Gluckin & Kripke 1979) can prevent one from performing optimally if conditions are not supportive. Hence, there is a high possibility of having an intelligent student whose academic performance can be surprisingly and inconsistently poor, whom people consider an average student, but is not an average thinker (Vail 1989) especially if they learn in learning disability unfriendly conditions. Shecter-Lerner et al. (2019) established challenges that are related to assessments, where some students with learning disabilities never experience an “I am ready for a test” moment and they struggle to finish their assessments within the allocated time due to adverse levels of anxiety and panic. One can consistently make unexplained mistakes that cost marks (Swanson, Harris & Graham 2013), leaving a student in a deficit position despite high intelligence levels. Concerning that, Michael (2004) comments that hope and aspirations can easily be diminished where a student always anticipate failure, grow tendencies of setting low standards in life, be scared of unfamiliar situations, and use avoidance as a defense tactic in challenging situations. Pirttimaa, Takala and Ladonlahti (2015) therefore conclude that there is a high risk of intelligent students with learning disabilities who fail to study to a level they are capable of or would prefer to. Students, therefore, may develop low self-esteem, experience shame, humiliation, or lack confidence in their ability to perform well academically where they repeatedly under-perform. The next section expands this discussion.

2.4.1 Learning disabilities and academic self-concept

Scholars, including Sternke (2010) and Swanson, Harris and Graham (2013) suggest that most of the difficulties that students with learning disabilities face often affect their academic and

general self-concept. Academic self-concept refers to attitudes, feelings, perceptions and beliefs that students hold of themselves as learners and their academic achievements (Chapman & Turnman 2003; Ferla, Valcke & Cai 2009). General self-concept refers to one's view of self across multidimensional domains, based on self-evaluation and knowledge of one's worth and abilities (Eccles, O'Neill & Wigfield 2005) and it has been associated with academic achievements (Lent, Brown & Gore 1997). Some studies, however, including that of Marsh and Martin (2011), suggest that positive self-concept yields high academic achievements, and the two can reinforce or weaken one another. Others signal that students with learning disabilities can have a low self-academic concept as they struggle to execute academic activities to their optimal potential (Tracey & Marsh 2000; Chapman & Tunmer 2003). Academic self-concept, although highly subjective (Soom & Donche 2014), can be affected by negative academic emotions that deactivate interest, persistence and action, and activate worry, doubt, avoidance and low self-esteem towards academic work (Sainio et al. 2019). Jackman et al. (2011) therefore, argue that a negative self-concept developed out of under-achievement can be ruinous because perceptions of self are continuously made through comparisons with what one thinks is the ideal self, what one is able to do or be, social expectations from others who often link failure to poor intelligence, or what one admires in others' abilities and achievements. Orr and Goodman (2010) as well as Sarid, Meltzer and Raveh (2019) note poor self-esteem (one component of self-concept) among students with learning disabilities. Orr and Goodman (2010) use a quote from one of their participants (*People like me don't go to college*) to highlight students' complexities. Many students with learning disabilities are therefore at risk of under-achieving academically, mostly where their disabilities are not supported to boost their academic self-concept. The resultant situation is students often dropping out of university (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014).

However, Ekelman, Bazyk and Bazyk (2013) and Honicke, Broadbent and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2019) highlight intrinsic factors that enable students with learning disabilities to succeed in higher education. Some of the intrinsic factors include a positive attitude towards academic work, understandings of self and goal orientation (Ekelman et al. 2013; Honicke et al. 2019) that can be crucial in seeking support and also in encouraging competence in learning and positive learning outcomes (Anctil, Ishikawa & Scott 2008). Other studies highlight how students with learning disabilities develop self-efficacy towards their studies (Hinkley & Alden 2005) and self-advocacy (Connor 2012) especially when operating under constraint. Self-determination and self-advocacy are viewed as very important states to acquire for students with learning disabilities to be successful in higher education (Cobb et al. 2009). Seeking support for a disability is also viewed to be dependent on these two dispositions (Wehmeyer 2005). Nonetheless, for meaningful outcomes such as degree completion and good grades, persistence is considered to be the most influential factor in the academic success of students with learning disabilities (Kimball et al. 2016), a finding also among any other students in post-school education by Grimes (1997).

Relating to the common experiences that students with and without disabilities can encounter, Healey et al. (2006) as well as Waterfield, West and Parker (2006) compared the learning experiences of students with disabilities to those without disabilities. They established some similarities and differences in (all) students' experiences where most of them are generally challenged by higher education. However, those with disabilities encounter more difficulty in note-taking (especially listening and taking notes at the same time) and the time needed to read and complete assignments. Waterfield et al. (2006) further established difficulties faced by students with disabilities in hearing and understanding what the lecturers teach and the acquisition of information in a format they can easily use. A close exploration of the questions

asked in both these studies that established similarities and differences show that the type of questions asked did not tackle impairments, but only the systematic aspects in teaching and learning where questions solicit a yes or no answer. More qualitative data would have helped to better understand the students' experiences in this regard. However, I do not disregard the fact that students with learning disabilities might have the same academic complaints as any other students. But the reviewed studies show that students with learning disabilities have underlying conditions that can exacerbate difficulties in learning.

International scholars also point out that some students with learning disabilities can have low aspirations (Smyth & McConkey 2003; Camarena & Sarigiani 2009), starting with aspiring to engage in higher education (Office of Disability Employment Policy, Department of Labor⁹ 2007). Those with learning disabilities can feel a sense of under-achievement as they put their all into doing things but fall short of others' expectations (Fast 2004). Earlier studies suggest that continued failure to perform satisfactorily, as desired by students, or as expected by educators, family and peers, is often responded to by frustrations that can discourage ambition and hope (Lynn, Gluckin & Kripke 1979). Although available debates on causes and effects are not scientifically conclusive, unsatisfactory academic results are believed to affect goal-setting and hamper career development and can cause negative views on life in general (Hitchings et al. 2010).

Taymans et al. (2009) highlight that learning disabilities can negatively affect people's job aspirations and the actual job experiences, social life, interpersonal relationships and community engagements. There are also contested claims by the Mental Health Foundation in

⁹ United States of America context.

its August 26 (2011) bulletin that people with learning disabilities have limited opportunities in life generally, are less likely to aspire towards prestigious occupations (Rojewski 1996), and neither do they want occupations that expose their disabilities (LoGuidice 2008). Hence, literature suggests that most people with learning disabilities can develop a low drive to explore challenging things (Fast 2004). Hitchings et al. (2010) also commented that people with learning disabilities might lack the ability to make sound career decisions for fear of failure. Therefore, the views expressed in the existing literature suggest that learning disabilities can affect not only academic issues but careers and livelihoods as well.

These findings hint at the complication of deciding what one chooses to value to do or become and the struggle to maintain or improve the chosen career path. One might believe Fast's (2004) observation that people with learning disabilities struggle with the process of seeking and maintaining employment matching their qualifications as four out of five people with learning disabilities are unemployed or underemployed. Cunnah (2015) established that the number of graduates with learning disabilities included in paid employment is less than their similarly qualified counterparts without disabilities because learning disabilities can interfere with productivity. Therefore, Cunnah (2015) and Fast's (2004) findings corroborate to argue that graduates with learning disabilities can struggle to get and maintain a job that suits their qualifications because they encounter difficulties in performing to the expectations of employers. Hence, the career trajectories of those with learning disabilities can be affected by having a learning disability.

2.5 The institutional environment and associated challenges to learning

The calls for inclusivity in education has resulted in a general increment in the enrolment of students into higher education worldwide. For example, McCowan¹⁰ tweeted that in 1970, the rate of university enrolment in general was 10%, it increased to 19% in 2000 and doubled to 38% in 2018 (McCowan 2019). Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the enrolment rate showed a four-fold increase from around 1% in 1970 to 9% in 2018 (World Bank 2019). With these increased enrolments and calls for inclusive education (UNESCO 1994), students with disabilities too are likely to get more chances of accessing higher education (Burge 2017; Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacico 2020). However, university students with disabilities are reported to face challenges in mainstream systems where a focus on placement is intensified often without the disability-sensitive institutional arrangements (Polat 2011; Burge 2017; Giangreco 2017; Morña 2017). Hence, available literature regards students with learning disabilities as needing support for them to be successful in higher education despite them having strong cognitive abilities (Lindsrom, Nelson & Foels 2019).

Students with learning disabilities often operate within inaccessible teaching, learning and assessment methodologies (Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson 2004) that make it difficult to access learning material and articulate assessments well (Biggeri et al. 2020). Busy lectures can be a challenge to many students with learning disabilities who have a different way of processing information and the exacerbated test anxiety and panic attacks some experience affect test scores (Lindstrom et al. 2019). The likely effect is that students perform unsatisfactorily and

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can be perceived as less competent in their courses. In South Africa, this can be compounded by the high failure rates at universities, especially in the first and second year of university (Wilmot & Merino 2015) mostly due to the unpreparedness of students or the complexity of coursework (Maddock & Maroun 2018).

Students with learning disabilities can be negatively affected by increased university enrolments (massification) as universities worldwide are moving from being elite to universal institutions (Mok & Neubauer 2016) by promoting mass access to higher education. Allais (2014), writing in the South African context, describes massification as a self-defeating approach that is problematic for learning and for the quality of education delivered and received. Large classes create situations where the available resources and infrastructure cannot match the number of students (Altbach 2013). The University of the Free State admit that massification in higher education is creating complex and challenging teaching and learning environments (UFS 2017) where available resources cannot accommodate the large population of students. Thus, lecturers can fail to teach well because of insufficient resources, and students too can struggle to learn well due to the resultant limited engagement with academic materials.

Big classes can also negatively affect the student-academics relationship that supports the development and acquisition of knowledge (Allais 2014) in that lecturers might not be accessible to all students as the amount of individual contact time is limited to accommodate a large number of students. It can be difficult for lecturers to know who exactly their students are and their educational needs in large classes (Hornsby & Osman 2014). Generally, the value of pedagogy can be negatively affected and students with learning disabilities, whose needs are not apparent to be easily recognised and addressed, can be disadvantaged. The underlying conditions experienced by students with disabilities can aggravate these challenges to learning

that any ordinary student faces. The main concern is that the conditions within which students with learning disabilities learn are not accommodating of their disabilities. Students might respond using nonconforming behaviours such as avoidance (Sainio et al. 2019) resulting in them missing classes. Therefore, it is important to ensure that all education components, including curricular design, course assignments and co-curricular programming do not marginalise students with learning disabilities (Kimball et al. 2016).

2.5.1 Concerns related to lecturers' conduct

The conduct of academics features among the barriers that students with learning disabilities face in South Africa. Most lecturers are not skilled to handle disability issues in teaching and learning (FOTIM 2011). Some have pre-conceived ideas on disability that can impinge positive responses to the needs of students with disabilities (FOTIM 2011). At the international level, there is a concern for faculty members whose negative attitudes and lack of knowledge and training on learning disabilities affect the performance and success of students at a public university in Israel (Shecter-Lerner, Lipka & Khouri 2019). Sniatecki, Perry and Snell (2015) conducted a study on faculty attitudes and knowledge regarding college students with disabilities in the United States and found that students with learning disabilities receive unfavourable attitudes from staff members more than other students with physical disabilities. Relatedly, Fuller et al. (2009) comment that many lecturers lack the capacity to deal with students' requests for adjustments, as they do not know what this is and how to implement adjustments. It is assumed to be caused by the fact that the inclusion policy was being implemented without training or informing lecturers of their duties towards students with learning disabilities (Weedon 2009). Cole and Cawthon (2015) corroborate these sentiments by reporting attitudinal problems from lecturers who have negative conceptions of learning

disabilities or lack of capacity to implement the inclusion policy into practice. Lecturers are reported to be unwilling to adopt flexible teaching and instructional modes that accommodate the needs of students with learning disabilities (Cole & Cawthon 2015).

Lecturers are also found to question the rationale for supporting students with learning disabilities (Cole & Cawthon 2015). One distinct situation is where some lecturers contest disability accommodations for learning disabled students as systems that offer preferential treatment (Riddell & Weedon 2006). The idea of students explaining their learning disability to lecturers is often met with stigma. This extract from one of the interviewees in a study by Sarver (2000: 86) is telling:

I have accommodation letters ... that request that I have extra time to do things. ... One time, I'll never forget this, I brought my letter in to this one professor, and I said, "It's an accommodation letter from Student Services." [He said,] like, "So what is it, a whole bunch of legal mumbo jumbo?"

Yet, students' good class experiences largely depend on staff members' conduct, attitudes and how they handle students' requests for adjustments to learning conditions (Shecter-Lerner et al. 2019; Mull, Sitlington & Alper 2001). Lecturers need to develop a non-judgemental view of students' disabilities for them to be able to support students' needs than to be un-cooperative (Lightfoot, Janemi & Rudman 2019). Their cooperation counts towards making learning spaces inclusive.

2.5.2 Learning disabilities and social challenges

There are suggestions that students with learning disabilities face challenges, not only in formal learning, but also in life in general. They are likely to experience social and psychological difficulties, especially depression and anger (Nelson & Liebel 2018) owing to constant

frustration emanating from failure to meet social expectations (Michael 2004) and negative self-concept, as discussed earlier. Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) view learning disabilities as a life disability that can affect relationships, social interactions, self-image, judgments and other aspects beyond official learning environments. In a study involving university students with learning disabilities in Israel, Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) established low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and poor social interactions as secondary challenges that affect students. These secondary challenges often stem from feelings of inadequacy due to students failing to perform to their full potential where conditions are restrictive (Skinner & Lindstrom 2003).

Negative stereotypes are associated with learning disabilities in May and Stone's (2010) study among college students in the United States of America as people associate learning disabilities with low intelligence levels. Stereotypes can lead to stigma towards those with learning disabilities as they may be assumed to be intellectually inferior, lazy and attempting to seek unfair advantage where they receive support (Riddell & Weedon 2006; Denhart 2008). Students can therefore struggle to fit in the education system or social spaces around the university if their disabilities are stigmatised. Students also can fail to utilise the available disability services because of the social isolation and stigma they experience (Cole & Cawthorne 2015). Overall, students can struggle to develop a disability identity that is crucial in qualifying for disability accommodations (Cunnah 2015).

However, some students with learning disabilities feel that taking up disability support services is a direct way of exposing them to stigma (Mullins & Preyde 2012; Waterfield, West & Parker 2006). Students are likely to selectively disclose their disabilities where they are assured of getting support, and hide them in other contexts where there are threats of stigma (Tinklin,

Riddell & Wilson 2004). Hence, students with learning disabilities' academic engagements can be affected by social spaces that are not supportive.

2.6 Disability support in higher education

Some of the international literature indicates that students with disabilities have needs that require attention and support. Those with learning disabilities are likely to struggle to learn in unsupported conditions (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014). Research focused on disability support and students' academic success shows that students whose learning disabilities are supported perform better and have higher chances of graduating (see, for example, McGregor et al. 2016; Zeng, Ju & Hord 2018; Sarid, Meltzer & Raveh 2019). Students with unsupported learning disabilities are reported to have a lower academic success rate (41%) compared to their non-learning disabled peers (52%) (Zeng et al. 2018) and have a high risk of leaving university without a qualification (McGregor et al. 2016). At some point, there was an approximately 70% drop-out rate in post-schooling for students with learning disabilities in the United States of America (DaDeppo 2009). Besides, earlier studies report that students with learning disabilities are likely to take approximately five and a half years to complete a three-year undergraduate degree (Greenbaum, Graham & Scales 1995) because they are likely to repeat courses and take study breaks (Simmeborn Fleischer 2012; McGregor et al. 2016). Generally, universities adopt the disability accommodation framework in supporting students with any disability. Discussions in the next sub-section cover this.

2.6.1 Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities

The term *reasonable accommodations* is commonly used to refer to disability support or arrangements made to cater for the needs of students with any form of disability. Reasonable accommodations are understood as any modification or means of eliminating or reducing barriers to learning and improve academic success for students with disabilities (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay 2011; Newman & Madaus 2015). They are needs-based adjustments offered to students with disabilities (Lightfoot, Janemi & Rudman 2019) and can take the form of a human (e.g a scribe) or a device (e.g. screen readers), or structural arrangements (e.g. separate exam venue) (Lipka, Forkosh Baruch & Meer 2018). International perspectives identify the following disability accommodations.

- **Programme accommodations** — these include a provision for an educational programme to be adjusted with consideration for the difficulties students with learning disabilities face. For example, extending the programme duration or allowing the programme to be taken on a part-time basis (Wolf 2001). It also involves giving registration priority to students with learning disabilities (Foley 2006; Troiano, Liefeld & Trachtenberg 2010; Connor 2012).
- **Support services** — these include the provision of assistive and innovative technologies and programmes (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011), assistance with functional skills such as study, time management, organising, memory, listening, test-taking and communication skills (Mull et al. 2001). This kind of support service is reported to be the least provided in a systematic review by Zeng, Ju and Hord (2018). Included in this category are tutoring services for students with learning disabilities (Hadley 2007; Vogel, Fresko & Wertheim

2007), which can be provided to individuals or small groups, peer-to-peer or instructor and student.

- **Presentation accommodations** — a systematic review of literature by Taymans et al. (2009) on the accommodations for students with learning disabilities reveals that presentation accommodations appear among the common forms of support offered to students as alternative means to access content and learning material without difficulty. These alternative means of presentation include text-readers, large print (font format), tape recorders, talking calculators and books on tape (Lindstrom 2007; Taymans et al. 2009; Alnahdi 2014). They are recognised as helpful ways that improve the learning experiences of students with learning disabilities (Zeng, Ju & Hord 2018).
- **Response accommodations** — offering students with learning disabilities opportunities to present their knowledge and competences through alternative means, such as oral presentations or, where resources allow, speech synthesis systems and voice recognition software such as speech to text software and spell checkers (Cullen, Richards & Frank 2008; Zeng et al. 2018).
- **Instructional adjustments** — include adjustments to how tests, assignments and examinations can be presented. For example, tests can be read aloud to students, pre-recorded on tape or printed with an enlarged font (Mull et al. 2001; Floyd & Judge 2012).

In South Africa and in many other countries, students with disabilities have to self-report their disabilities to the respective university offices for them to qualify for disability accommodations (FOTIM 2011). However, a lack of disclosure of disabilities to the university is one of the developed themes within the extant literature and various reasons for this are identified. For example, Cortiella and Horowitz (2014); Farmer, Allsopp and Ferron (2015);

Zeng, Ju and Hord (2018) reveal that non-disclosure can be caused by stigma, fear of discrimination, unpleasant past experiences. Stigma from peers and staff members, noted by Martin (2010) in a study based on the Australian context, Mullins and Preyde's (2013) study in Canada, and Lourens and Swartz's (2016) that focused on South Africa. Similar concerns (stigma and victimisation) are also highlighted in the (2018) South African Strategic Framework on Disability for post-school education as leading factors leading to the fear of disclosing one's disability.

Gaps in knowledge about available institutional support can also occur (Grimes et al. 2017). For instance, Newman et al. (2011) report that only 28% of students (in the United States of America) disclose their learning disabilities upon enrolling into institutions of higher learning. In the United Kingdom, 40% of students do not know any available disability accommodations upon joining a university (Reidy 2019). It is also observed that some students with learning disabilities in higher education can choose not to seek support because they do not know the process of applying for disability accommodations, or they think that they can manage without support (Lombardi, Murray & Gerdes 2012). Such cases where resources or services are not recognised or utilised unnecessarily risk students struggling to engage well with their studies.

Within South Africa, most tertiary education students report their disability at a later stage after being overwhelmed by academic work (FOTIM 2011). Unfortunately, disability support is not given in retrospect whether a student is struggling or not (FOTIM 2011). Others delay talking to their lecturers about their learning disabilities until they have established a relationship with them — which usually happens well past a considerable number of months into the semester, or might never happen due to the big classes that students find themselves in as noted earlier. Discrepancies between the availability of disability support and its utilisation show that it is

not as easy and given that where there is disability support, students benefit, or that all students with learning disabilities show up because there is disability support.

2.6.1.1 Critiquing reasonable accommodations

Fossey et al's (2017) study on the perceptions of students with disabilities and staff members offering disability services at a university in Australia established the complexities associated with the process of deciding on the kind of adjustments and accommodations that work well for students with disabilities. Complexities emanate from, among others, experiences of using disability support from high school where those who never had any support are less likely to seek support services in post-school education (Fossey et al. 2017). They also include the nature of available support, where some universities do not have services that suit the kinds of students' disabilities. Students can also lack negotiation skills that ensure that one receives the most suited services or they generally lack the agency to seek disability support (Newman et al. 2011). Fossey et al. (2017) also established that access to documents that prove disability is not easy for many students, hence they lack the documentation required to enrol for disability support. Such cases can affect the number of students with disabilities who are supported. Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) reported that only 17% of students with disabilities receive disability accommodations in post-school education in the United States of America. Nonetheless, students who utilise disability support progress well and complete their studies (Mamiseishvili & Koch 2011), thus showing a correlation between accommodations and student success in higher education.

Furthermore, Quenemoen et al. (2001) view accommodations as being stuck between inclusion, morals, integrity, values, on the one hand, and quality of education on the other. In

extending certain concessions to support students with disabilities during assessments, a university faces the difficult challenge of sticking to systems that upscale academic standards and promote quality education. Some lecturers in a study by Riddell and Weedon (2006) were worried that reasonable accommodations have an effect of compromising academic standards in higher education. Nonetheless, a university has to adopt some adaptations that support inclusion and uphold morality and educational values (Quenemoen et al. 2001). This can pose challenges in reconciling what is right and fair to do and what is good, and for what reason(s).

In a related critique, Terzi (2005), in consideration of inclusive education, cautions institutions to be careful about creating differences among students by treating those with disabilities differently through accommodations. By implementing inclusionary measures, there is a risk of labelling other students ‘unequal’ — those with learning conditions that need to be adjusted or those targeted for specific inclusive measures for the educational field to be levelled (Sayed 2003). The system can be invidious if strong disability awareness programmes are not in place to conscientise others about different disabilities and the nature of support they require. Disability accommodations are commonly adopted, but the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) discussed next, is topical and proposed in many disability and educational policies.

2.6.2 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The UDL framework involves the design of learning spaces, physical environments, presentation and delivery of information to be accessible and usable (without special or separate support) by all students in all educational situations regardless of need (Dalton 2020). Hence, the design of teaching practices, curriculum, modes of instruction and assessments is done with students’ diverse needs in mind, whether disability-related or not (Burgstahler 2008).

Within the UDL framework, there is no standard or ideal learner, rather it is diversity that is standard (Dalton 2020). Thus, the focus within the UDL framework is on what impedes any kind of student from learning well. The UDL approach follows three main principles, which are multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression and multiple means of engagement.

- **Multiple means of representation**

Multiple means of representation involves how information, including learning material, is made available to students. It stipulates that academic content should be accessible and understood by any student (Scott & Bruno 2018). There should be options for perception where, for example, students can be given study material including notes and slides before a lecture (Griful-Freixenet et al. 2017). It also involves presenting information in more than one format, for example having visual (e.g. photos and diagrams) and auditory (e.g. videos) ways of delivering information to students (Scott & Bruno 2018). Multiple representation also includes options for effective communication or language where information and instructions are transmitted in ways that every student understands clearly (Griful-Freixenet et al. 2017). Multiple representation of information thus involves opportunities to learn using different presentation and instructional modes (Scott & Bruno 2018).

- **Multiple means of expression**

Multiple means of expression involves the sharing of knowledge where students have an opportunity to express what they know or have learnt (Scott & Bruno 2018). There should be options for students to express their knowledge through ways that enable them to

effectively deliver what they want to demonstrate. For example, a student with a slow writing pace who experience difficulties in finishing tests within the allocated time can be allowed to present an assignment in typed format or orally (Bruno & Scott 2018). Options for engaging with learning material online are also encouraged (Goldowsky & Coyne 2016).

- **Multiple means of engagement**

Multiple means of engagement involves making students interested in learning by allowing them to contribute to knowledge production in different ways. This principle encourages students to be given options to work individually, in pairs or in groups, as long as they provide feedback that meets the expected objectives and outcomes (Scott & Bruno 2018). Students should also be encouraged and guided to meet their educational needs through, for example, giving advice on self-organisation, self-assessment and goal-setting (Bruno & Scott 2018). The aim is to motivate students to be interested in, and be responsible for their work.

Despite the UDL appearing as a progressive framework to attend to students' diverse needs, Dalton et al. (2019) argue that there are challenges in adopting the universal UDL design approach to curricular, pedagogical practices and assessments in South Africa. The main challenge in implementing UDL is lack of resources and capacity. Hence, universities in South Africa, and many others internationally, offer disability accommodations that do not require changes to the curriculum or teaching methodologies, but attend to individual needs.

2.7 Learning outcomes and reasons for supporting students with learning disabilities

Existing literature reveals that disability services, which are mainly offered through reasonable accommodations, are meant to support students with disabilities towards academic success (Kim & Lee 2016). Looking at what defines academic success, it can mean students being able to successfully demonstrate that they have attained the expected learning outcomes or graduate attributes at the end of the learning process (Barrie 2006). A broader understanding views learning outcomes as changes that occur to a person or progress made through higher education in terms of what the students actually achieved or what a student (intended or not) ends up with after engaging in higher education (Nusche 2008; Allan 1996). These include behavioral, attitudinal or affective attributes (Ewell 1984) that are acquired through and during the process of learning apart from those associated with the subject knowledge. Hence, learning outcomes are multi-dimensional, to be viewed in terms of cognitive academic attainments on the one hand, and/or non-cognitive and personal outcomes on the other.

A definition adopted from the AAGLO¹¹ project by Barrie, Hughes and Crisp (2014: 5) for graduate attributes is, abilities and values that students supposedly develop as a result of completing their university studies. Graduate attributes are also referred to as capabilities, skills, and competencies students are expected to hold upon graduation (Cumming, Cumming & Ross 2007). The University of the Free State, in its (2019-2024) Learning and Teaching Strategy (UFS 2020), proposes eight graduate attributes, which are; academic competence, critical thinking, problem solving, oral communication, written communication, community

¹¹ Assessing and Assuring Australian Graduate Learning Outcomes

engagement, ethical reasoning and entrepreneurial mindset. These graduate attributes are presented and explained in the snapshot from the UFS Learning and Teaching Strategy below:

Attribute	Definition
Academic competence	Academic competence refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes (including values) that students develop through their interaction with discipline-specific content. Critical to academic competence is lifelong learning, which is an all-purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. Lifelong learners are curious, take initiative, learn independently, transfer knowledge, and reflect on their learning.
Critical thinking	Critical thinking is a habit of mind characterised by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artefacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.
Problem solving	Problem solving is the process of designing, evaluating and implementing a strategy to answer an open-ended question or achieve a desired goal.
Oral communication	Oral communication is a prepared, purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviours.
Written communication	Written communication is the development and expression of ideas in writing. Written communication involves learning to work in many genres and styles. It can involve working with many different writing technologies, and mixing texts, data, and images. Written communication abilities develop through iterative experiences across the curriculum.
Community engagement	Community engagement is working to make a difference in the community life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. In addition, community engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community. Finally, community engagement includes an understanding of the social and cultural diversity in our country, whereby students value and respect different cultures and are able to analyse and solve problems with people from different backgrounds and cultures.
Ethical reasoning	Ethical reasoning is reasoning about right and wrong human conduct. It requires students to be able to assess their own ethical values and the social context of problems, recognise ethical issues in a variety of settings, think about how different ethical perspectives might be applied to ethical dilemmas and consider the ramifications of alternative actions. Students' ethical self-identity evolves as they practice ethical decision-making skills and learn how to describe and analyse positions on ethical issues.
	Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 2010
Entrepreneurial Mindset	Entrepreneurial mindset as the set of attitudes, skills and behaviors that students need to succeed academically, personally and professionally. These include: initiative and self-direction (leadership), risk-taking, flexibility and adaptability, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving. Other definitions include the ability to see opportunities, marshal resources and create value. An entrepreneurial mindset applies to all spheres of life. It enables citizens to nurture their personal development, to actively contribute to social development, to enter the job market as employee or as self-employed, and to start-up or scale-up ventures which may have a cultural, social or commercial

Fig 1: UFS graduate attributes

The UFS clearly states in Section 5.1 of the Learning and Teaching Strategy that the purpose of these graduate attributes is, “to enhance graduate employability and position UFS students in the job market in a manner that makes them stand out”. Such a stance supports Singh (2014) who comments that even though graduate outcomes can be expansively defined outside of economic terms, they serve the purpose of enhancing the economy. Thus, an attribute for citizenship can be aimed to have a stable society for the good of a stable economy.

Even though students with learning disabilities may successfully attain these attributes, they are likely to experience difficulties in getting and maintaining employment as Fast (2004) notes. It can mean therefore that the graduate attributes for employability that the university advances might not benefit students with learning disabilities in ways that the university intends. On that point, De La Harpe and David (2012) comment that graduates should be equipped with attributes for both work and life. This view suggests that sound graduate outcomes should be composed of technical knowledge, intellectual abilities and ethical values (Barrie 2006). Along the same lines, Fongwa, Marshall and Case (2018) looked at graduate outcomes apart from employability (that is rooted in the human capital thinking) by adopting a human development and social justice dimension to employability with the view that graduate outcomes should not be limited to employability alone. Rather, graduate outcomes should be expansively understood to incorporate the broader social and cultural benefits of higher education (Fongwa et al. 2018). Such a stance is advanced by scholars, including Walker (2018), as well as Walker and McLean (2013) who argue that higher education should expand opportunities to do different things. Hence, an expansive conceptualisation of disability services and what higher education enables a person to do does not narrowly regard disability support as an arrangement that is good for academic success that enable one to engage in activities with economic value only. Rather it regards arrangements that cater for the needs of

students with disabilities as a university's way of expanding students' capabilities to undertake economic and non-economic activities for the achievement of wellbeing. Further details are covered in the theoretical framework chapter that follows.

2.8 Conclusion

A review of the available literature on disabilities in higher education reveals that the field is widely covered, but there is limited knowledge on invisible disabilities, especially within the South African higher education debates. Learning disabilities and other invisible disabilities appear to be a 'missing piece' within the disability discourses, especially in the global South. Inequalities and opportunities for research therefore exist in cases where other forms of disabilities (particularly learning disabilities) are given little attention compared to other disabilities.

Generally, debates on learning disabilities within the education context focus on deficits in a student. The available literature reveals how students with learning disabilities struggle with learning and concentrate on what a university can do for a student to fit into the education system and not what a university can do for the education system to fit a student. As such there is considerable literature on disability accommodations that attend to individual needs under the banner of removing barriers to learning. The main aim for supporting students with disabilities is to allow students to succeed in their studies, where success is mostly measured by the learning outcomes that a student would have achieved. With more calls for the full inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, a system-oriented framework (UDL) that aims to make the education environment more suited for students to learn without needing individual attention is gaining traction in higher education both internationally and locally.

However, there is not much knowledge on where this has been practically implemented as examples of best practice. Research has focused mainly on structural issues and there is a gap in knowledge on whether and how students are experiencing the interventions being suggested or offered. Although a policy focus on pedagogy and other arrangements in learning is important, there is concern that most policies will not be enacted due to limited resources. Hence, UDL as a framework that guides inclusive teaching and learning, might not be implemented timely and with success. Yet, it is important in addressing inequalities and enhancing social transformation within the South African education system that was fragmented by the exclusionary apartheid systems where people with disabilities were regarded as not fitting for higher education.

This study aims to expand debates on learning disabilities in higher education in South Africa. Such a focus is important because learning disabilities are mostly ignored in scholarly debates and in education policies. Thus, the more scholarly attention learning disabilities are given, the greater the awareness and the more likely they will be better managed at universities. It is only fair to expand the debating ground to provide as much knowledge as possible (including students' perspectives) that is useful for transforming institutions of learning towards the full inclusion of students with learning disabilities. Hearing students' stories helps to understand how students negotiate the academic and the everyday life. This is one way to reveal the effectiveness of existing policies, with the possibility of enhancing them too. The knowledge produced through this study forces a reflection on the education systems and practices to engage broadly with how well students with learning disabilities participate and succeed in higher education both locally and internationally

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the study's theoretical framework (the Capability Approach) and its usefulness in analysing and understanding students' academic engagements and the conditions within which they learn. The key concepts of the Capability Approach, capabilities, functionings, conversion factors, agency and wellbeing are explained in the chapter, illustrating their relevance to this study. The value of education is discussed as part of students' engagements with the university, noting how the Capability Approach offers a broader conceptualisation of what students can gain from university education than the dominant human capital understanding that narrows the value of education to economic gains. Discussions extend to explain education as capability formation in higher education. The chapter further discusses the theoretical perspectives on disability within the Social, Medical and International Classification of Functioning (ICF) approach, pointing out how the Capability Approach can complement them in analysing university responses to disabilities. Conclusions on the discussed aspects in the chapter are presented in the end. First, I discuss the Capability Approach.

3.2 The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) is used in this study as the theoretical framework for analysing students' experiences. It is a normative framework for human development that focuses on developing and expanding people's capabilities or

individual real freedoms, wellbeing (“the wellness of a person’s state of being”) (Sen 1993: 36) and the achievement of what people have reason to value (Robeyns 2017). Therefore, the Capability Approach is used in the assessment of what constrains or enables students with learning disabilities to function well and how their abilities are impacted by circumstances (Robeyns 2017).

This study has a social justice focus that is rooted in the tenets of the Capability Approach. The idea that no student should be deprived of opportunities to learn meaningfully and benefit from education due to a disability (Terzi 2007) is maintained. The study is concerned about the learning experiences of students with learning disabilities as people with disabilities can face various forms of exclusion (Erevelles 2005) that can extend to educational settings where students face difficulties in accessing pedagogy (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacico 2020). Supportive institutional arrangements are crucial for students with learning disabilities to display their potential fully because they are not intellectually inferior (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014) as they are often stereotypically perceived to be. Their challenges in learning are exacerbated by institutional arrangements that are not designed with consideration for learning disabilities.

The Capability Approach places a moral obligation on a university to cultivate students’ capabilities or expand what students can become or do (Otto & Ziegler 2010). Generally, the Capability Approach adopts a prospective role (policy) and an evaluative role (normative) in challenging social injustices in education (Ibrahim & Tiwari 2014) and commands students to be recognised as having equal worth (Nussbaum 2006). Since the Capability Approach places a moral responsibility on universities to ensure that all students experience learning with dignity and fairness (Walker 2010), the designing of a university and the educational

components (curricula, pedagogy and assessment) ought to be sensitive to students' disabilities towards the enhancement of students' capabilities at the university.

This study's concern of how university arrangements affect students with learning disabilities thus supports Terzi's (2008) view that a socially-just institution of learning is one that allocates resources and creates conditions for their use effectively and fairly for those with disabilities not to be disadvantaged. The Capability Approach, therefore, embraces distributional, recognitional, and processual elements of justice (Bates 2007) rather than settling only for the availability of disability resources. This study thus supports Walker's (2008b) view that the formation of students' capabilities is central to evaluating and identifying inequalities embedded in institutional arrangements because their capabilities reflect how well students are doing in higher education in terms of what and how the students managed to achieve within the university context. The holistic approach that the Capability Approach offers enables a consideration of how students are taught, how enriching or depriving the learning experience is and also whether they can achieve the socially expected or valued educational functionings that reflect the value of education. Explained below are the key capability concepts adopted in this study (capabilities, functionings, conversion factors, agency and wellbeing) that will guide the interpretation of the empirical evidence in my study.

3.2.1 Capabilities

This study adopts Amartya Sen's (2009) explanation of capabilities as potential achievements or what a person can possibly do or become. Sen (1993) emphasises that people should have practical opportunities to do or reach states of being that they have reason to value, therefore

considering a capability as an opportunity to achieve something that one has reasons to value. Within this framing, capabilities are understood as what students with learning disabilities can do or gain while at university and through (or after) university and how the university can enable or diminish that. A student can therefore acquire competencies in the process of living, or as one acquires higher education (Wilson-Strydom 2017), which are known as internal capabilities (Nussbaum 2000). These capabilities, for example, for resilience, are considered to be empowering, as they enable a person to act on the things that they have reason to value (Crocker 1995). External factors such as social arrangements, however, affect these internal capabilities to enable a person to function in what is termed combined capabilities (Nussbaum 2000). Thus, the personal characteristics, context, and opportunities are relational and can shape what one does or can freely accomplish. This study explores not only students' innate abilities, but also external factors (teaching practices, disability support, assessment modes, the physical and social environment) that impact on students' academic engagements towards achieving what they value in and through their studies.

Capability formation therefore involves the conditions of operation and the process around the development of students' potentials (Broderick 2018) or capability sets, where a capability set is a range of what can be achieved or opportunities to function well (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco 2020). Hence, capability formation encompasses opportunities for students with learning disabilities to function well. Attention is given to the university arrangements to examine how they affect students' educational trajectories. Focus is also given to what students can do or become given the conditions in which they learn or experience higher education.

3.2.2 Functionings

What a student has managed to achieve, depending on available opportunities (capability set), circumstances (external capabilities), drive (internal capability), agency and other intervening conversion factors, is referred to as functionings (Robeyns 2017). Functionings are thus the actual beings and doings (Sen 2009) that indicate what a person has managed to do or become or the achievement of desired outcomes by students within the education context (Wilson-Strydom 2011). Examples of functionings are being educated, knowledgeable, confident or being a student with disabilities who can take part in the curricular activities without barriers.

The difference between a capability and a functioning is that capabilities are opportunities to achieve and functionings are the actual achievements (Terzi 2007). Hence, capabilities can indicate how equal or inclusive a university is, in terms of institutional arrangements, and functionings can indicate what students regard as the value of education because they involve what students have managed to achieve. Students' achievements alone cannot satisfactorily reflect their engagements as there are intervening factors that influence achievements, referred to as conversion factors (explained next).

3.2.3 Conversion factors

Conversion factors explain a person's ability to convert resources or opportunities into functionings or achievements (Robeyns 2017). They can be internal characteristics of a person or external (for example, policies) (Trani et al. 2011) and they operate mainly at personal, social and environmental levels (Robeyns 2017). Conversion factors concern mainly the conditions within which capabilities are formed (Walker 2019). Hence, conversion factors determine how

much functioning a person obtains from availed resources or services (Robeyns 2017). They stand as a force between an agent and what needs to be achieved. This study aims to identify different conversion factors for students with learning disabilities in its analysis of students' academic engagements. Factors that influence students' ability to convert resources or services meant to support them to opportunities and also converting those opportunities to achievements are examined. By accounting for students' ability to achieve, the Capability Approach complements or enriches the Social Approach of disability (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco 2020) to contribute to disability-friendly environments or services. The Capability Approach considers how students interact with those services to be able to achieve functionings through their education. The Capability Approach thus maintains its usefulness in informing policy and practice because it accounts for conversion factors rather than settle only for the distribution of resources. People might not benefit equally and fully from support systems as different factors can impede the proper utilisation of a service or resource. Relative to this study, the negative attitudes, for example, can discourage a student from accessing a disability service that is meant to support learning while the university assumes that the needs of students with disabilities are being catered for.

A focus on conversion factors shows the capability approach's concern for diversity and the inter-, intra- and extra-personal variations among students as it does not assume that students are a homogeneous group with the same needs, abilities and learning outcomes. A recognition of conversion factors addresses the different circumstances that a person operates in and compels an examination of the process that leads to achievements (Sen 2009). It would not be useful to assume that the needs of students with learning disabilities are met just by having CUADS. Students, nonetheless, are not passive recipients of support or other arrangements that promote the development of their capabilities. They are considered as active agents that have

a role to play in the process that leads to their achievements. Thus, the Capability Approach underscores the importance of agency in the formation of capabilities.

3.2.4 Agency

Central to the Capability Approach is the concept of agency. Sen (1999) views an agent as a person who works towards achieving what they have reason to value and wish to achieve. Agency, at an individual level, therefore entails pursuing goals that are valued and important for what an individual wishes to achieve (Walker 2006). A person thus develops agency that primarily involves pursuing valuable functionings (Vaughan & Walker 2012). This understanding frames students' participative role in the formation of their capabilities with interest also in whether the conditions at the university support students' agency.

The Capability Approach acknowledges that agency is exercised within social and structural constraints or pre-existing conditions that might not support a person's agentic role (Herdt & Bastiaensen 2008). There can be tensions within a university between what a student can do and how the conditions are set to allow or disallow it. For example, a student who aims to get good grades might fail to access a lecturer for extra learning support because the lecturer is overloaded with work from oversized classes. Or, a student who needs disability support might fail to seek support on time because s/he is not aware of the existence of such services at the university due to poor awareness on the part of the university. Therefore, this study acknowledges that agency and structure can be at tangents and this can constrain the successful acquisition of what students with learning disabilities value in their higher education engagements.

3.2.5 Wellbeing

Wellbeing refers to “the wellness of a persons’ state of being” (Sen 1993: 36) or the ability to “function in ways people have reason to value” (Crocker 2009: 269-70). Wellbeing can thus be evaluated with regard to achievements and how well a person is functioning (Foster & Handy 2008). The Capability Approach provides a conceptual framework for the assessment of how society is arranged to enable people to achieve wellbeing. By extension and relative to this study, I explore how a university is arranged to enable students with learning disabilities to achieve wellbeing (which is not limited only to educational contexts, but in life in general). Students’ wellbeing in general includes having opportunities to pursue and achieve what they value without limitations. Students with learning disabilities’ educational wellbeing would be, for example, being able to adopt a learning disability identity freely if one values that, feeling and experiencing equal treatment from everyone at the university, or being able to learn under circumstances that do not limit a student’s potential. Hence, we cannot convincingly say that a student has wellbeing by merely looking at their marks (Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015). The experience of learning leading up to the attainment of adequate scores adds to the wellbeing of a student and it counts when the formation of students’ capabilities is evaluated.

3.3 Education as capability formation

Higher education can be a capability on its own, or it can be constituted by different capabilities such as having the ability to gain knowledge, information and be literate (Walker 2008b). What is important to note is that education opens up different opportunities, making it a capability expander (Terzi 2007). This means that the role of education is foundational to the development

of many other capabilities or possibilities, career-wise or in general life. For this reason, education is good for people's wellbeing (Walker 2008b) as it enables many other valued beings and doings to be pursued and achieved. Walker (2008b) suggests that it is more useful to ask what education is good for or what education enables people to do or become rather than trying to define what education is. Universities usually reflect what education is for and the effect it has on people through a top-down list of graduate attributes. This study recognises that education is good for many other things, as discussed below, where the human capital and Capability Approaches are explained.

3.4 The value of education: the human capital approach and the Capability Approach to education

The value of education is predominantly understood within the human capital framework where learning outcomes and the competencies that students are expected to gain are viewed mostly with regard to their contribution to economic growth (Calitz 2015). There is more consideration of how productive people are in work situations than in social situations (Marginson 2013), as explained, for example, in a quote from the UFS Learning and Teaching strategy mentioned below. Students are also institutionalised to think first of getting qualified to secure a job and become industrious and productive at work before considering other values embedded in a university education (McLean 2006). The UFS stipulates that:

The purpose of clear and implementable graduate attributes at the UFS, is to enhance graduate employability and position UFS students in the job market in a manner that makes them stand out (Section 5.1 UFS Learning and Teaching strategy).

Thus, the human capital approach to education as being instrumental to securing economic opportunities dominates in educational settings (Walker 2010). For this reason, the human capital approach is criticised for valuing education in overly economic and reductionist ways (Robeyns 2006; Calitz 2015) or limiting the possibilities of what education is good for (Walker 2008b).

Within the Capability Approach, the value of education is plural, with its principal value being the contribution it makes to people's wellbeing. Sen (1997) acknowledges the importance of the human capital approach with the view that production is augmented by the skills, abilities, and knowledge gained from education. It is Sen's (1997) understanding that a person with education is in a position to produce more goods, which in turn can contribute to that person earning more to sustain a decent standard of living or a better quality of life. Walker (2012) stresses that the human capital approach is important because economic opportunities are good for people's wellbeing. Therefore, the Capability Approach recognises the economic value of education for its contribution to the wellbeing of people, but does not limit it to only that.

The Capability Approach recognises the additional benefits education can bring, such as more life-fulfilling options or satisfaction (Deneulin & Shahani 2009; Dreze & Sen 2002). Feeling empowered to resist inequalities or to participate in public discussions can be non-economic opportunities that can be developed through education (Vaughan & Walker 2012), and so is one's civic contributions towards the greater good of society (Walker 2018). The point is that the Capability Approach frames the benefits of education more broadly than what can be quantitatively or monetarily measured, to include intrinsic benefits. Therefore, this study considers the plurality of the value of education, recognising both its economic and public good value (Walker 2018). It acknowledges the idea that students should not be educated solely for

economic gains. Thus, while economic development is important, the study maintains that students' capabilities should not only be formed and understood around it, and educational functionings should contribute to the overall wellbeing and human flourishing of a person. Therefore, a university is not only regarded as an institution where individuals learn and get a qualification that earns them opportunities for securing a job, but an institution that contributes to the expansion of students' capability sets or their flourishing as a whole. The study thus considers the value of university education in how best it expands students' capabilities and achievements (Walker 2015), whether academic, social, economic or political (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco 2020). Next are discussions on disability since this study incorporates disabilities in higher education.

3.5 Theoretical perspectives on disability

The understanding of disability sets the conditions for developing ways to respond to it, which is the primary concern of this study. The definition of disability is complex, dynamic and contested (WHO 2011). The World Health Organisation's definition of disability is:

...the umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual's contextual factors (WHO 2011: 4).

This definition recognises both the social and medical components of disability to bridge tangents between the prevalent Social and Medical Models of Disability¹² for a balanced approach to understanding disability. The WHO encourages disability to be understood within

¹² Explained in detail in the next sub-sections.

the International Classification of Functioning¹³ (ICF) that recognises that different domains influence a person's functioning and disability. These domains include the dynamic interaction between the body (features of a person), health challenges (impairments), activity (individual actions) and limitations to participation (physical, social, economic, cultural or political) and other contextual factors (relations to society) (WHO 2001). Within this understanding, disability incorporates the biological, physical, psychological and social components for the ICF to be considered as a bio-psycho-social model (WHO 2011).

The position taken for this study is to understand disability more comprehensively by adopting an understanding of disability using multiple perspectives because disability is neither limited to only the social nor the medical aspects. This study thus acknowledges that a person, bodily functionings, structures and participation are important domains in understanding disability. However, this study goes beyond that (within the Capability Approach) to incorporate aspects of people's opportunities, what they value, their functional goals, conversion factors, and their agentic roles towards achieving what they pursue. Also, the Capability Approach advances the idea of an ethical responsibility on the part of a university in addressing disability issues; a stance that is not very prominent in the existing disability models.

The two historically dominant disability models (medical and social) form part of the theoretical discussions around disabilities, showing how university responses to disabilities align with these models and also how they compare with the Capability Approach. While I am aware that there are other disability models such as the social-relational (Thomas 1999), the

¹³ A model of disability that is concerned about what participation is and how it affects functioning (Shakespeare 2020: 548).

Social and Medical Models of Disability are incorporated in this study as the central and widely critiqued approaches within disability studies. The theoretical ideas of these models will be compared against the Capability Approach, showing how useful it can be if the Medical and Social Models of Disability, and the Capability Approach are integrated to understand and respond to disability. The ICF, as a bridging model between the Social and Medical Model of Disability (WHO 2011) will not be discussed separately apart from its contribution to defining disability as indicated earlier.

3.5.1 The Medical Model of Disability

The Medical Model of Disability is regarded as a traditional approach that recognises disability as a biological, physical, mental and sensory personal deficit inherent in a person (Shakespeare 2014; Watermeyer 2013). The basic understanding of disability within the Medical Model is that disability is located in a person and warrants rehabilitation, medical care or behaviour change (WHO 2001). Such an approach is viewed as an initial position on disability (Fulcher 2015) where specialised means (diagnosis and prescriptions) are required to understand and respond to disability. Responses to disability within the Medical Model are mostly reactive in the form of medication, counselling and rehabilitation. This is a shortfall of the medical approach, that it too narrowly articulates what a disability is.

The medical perspectives also characterise disability as deficiency, limitation and inability (Evans et al. 2017) along with assumptions that students with disabilities are not able to operate at the same level as those without disabilities (Mitra 2006). The general view is that, if one has a disability, s/he is less capable of conducting academic activities at the level of others without disabilities (Hulsebosch 2009). The conception of disability is therefore understood along academic performance and conformance to set educational standards where the achievement of a certain standard determines disability or ability (Shakespeare 1996). Shortfalls are thus directed at the student with a disability who encounters difficulties performing and conforming to the expected academic standards (Gabel & Connor 2009). The Medical Model therefore embraces the idea that disability is a divergence from a capacity of conducting activities considered as typical (Trani et al. 2011). Within this theoretical position, there is a greater focus on disability than on how a system can be organised or how a student can be supported to be able to perform to his or her full potential. This can encourage inequalities in higher education by placing privileges to academic achievements on a certain group of students (those without disabilities) over another (those with disabilities). The Social Model of Disability offers a different perspective on disability as explained in the following sub-section.

3.5.2 The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability considers disability as restrictions to participation imposed by society against a person with an impairment (Oliver 2013). Disability is therefore socially and publicly constructed to limit the involvement in social activities (Finkelstein 2001). This approach recognises that a person is disabled more by contextual factors (social institutions and processes) where the locus of a problem is how the world is arranged or the conditions

within which one operates (Evans et al. 2017) than the physical impairments (Oliver 2013).

Evans et al. (2017: xiii) explain:

It means that we believe the barriers to success in higher education lie in the structural, organizational, physical, and attitudinal aspects of our institutions.

A university is expected to be arranged inclusively through disability-friendly arrangements that do not disadvantage any student on the basis of a disability. The Social Model therefore accounts for human diversity by design, where the goal is to increase accessibility and participation in social spaces (Thurber & Bandy 2018). The extent to which the UFS fulfills this tenet will be analysed because this is crucial in establishing ways in which opportunities for students to engage well with learning are expanded.

In addition, the Social Model of Disability maintains that people are disabled by others' perceptions, responses, judgements and attitudes towards those with disabilities (Oliver 1990). Thus, discrimination, stigma, prejudices, ignorance and deliberate limitation to accessing services all contribute towards the exclusion of people with disabilities (Mantsha 2016). On a broader social perspective, discriminatory laws, policies and institutional cultures and practices that infringe on the rights of those with disabilities (WHO 2015) are factors that require social change within the Social Model of Disability.

The Social Model cares most about making the environment barrier-free. Within the university context, and from a policy perspective, disability is dominantly regarded as something that needs to be supported in making universities inclusive (Ketterlin-Geller & Johnstone 2006; Cawthon & Cole 2010). This stance informs how disabilities are responded to at universities in South Africa (FOTIM 2011), where students with learning disabilities are considered as

those needing support in learning. Hence, students with learning disabilities receive what is known as reasonable disability accommodations to remove barriers in learning, mostly through adjusted test and examination conditions. Within the Capability Approach, a more ethical and normative position can be taken to regard these students not only as the ones who need support, but as students who need enabling opportunities to learn and achieve what they value, with concern for their wellbeing. The Capability Approach therefore can complement the existing disability models to bring multi-dimensional perspectives that incorporate the medical, social, psychological, relational and moral dimensions of disability.

3.5.3 The Capability Approach to disability

Sen (2009) views disability as a possible form of deprivation of capabilities and functionings because it can affect how a person interacts with an institution, services and resources (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco 2020) to limit a student from achieving what they value. Although most of the examples of disability that Sen provides refer to physical disability, he clarifies that disability can also be the taking away of individual freedoms for a person to live a life they have reason to value (Sen 2009). Mitra (2006) supports Sen's view and further argues that a disability can constrain opportunities that could have been developed or expanded. Thus, the Capability Approach views disability at a capability and functioning level where opportunities and achievements that are valued can be limited through the way a person interacts with the environment, systems, services and resources (Biggeri et al. 2020).

The view of disability as a limitation of opportunities is a point of convergence between the Social Model discussed above and the Capability Approach. The Capability Approach advances the idea of having social arrangements that do not disadvantage people in any way

(Sen 1999) and the Social Model supports a society that removes barriers that limit the participation of those with disabilities (Oliver 2013). Thus, both approaches are concerned with equality for people with disabilities with the view that everyone should have equal chances to participate in social issues. However, the Social Model does not emphasise the role of agency and the interaction a person has with the environment, neither does it account for capabilities. The Social Model settles for the removal of barriers by others and is weak on addressing and advancing the agency of those with disabilities. The Medical and Social Models and Capability Approach to disability are summarised in Table 2.

3.6 Comparing the Social and Medical Models and the Capability Approach to disability

The table below gives a summary of the differences in understanding disability and ways to respond to it. The Social as well as Medical Models of Disability and the Capability Approach are compared against each other to form the basis for recommending that the models work alongside each other. As mentioned earlier, the ICF is not included in the comparisons because it incorporates principles from both the Social and Medical Model of Disability.

Table 2: Conceptual differences between the Social, Medical and Capability Approach to disability

Social Model	Medical Model	Capability Approach
The Social Model of Disability does not consider what people have reason to value.	The Medical Model of Disability does not account for conversion factors and what people have reason to value.	The Capability Approach takes into account capabilities and what people have reason to value (Sen 2009).
Disability is understood as a limitation of participation by inconsiderate arrangements in society. Disability is externally imposed through the physical and social components of society that are designed without consideration for diversity or difference. Therefore, the Social Model of Disability stresses that disability can be overcome by organising society to become disability-friendly (Oliver 2013).	Disability is a biological condition that constrains a person's physical and mental capacity. Disability is a mishap located in a person and therefore can be cured, rehabilitated and prevented by medical means (Areheart 2008). Therefore, the Medical Model of Disability stresses that a person is disabled by the inherent impairments than the arrangement of the environment in which one operates.	Disability is a possible deprivation of freedom (Mitra 2006). It is multi-faceted and located in a person, the physical and social environment, and lack of ability to utilise resources. Therefore, it can be overcome by expanding people's freedoms (Sen 2009).
Communal over individual agency for the removal of barriers is encouraged. Well-wishers, disability advocates and people in positions of power are expected to act upon arrangements that disable people. Therefore, action against disability is driven by the need for social change. It adopts a societal and collective approach to eliminating barriers to participation.	Agency is limited to professionals and experts to diagnose, treat or remediate the symptoms of disabilities. Therefore, action against disability is driven by the need for medical cure and remedies (Jackson 2018). A biological and individual approach to disability is adopted.	The Capability Approach advances individual and communal agency (Clark, Biggeri & Frediani 2019). Action against disability is driven by social justice to eliminate inequalities. The approach is ethical (Robeyns 2017).
This model is responsive and action-oriented as it seeks to remove barriers (Mantsha 2013).	The model is reactionary as it seeks to prevent, cure or rehabilitate the disability (Jackson 2018).	The Capability Approach is prescriptive and normative to encourage ethical and just practices (Robeyns 2017).

While the Social Model of Disability is helpful in arranging learning spaces to limit barriers in teaching and learning, the Medical Model provides the basis for understanding the nature of a disability to be addressed. The Capability Approach acknowledges these principles but broadens the understanding of disabilities by accounting for capabilities and what people have reason to value. Disability within the Capability Approach is thus understood more expansively, for example, acknowledging its impact on students' academic engagements in multiple ways — as a set of conditions inherent in a student with a potential to deprive a student's capabilities (as a personal conversion factor). The university's physical structures can impede learning for students with learning disabilities (environmental conversion factors). Disability unfriendly practices, negative attitudes and stigmatising social norms (social conversion factors) also contribute to students' challenges in learning and work against students' achievement of their educational functionings. A student can take an active role working with a disability through disabling circumstances to achieve what they have reason to value (agency). The Capability Approach, therefore, embraces and complements the lenses of both the social and medical approaches, but is a broader framework that considers the chances a person has to utilise opportunities for wellbeing. It also discourages viewing students with disabilities as needing support — something that rigid education systems normalise, but it encourages university arrangements to consider every student as a subject of social justice such that no university practice or system disadvantages any student. Therefore, integrating the principles of existing and well-established disability models and those of the Capability Approach has the potential for a 'rich' conceptual lens for disability and, as Sen (2009) alludes, a broader informational base from which to address inequalities.

The Capability Approach is not presented here as an ideal and complete approach, although it has the potential for being a useful approach in articulating disability matters. Sen conceives

of it as an open-ended approach, making it less of a fully-fledged theory. Specific to this study, the Capability Approach offers a broad framework to address inequalities, but does not specifically address the disadvantages that students with learning disabilities face. As such, I draw on the theories of the Social and Medical Models of disability to explain, for example, what learning disabilities are, how they manifest in students, how policies, structures and practices disadvantage them, and possible ways of addressing the challenges they face. Furthermore, the Capability Approach is not yet fully established and widely applied to learning disabilities within the higher education context as compared to physical disabilities. Even many of examples concerning disabilities within the Capability Approach involve mobility challenges, for instance, in Mitra (2006), Trani et al. (2011) and Mutanga (2019). However, Nussbaum (2009) addresses cognitive or mental disabilities, which others might consider close, but very different from learning disabilities. Her work advances the access to education of people with cognitive disabilities (Nussbaum 2009). There are theoretical gaps in relating learning disabilities and students' higher education experiences to establish how their capabilities are formed, the notion which this study addresses.

3.7 Conclusion

The Capability Approach provides a theoretical framework to analyse and comprehend the experiences of students with learning disabilities. One way of ensuring that students have practical opportunities (capabilities) to achieve valued educational functionings is through having institutional arrangements that cater for the needs of all students, including those with learning disabilities. While the Medical and Social Models of Disability provide frameworks with which to understand disabilities, incorporating the Capability Approach offers a more nuanced conception of disabilities and how they should be responded to. It commands that a

university ought to have an ethical obligation to afford each student a dignified learning experience where everyone is regarded as a subject of social justice. It is thus imperative that a university treats all students as having equal worth (Nussbaum 2006) and deserving equal concern and respect in learning and in what they value to achieve (Walker 2010). Such an approach to students' learning and achievements concerns the formation of capabilities in higher education.

A consideration of students' agency in their learning processes by acting on the issues they consider valuable in their academic engagements is highlighted from a capability perspective as necessary towards achieving educational functionings. However, there can be limitations in doing so, to which the Capability Approach emphasises the importance of conversion factors where services or resources are availed for students. An account of conversion factors is thus necessary for a university to understand if students are able to fully utilise and benefit from available disability services. The Capability Approach's expansive conceptualisation of elements that affect a dignified human life contributes to further understanding of the formation of capabilities at a university. In a broader South African higher education context, using the Capability Approach to understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities enables policymakers to be attentive to distributional and processual aspects of justice and to ensure that equity is addressed from an ethical standpoint so that no student is marginalised.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological aspects of the study. The study is interested in exploring the learning experiences of students with learning disabilities at a university, particularly how university arrangements shape students' education trajectories. The chapter starts by explaining the aim of the study and outlining the research questions before explaining the narrative framework and why this frame suits the study. The chapter further presents details on power dynamics around narratives, how I achieved rapport with study participants, the study context and how participants were recruited. Details on the study participants follows as well as explanations on how data was collected. This is followed by explanations on how the data was analysed, as well as a description of the ethical considerations and the credibility of the study, before concluding the chapter.

Focusing on students from the University of the Free State (UFS), stories of their learning were collected through semi-structured interviews. I also drew perspectives from relevant policy documents, academics and support staff members who manage disability and teaching and learning at the university. Those perspectives are important in contextualising students' stories or versions of their experiences. The study adopts a narrative inquiry research design (Polkinghorne 1995) which is a form of qualitative inquiry that involves a storied account of experiences (Rudrum 2005) focused on a given purpose. Stories are thus told, reflected on, interpreted and written (Leavy 2015) to understand experiences. The narrative approach is thus the research design framework, and semi-structured interviews are the data collection tool. The study draws on the concepts of interpretivism that seek to understand how people make sense

of their experiences since a story is fundamental in thinking about the self and experiences (Mason 2017; Smith & Osborn 2007; Bryman 2012).

It is common for narrative researchers to focus on particular actors, in particular social circumstances at a particular time (Riessman 2008). Therefore, I chose to focus exclusively on university learning experiences, drawing also on the views of Chase (2007) and Riessman (2008) that narratives can be organised around a single topic instead of a whole life story, to give a topical account of experiences or aspects of immediate relevance to an area under investigation. Goodson (2006) refers to these kinds of narratives as life narratives or small-scale narratives as he explains a shift from grand narratives to those focused on a specific issue. I therefore gather the university narratives of students as an extension of their personal lives, but without gathering their entire life history. The students' stories are told to suit a specific purpose, which is to illuminate their university experiences. I sought these students' stories to enlighten people's understandings of a population of students that is often left out in most higher education debates. The recognition of such populations counts towards the appreciation of narratives as a methodological framework as they bring out the voices of those who are considered as marginal and whose experiences are not usually recognised (Plummer 2001; Maynes, Pierce & Laslett 2012).

4.2 Aim of the study

This study seeks to analyse and understand how university arrangements contribute to the formation of students with learning disabilities' capabilities. As such, the study seeks to examine the outcomes that students value in higher education, the challenges they face, how

their needs are responded to, their views on the usefulness of the interventions, and the various factors that influence their ability to meaningfully benefit from these interventions. The study therefore investigates students' educational endeavours using their personal accounts and also perspectives from lecturers, support staff and the university's policy documents.

4.2.1 Research questions

The study is guided by this overarching research question: How can a university foster capability formation for students with learning disabilities. The following sub-questions support this main research question:

- i. What do students with learning disabilities value in and out of their university education?
- ii. How has the University of the Free State constructed and implemented interventions that target students with learning disabilities? How do these interventions meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?
- iii. What and how do conversion factors enable or inhibit the formation of valued capabilities for students with learning disabilities?

4.3 Narratives as contextualised life stories

Stories in narrative inquiry research are mainly organised around a social phenomenon, crisis or any other cultural frames, and institutional contexts (Plummer 2001; Clandinin 2006). Stories of experiences are thus embedded in social contexts to give a better understanding of people's relationships with circumstances or the things that surround them (Pinnegar & Daynes 2007). It is the nature of qualitative research to locate a person in the world and examine his or

her relationship with it (Smeyers et al. 2015). Thus, personal accounts are weaved into the surrounding world for people to understand a person and their circumstances (Bold 2013). This could not have been achieved had I used a quantitative approach or any other qualitative approach that does not focus on life experiences. The stories I obtain in this study are located in disability and higher education, while the study explores how university conditions affect students' engagements as explained in the theoretical framework chapter.

A life story without context is just a personal life story with no relationship, process or power dynamics; aspects that are crucial in adding meaning to experiences (Goodson 2001). Polkinghorne (1988) notes that meaning in narratives is observed by realising that something is a part of a whole, something is caused by something else or something has an effect on something else. This stance strengthens Tamboukou's (2008) argument that narratives should not be natural and unquestionable, but that instead they are an effect of different contexts. Otherwise, a free-standing personal narrative with no connection or relationship has little value. Goodson (2001) uses this stance to differentiate a life story (personal narration) from a life history (contextualised story), explaining that a life story becomes a life history when it is analysed within a macro framework. The context within which narratives are formed is important in order to gain a fuller understanding of how people make sense of their lives (Owens 2007). With this view, the narratives I produce for this study qualify to be called life histories. The term life narratives is preferred for this study to refer to contextualised life stories that are composed of/from participants' stories and embedded in the perspectives of academics, policy documents, as well as managerial and support staff. I wouldn't want to evoke thoughts of students' histories and long accounts of their lives by using the term life history even though terms such as life history, life story, life narratives, stories and narratives are mostly used interchangeably.

A fusion of students' stories and data from other sources follows Smeyers et al. (2015) view that personal stories alone are incomplete representations of a person's life as they can only offer partial views that, in many cases, are told to suit personal motivations. Also people represent reality from selective memory and tell versions of experience as they are interpreted and not as they were actually lived. I thus produce a narrative of students with learning disabilities' learning experiences based on the personal accounts and examined within the institutional contexts where their experiences are located.

4.3.1 Rationale for using the narrative approach in this study

Clandinin (2013) suggests three justifications for using the narrative approach in research — personal, practical and social justifications. Personal justifications explain the researcher's positionality, which seeks to give answers to questions such as “who am I and why I am conducting the study?” In other words, personal justifications reveal how I, as a researcher, understand myself in relation to the research project and what motivates me to engage in this research project. Researching learning disabilities for me is stimulated by curiosity and concern for equality in higher education, with a specific focus on the conditions within which university students with learning disabilities experience learning. Having a sociology background, I am concerned by how people live their lives, how they are navigating the everyday and how they interface with the environment in which they experience life. In this study, I propose to share stories of people who have been marginalised in society in different ways, so that a wider audience can understand how they experience life through personal accounts of their experiences. I am an ‘outsider’ in this project with an etic perspective, seeking to have a better understanding of the higher education experiences of students with learning disabilities through the stories they tell, the narratives constructed from the circumstances they face at the place

they study, and the wider social milieus that shape their experiences. As such, a narrative framework suits this purpose of sharing people's stories.

Practical justifications for a narrative inquiry are usually aligned with the researcher's anticipation for change or improvements in practice through the research that is being conducted (Clandinin 2013). In most cases researchers seek people's stories out of concern for human conditions (Kramp 2004). As such, narratives respond to situations in the world with the aim of improving social conditions (Bold 2013). In addition, the bottom-up approach adopted in narrative research gives room for the voices of the subaltern, the marginalised or those whose needs get less recognition, to be heard to contribute to social change to improve certain aspects of their experiences. Thus, hearing the personal accounts of university students with learning disabilities' experiences can be used as a practical rationale for using a narrative inquiry for this study because, as we learned from the existing literature, learning disabilities are often left out in higher education debates in South Africa. I have involved the perspectives of policymakers, support staff from support services departments, and the academics in my project with the aim of presenting a combined narrative that includes different perspectives to locate students' stories in the institutional context.

Furthermore, research that employs a narrative inquiry approach offers or creates imaginations for alternative possibilities (Clandinin 2013) which, in this case, can be possible interventions aimed at enhancing the university experiences of students with learning disabilities. Even though students' stories are personal, they can serve a wider and far-reaching purpose (Goodson 2006) where the interpretation of their experiences exposes the inequalities in higher education or inadequacies of a policy or service. Narratives can also be used to challenge certain institutional cultures and the taken-for-granted assumptions, official accounts and

established theories and policies (Fraser 2004; Watts 2015) just by verbalising the concerns of victims about inequalities in particular settings. Hence, students' stories are powerful enough to challenge existing university structures, practices and policies that interfere negatively with the way they experience learning. A narrative methodology, with this power to influence policies (Watts 2015), suits my study since it has a policy focus.

Social justifications mainly involve theoretical validations. By using students' stories as the starting point in my methodology, I bring an understanding of what students value and how conditions are enhancing or restraining the achievement of what is valued in and from their studies. Narrative inquiry is not a commonly used method to explore students with learning disabilities' experiences. Hence, the use of narratives brings the untold stories of students with learning disabilities to attention and foregrounds their voices amid the statistical evidence that constitutes the largest part of higher education debates. It is the work of narratives to reveal hidden or suppressed stories, and to foster a revision of understanding experiences (Clandinin 2013). It is also through narratives that we get thick and rich descriptions of experiences from the narrator (Fraser 2004) for a better understanding of how students with learning disabilities experience university. As I consult literature and follow the tweets of people with disabilities on the '#WhyDisabledPeopleDropOut' of higher education, it is clear that students with disabilities need to be recognised as valued academic voices as they feel left out. All three justifications detailed above are relevant to my study because learning disabilities do not receive sufficient attention and students with learning disabilities' voices are not verbalised in educational research, making it difficult to understand the challenges that students face in their learning. Furthermore, narratives as a discourse and a methodology are scarcely applied to research on learning disabilities and higher education in general — thus providing the rationale for adopting this research design framework.

A point to note is that a narrative methodology allows different interpretations and understanding of data or how the researcher ‘reads the world’ and how one presents their ‘reading of the world’ for it to be believed (Fraser 2004). This offers a plurality of truths (Fraser 2004) for stories can be told/written differently to different audiences (Watts 2015). The findings of this study, especially those derived from human participants, are therefore not presented as certainty or proof of factual truths, but as interpretations prone to multiple or further interpretations. Such a stance does not give definitive final positions, but rather explorations into the contextualised subjective experiences of participants leave room for the plurality of possibilities in ways to address different needs. The narrative methodological framework is therefore suited for the theoretical framework of this study.

4.4 Relationality, positionality and power dynamics in narrative research

To a large extent, narrative research is dialogic (Riessman 2008), where the researcher and the researched construct meaning through a conversation focused on a particular issue under study (deMarrais 2004). Knowledge, or the final narrative, is thus interactively and intentionally produced as the two interview parties engage and relate with each other in the research process. The influence I have on the production of data as I am actively present in the research process, cannot be ignored, and neither is my theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, my personal experiences and assumptions (deMarrais 2004). I constantly reminded the student participants that I was there to learn from them and their experiences and this heightened their enthusiasm and willingness to talk without them being intimidated by the fact that I am a doctoral student. I guarded against unnecessary interference by not asking leading questions and by avoiding the voicing of preferences and prejudice as far as possible. Initially, I went into the field without

giving much thought to the way I use the term disability. I realised after a few interviews that other students do not like the term, and this might possibly have influenced the attitude and quality of the first interviews. Interviewees might have told a deficit-focused story to match my disability-centered view of their conditions. I thus conducted the remainder of the interviews using terms like ‘condition’ to refer to a learning disability, taking into consideration the feelings and preferences of participants (which I had to ask for before the interview). However, the final narrative is presented using theoretical terms (learning disabilities) common in the discipline or concepts that are not confusing or vague. The final story is also presented with the audience in mind, reflecting on how the constructed narrative is going to be heard and responded to by the readers (Etherington 2006). Therefore, I am also influenced by the readers on what and how to write the final narrative in terms of how convincingly the narrative is constructed, yet still ethically produced.

What should be noted is that it is not possible to have an ideal research situation and process when there is a researcher with a face and feelings and participants who are approached and have not necessarily taken their own initiative in telling their stories (Plummer 2001). Researchers cannot claim that their understanding of the issue under study is only shaped by the stories they collect (Smeyers et al. 2015) with no added reasoning, interpretation or inferences. Also, it is rare to find participants with clear and total knowledge of the issue under study such that they do not require any guidance from the researcher (Plummer 2001). There is always influence, impressions and bias in the process of constructing a final narrative. What Plummer (2001) therefore recommends is that researchers should be aware of these biases, describe them and show how they have shaped the research process and the ‘end story.’

I undertook this study as an outsider in terms of me not having a diagnosed learning disability, but as an insider as I am a student at the University of the Free State where the study is based. In as much as there are theoretical assumptions that influence my views on the subject under study, I consider research participants as knowers of their experiences and treat their perspectives as valuable data for the study. This brings attention to power imbalances in narrative research or any other forms of research where the researcher is the one who designs the study, directs the interviews, interprets the findings and publishes them (deMarrais 2004). It is important for the researcher to understand and acknowledge the power that the participants hold in the research process, which is the power of knowledge and experience that the researcher seeks, the power to tell or not to tell their stories, and the power to re-interpret data if given a chance to do so (deMarrais 2004). Therefore, reflexivity and attentiveness to the situation and position of those involved in the research are important (Plummer 2007) and I was considerate of this throughout the research process. As a researcher with an outsider perspective where I am conducting this research, not as a student with a learning disability, my understanding of these students' reality is not derived from sharing the same experiences, but mainly from theoretical and disciplinary assumptions. I thus treat participants as bona fide knowers and sources of knowledge of their experiences. Building a strong relationship with participants is also key to the sharing of power within narrative research (deMarrais 2004). I tried to engage with research participants with the 'sharing of knowledge' approach with an emphasis that the students know better because they are the ones who are experiencing university with a learning disability. Our communication before the interviews and the way we interacted during the interviews (as explained next) was key to the strengthening of our relationship.

4.5 Creating rapport

Rapport was established with the research participants as we exchanged conversations that constituted both the social and academic dialogue. I feel that I connected well with the research participants even though we did not know each other and had not met before the interviews. I told the students that I wanted to learn from them and they felt encouraged to open up. Tony stated that, “I can say all these things to you because I trust you, and you want to learn.” Tess also stated, “I really have to trust you to tell you what I go through. In your case, you want to learn, and I trust you.” As such, the participants shared and entrusted me with aspects of their lives that are very sensitive, such that there were instances where I was told not to share some aspects of their experiences with anyone. For example, Duncan would say, “Can you just pause the recorder, I need to tell you something off the record.” There were moments where Ziyanda shared aspects of her private life and she would say, “Between you and me, ...” or where Kristen complained about her lecturers and would say, “Not for the record, ...” I complied and kept my word that I would not share that information with anyone else.

The same can be said for the interaction I had with staff members. We engaged comfortably with each other. One lecturer ended up showing me a video about how people are assisted to read and understand things better at an organisation that his friend works for. This was not part of the interview but we interacted so well that he shared something that he thought would broaden my understanding of learning disabilities. During the interview with the Deputy Director of CTL, she opened up about people close to her who have learning disabilities. She also suggested and arranged that I meet the principal of a special school in Bloemfontein, just to see and observe what happens at the school, understand how they support children with learning disabilities and possibly to check if I could locate participants from their students who

are now at the University of the Free State (UFS). I went to the school and met the principal, even though the school could not supply me with the contact details of those who qualified for university education for the sake of confidentiality. Such interactions reveal good rapport with the research participants.

4.6 Selection of study participants

The eligible student participants for this study were registered UFS students with learning disabilities who are registered with, and have disabilities being supported by the university's Disability Unit known as the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS). The eligibility criteria for academic staff members was any member of staff who teaches students under the employ of the UFS. The nature of the employment contract was not a factor because the nature of the job was considered more important in this case. The same applied to support staff. However, specific support staff were targeted, particularly those involved with students with disabilities and the management of teaching and learning components at the UFS. Eligible university policy documents analysed in this study are those aligned to disabilities, teaching and learning.

I experienced great difficulty in finding students and academic staff participants as both groups failed to cooperate on the first contact attempt. Initially, I arranged with CUADS to distribute my research advert and a letter of introduction (introducing myself and the study) to all students with learning disabilities to establish a pool from which I could select the study participants. On the advert there was a link directing students to indicate their willingness to participate in my study on an online-generated (Evasys) form. The Evasys-generated form allowed responses to be channeled only to me, such that I would be the only one with the credentials to access the

responses. As such, students who agreed to participate in my study would be known only by me, even though CUADS distributed the information to every prospective study participant. This was explained to the students in the letter.

The Evasys survey generated a 0% response rate. I resorted to snowballing where I identified the first participant through a friend I shared my worries about the study. Through the snowballing chain, I only managed to get seven participants, but two of them could not participate as we could not find a suitable date and time to conduct the interviews. With five participants, the number was not sufficiently large to have the anticipated depth and breadth on the issues under study. I, therefore, met the head of CUADS who arranged a convenience technique upon realising the difficulties many researchers encounter in getting the cooperation of students with disabilities from CUADS. A suggestion was made that I could approach students as they leave CUADS, for their cooperation. I took up the suggestion from the head of CUADS and managed to get eleven participants, but one of the students withdrew before we could even arrange for an interview date. Altogether, I had fifteen student participants who were obtained through a combination of snowballing and convenience techniques. Interview arrangements were done mostly through phone calls and WhatsApp messages¹⁴ because the students had proved and also admitted that they do not work well with emails.

Although I eventually had fifteen students (out of 120 students with registered learning disabilities at that point) due to the challenges encountered in locating willing students, I also considered the feasibility of conducting a qualitative narrative study within three years. A small

¹⁴ I have written proof from CUADS that students agreed to have their contact details shared with me so that I could contact them.

sample is preferred because it is feasible for a narrative approach that produces words/text more than numbers (Robinson 2014) to enable a deep understanding of the issue under study. Fifteen stories from different students is a sample big enough for the study to be credible (Cleary, Horsfall & Hayter 2014) because credibility is important for the quality of the study or for the findings to be taken seriously. Sandelowski (1995) points out that the number of participants must be determined by a consideration of the quality of data — too few might not be adequate for breadth and depth, and too many can produce superficial data. Therefore, I believe that the number of participants is reasonable enough to satisfy these feasibility and credibility requisites of a qualitative study.

No student was forced to participate, and everyone signed a consent form after I gave them an explanation of the study. In fact, towards the end of each interview, I asked students why they agreed to share their experiences with me and I use part of the findings here to illustrate how willing students were to participate in the study. These are some of the responses I got:

I agreed because if this study can help one person, then I have done my job. And if CUADS could improve on the problem areas, then I haven't just won it for myself, but for others. (Ziyanda)

My friend and I were studying and we were approached to help a student who is doing research on learning disabilities. I said yes instantly and the other guy said yes. We both wanted to help. But later on I thought a little about it and said I would like more research on learning disabilities to be done because I don't think that it's as common as other disabilities like blindness where one can be recognised and helped easily. I think that there are lots of people who can benefit from this research. (Brian)

As I told you, I want to learn [sic] people about learning disabilities, because many people don't know about them. (Duncan)

It is therefore evident that the students had their reasons for participating in my study, including their willingness to help the researcher, hoping to educate the audience on these

invisible disabilities, and also anticipating the university's Disability Unit to improve in its handling of the needs of students with learning disabilities.

4.6.1 The students' profiles

Fifteen out of 120 students with learning disabilities from the UFS participated in this study (11 females and four males). All the participants are South African citizens, not by arrangement but CUADS confirmed that there are no international students on the CUADS database. Three black students participated in the study (all female). The rest were white students. There were no other ethnic groups involved in this study, probably because they did not volunteer their willingness to participate, the snowballing technique did not lead me to them, or none of them have registered a learning disability with CUADS. However, arguments of learning disabilities being associated with socio-economic status where socially-disadvantaged students receive disability support the most (Blanchett 2010) cannot be ignored here. Most students from advantaged backgrounds get to the university being aware that there are disability accommodations they can benefit from because their (better-resourced) schools offered them such (Shifrer, Muller & Callahan 2011). Liz, a participant in this study needed extra-time in high school but she was refused that service. She recounted here ordeal as follows:

So, I spent too much time on everything and I was not finishing my exams. So I needed extra time and all the proof was there, and then they were like, "We can't just give you extra time because all these things must go to the Department of Education and all that." But others were getting it. (Liz)

The average age of the students is 23 years. All the students are studying full-time and are being supported by CUADS. Students are from seven departments, but I will not associate students with departments in the text for fear of exposing their identity because some

departments have very few students with learning disabilities, and they are known to their peers and the academic staff. Therefore, naming affiliating departments can expose their identities. However, students are at different levels of studying, but there were no first-year students or students who were studying towards a Master's or Doctoral degree. The study participants are second-year, third-year and Honours students. At the point of submitting the thesis, only four of these students were still at the UFS. Below is a summary of the students' profiles.

Table 3: Student profiles

Participant	Liz	Tamara	Frank	Sammy	Ziyanda	Molly	Duncan	Kristen	Anna	Brian	Tony	Brenda	Cici	Tess	Lerato
Gender	F	F	M	F	F	F	M	F	F	M	M	F	F	F	F
Race	Black	White	White	White	White	White	White	White	White	White	White	Black	White	White	Black
Age	20	23	29	22	29	21	20	20	24	30	22	23	21	21	21
Level -study	2 nd (ext)	Hon	Hon	Hon	Hon (ext)	Hon	2 nd	2 nd	4 th (ext)	3 rd (rep)	2 nd	Hon	3 rd	3 rd	Hon
Disability	ADHD, ADD	ADD (Misophonia)	Dyslexia ADHD, Dyscalculia	ADHD Panic attacks	ADHD Hearing imp.	ADHD	Autism ADHD ADD	ADHD, Dyslexia	Dyslexia ADD	Dyslexia ADHD	Dyslexia	Dyslexia ADHD	Dyslexia	Dyslexia	ADHD
Diagnoses /yrs	4	5	7	14	16	3	14	16	4	Dyslexia 12 ADHD - 3	14	7	15	5	5
At CUADS	1 st yr	2 nd yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	2 nd yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	2 nd yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	1 st yr	1 st yr
School attended	Public	Public	Pvt	Home Sch & Public	Pvt	Pvt	Special	Pvt	Public	Public	Pvt	Public	Special	Pvt	Public

Supported /Sch	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
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Key								
F and M stands for female and male respectively.	LD. Short for learning disability	Ext. means extended programme	Imp. Short for impairment.	Rep. Short for repeating.	Hon. Short for Honours.	Pvt. Short for Private.	Yr. Stands for year.	Sch. Short for school

As Table 3 shows, the most common learning disability among students is ADHD (n=10), followed by Dyslexia (n=8). There are four students who have both ADHD and Dyslexia, one student with ADD and Dyslexia, and one student with only ADD¹⁵. Twelve of the students had learning disabilities diagnosed prior to enrolling at the university but ten of them only sought disability support after failing to perform satisfactorily academically. Only two of the twelve students were registered with CUADS from the onset of their university studies. The average period for which students had a diagnosis of a learning disability is nine years (minimum three and maximum 16 years). Student participants were educated at different types of schools – special school (n=2), private school (n=5), and public school (n=8). All the public schools (except for one) are fee-paying and attract students from advantaged backgrounds¹⁶. Students' (n=14) descriptions of their personal lives show that they are from socially-advantaged backgrounds.

¹⁵ The student says she has Misophonia, but it is recognised as ADD for it to be categorised as a learning disability.

¹⁶ Schools in South Africa are classified into 5 groups (quintiles) ranked from poorest (quintiles 1, 2 & 3), to least poor (quintiles 4 & 5). Refer to <https://www.schoolguide.co.za/for-parents/school-review-guidelines/1036-education-guide/10975-school-fees-quintiles.html>

4.6.2 Staff participants

4.6.2.1 Support staff members

I interviewed section heads and officers who offer support services to students with disabilities and those from the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) as additional data sources, whom I recruited using a purposive sampling approach. Support staff members' profiles are presented in the table below:

Table 4: Profiles of staff members from CUADS and CTL

Participant	Position	Section
1	Head of Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (Assistant Director)	UFS Support Services (CUADS)
2	Assistant Officer (Coordinating alternative test and exam arrangements)	UFS Support Services (CUADS)
3	Deputy Director	Centre for Teaching and Learning
4	Officer (Academic Student Tutorial And Excellence Programme — A-STEP)	Centre for Teaching and Learning
5	Officer (Academic Advising)	Centre for Teaching and Learning

The identities of these staff members are not anonymised because they are office-bearers known to everyone and they are involved in the study for policy perspectives. They were asked how the university manage learning disabilities and teaching and learning. My view is that their perspectives represent the position of the institution, not personal views. Therefore, it would not be fair to hold them accountable for any substantive policy positions divulged. I interviewed the Head of CUADS and the officer who is specifically in charge of learning disabilities at the university. I also involved staff members from the CTL where I interviewed the Deputy

Director, the Chief Officer in charge of the Academic Student Tutorial and Excellence programme (A-STEP), and the Chief Officer in charge of Academic Advising. I also had an opportunity to interview a Programme Director of one of the schools at the university. The interview with this Programme Director was necessitated by the insistence of the Head of that School who found it better that the Programme Director joins us for the interview since she is the one who interacts more often with students with learning disabilities in their school. The Programme Director is also the person who does all the administrative work that is instrumental in facilitating support for students with learning disabilities in that particular school, including identifying students who are not progressing well academically. Therefore, we had a joint interview where the Head of School offered her perspectives from a leadership position, while the person on the ground (the Programme Director) offered insights on what is really happening.

4.6.2.2. Lecturers

Eight academic staff members (four females and four males), three blacks and five whites participated in the study after approaching them directly in person, at their offices. Initial attempts to randomly recruit the lecturers through emails did not materialise as some lecturers did not respond and others informed me that they had never encountered students with learning disabilities in their careers. However, I involved academic staff from the departments where I got the student participants to locate each story within the departmental context. Below I present a summary of lecturers' profiles.

Table 5: Lecturers' profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	No. years of service (range)
Lecturer 1	M	15-20
Lecturer 2	F	10-15
Lecturer 3	F	10-15
Lecturer 4	M	20-30
Lecturer 5	M	1-5
Lecturer 6	F	10-15
Lecturer 7	M	10-15
Lecturer 8	F	15-20

All the lecturers are permanently employed by the UFS and have taught or are teaching students with learning disabilities. I take caution not to divulge too much information that can expose both the identities of staff and student participants. As such, details that can link lecturers to their departments and possibly making them identifiable are omitted. There is a balance of long-serving and new staff members, ranging from one to 30 years of service. The average number of years of service is nine years. A combination of long-serving and ‘new’ staff members helps to establish how policy and practice has changed over time concerning the way learning disabilities were or are handled in the classroom. The sample is composed of professors, junior and senior lecturers and a head of school, not by arrangement, but because these are the ones who were willing to participate after failed attempts to purposively recruit participants using the email method.

4.7 Collecting the data

The data collection tool for interviews was semi-structured interviews that were centred on university experiences for students, teaching students with learning disabilities for lecturers, and managing disabilities for support staff. Important to note is the fact that narratives constitute the research design framework for the study's interest in stories of experiences that are contextualised. Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool to solicit the stories. Short life stories that were collected in this study are gathered mainly through in-depth interviews (Plummer 2001) and this approach is useful when dealing with people with learning disabilities who are likely to lack verbal articulacy (Owens 2007).

Data was collected between May and September 2019 after obtaining ethical clearance from the Ethics Review Board of the university; ethical clearance number UFS-HSD 2019/0038/2903. The data was primarily derived from participants through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that sought comprehensive responses. The questions were, to a large extent, influenced by the theoretical framework¹⁷ that guides this study by seeking what students value to do and become, as well the university arrangements that support or constrain the achievement of what students have reason to value.

The interviews were guided by a set of questions for a better focus (Atkinson 1998) because we cannot always assume that interviewees are clear and totally knowledgeable of what the research seeks to explore. Also, guided interviews work better for most people with learning disabilities because of the challenges they face in processing information to be able to think coherently and explain things on the spot (Fast 2004). The interview guide, though, was used

¹⁷ The theoretical framework is the Capability Approach as discussed in the theoretical framework chapter.

as a standard protocol for each interview and was flexible to suit how each participant recounted his or her story. Hence, in some cases, not all the same questions were asked because some students would just narrate relevant aspects without being specifically asked to address it. For example, some would talk about their learning disabilities in the introduction before I could ask about it, while others would wait for me to ask them. However, care was taken to ensure that all the important aspects on the interview guide were addressed in the discussions. An explanation of how data was collected from the research participants follows below.

4.7.1 Student participants

Participants were interviewed individually after explaining the purpose of the interview and all the contents of the information sheet and consent forms. Room was given for participants to ask questions where they were not clear, and they had to sign the consent form after everything was explained to them. The interviews started with questions that solicited factual data where participants mainly gave contextual information and further divulged into deeper discussions on the nature of learning disabilities and experiences of learning. Also, students' relationship with CUADS at the campus was interrogated, as well as policies and practices that work for them, and their idea of an ideal disability policy. The questions allowed the researcher and the audience to better understand what life is like for university students with learning disabilities.

The open-ended nature of the questions adds value by allowing the researcher to be inquisitive and to explore further the things that do not 'appear on the surface', but also to pry deeper in search of a comprehensive picture of the nature of reality that the students experience. For example, where Cici stated that "CUADS is 100%" for her, I would ask further what she means by that or for her to give examples that represent what she meant. Students would then tell me

how their average marks improved or how they can freely express themselves at CUADS, amongst other things.

While taking note of Fraser's (2004) suggestion that an interviewer should be sensitive to different communication styles, a language that the interviewee and interviewer are comfortable with was preferred. I interviewed everyone in English as that was the language we could all understand well and were comfortable with. I am not proficient in most South African local languages and I was dealing with university students who are being taught in English. So, we could understand each other clearly without communication difficulties that could have jeopardised the value of the interviews. There was also no need for an interpreter of any kind.

The interviews were held in a setting where the students felt comfortable and secure (Saldana 2011) because participants need a platform where they are not worried about being seen, known or heard while they are sharing personal details of their lives, especially since a disability can be a sensitive issue. With the first participants that I recruited through snowballing, we used the study cubicles at the library that allow only two people in the room. We later used study cubicles at CUADS, as suggested and preferred by the students, because they are familiar with the environment and were not worried about being seen or heard because most people around the centre understand them. The cubicles are soundproof and offer a conducive environment to have one-on-one interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of participants, to have a first-hand representation of participants' voices. Audio tapping also allows direct quotes that are needed to support the analysis of data to be captured.

4.7.2 Staff participants

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight lecturers. The interviews were conducted in the lecturers' offices on a mutually-agreed date and time. The main purpose for conducting the interviews with lecturers was to get their perspectives on teaching students with learning disabilities and how they interact with CUADS on issues concerning disabilities. The interviews took an average of one hour to complete. Interviews were also conducted with five staff members from CUADS and CTL to obtain policy perspectives. These interviews give information on how disability is handled in teaching and learning and other university functions. In the process, the conditions within which the capabilities of students with learning disabilities are formed are revealed, from the middle-management and academic staff members' perspectives. Interviews with staff members also enabled me to get critical responses to the issues that were raised by the students during the interviews. Interviews with all staff members were also audio-recorded with their consent.

Policy perspectives were also obtained from studying relevant documents of the university that include the disability policy and teaching and learning policies. I analysed these documents to offer contextual information on disability, teaching and learning at the university, and to reveal where possible, discrepancies between the policy on paper and in action. A presentation of all the policies and documents involved in this study follows. The policy documents are grouped according to the sections where they belong.

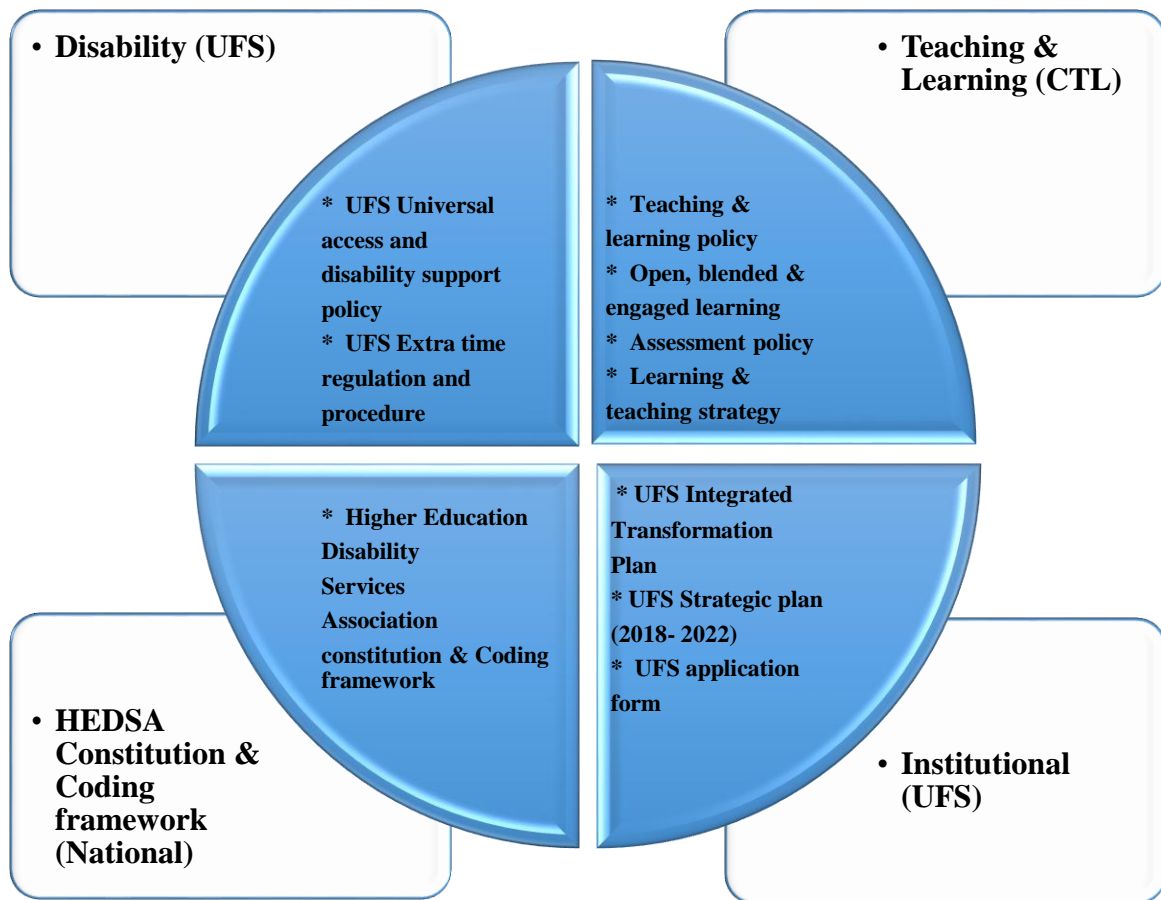


Figure 2: UFS Policy documents (author's own illustration)

These policies are discussed in detail in Chapter 5 to highlight what they advance and how it affects students' engagements with their studies as part of the study findings.

4.8 Data analysis

Polkinghorne (1995) suggests that narrative research involves two frameworks of analysis, the analysis of narratives or narrative analysis. The analysis of narratives involves a researcher making sense of the stories (which are used as data) that the interviewees tell, mostly to identify

themes common across the stories (Polkinghorne 1995). Whereas narrative analysis involves gathering life histories and making sense of them through a process of emplotment (Polkinghorne 1995) where a researcher can make a summary of the major life events (synopsis) detailing the problem, setting, characters, interactions and how the problem was resolved (McCormack 2004). This study since it used semi-structured interviews to collect data on a segment of students' lives, not full-fledged personal life stories, adopts the analysis of narratives framework where narrative excerpts that best represent students' experiences are selected to form a narrative that aligns with the aim of the research. However, the excerpts of interviews include narratives, as personal accounts are told in a narrative form

In analysing students' narratives and data from other sources, I try to make sense or understand what research participants mean about the aspects that reflect or affect their experiences (Saldana 2011) through data reduction, re-organisation, interpretation and re-presentation (Roulston 2014). I adopt an interpretive analysis of data that acknowledges that people construct knowledge or meanings of their experiences through (their own) interpretations (Owens 2007) of how the social world is shaped by the interactions they have (social constructionism). Hence, knowledge is viewed as constructed, not discovered (Andrews 2012). Therefore, the study provides interpretive, not realist assumptions about how students experience university, based on their narrations — noting that experiences are best described narratively (Bryman 2012).

Furthermore, within the interpretive paradigm, as a researcher, I try to understand participants' perceptions of their world. Participants' narratives are thus understood as given, and interpreted through the views of the researcher, using the theoretical framework and the existing discourses

on the subject matter. This allows a broader understanding of meanings and application of the research findings (Saldana 2011) instead of just ‘acclaiming’ narrated accounts, without engaging critically with them (Riessman 2011). I analyse the stories and produce life narratives following Walcott’s (1994) stance that when I (the researcher) describe, I want the audience to see what I saw, when I analyse, I anticipate that the reader knows what I know, and when I interpret, I want the readers to understand what they think they have understood. Attention is given though to tensions between theoretical assumptions (the interpretation of experiences) and the subjective experiences of people, especially since my study’s title and the research questions are framed within the Capability Approach terms. I also use the Capability Approach as an analytical framework to gain descriptive accounts of how students with learning disabilities experience higher education following Holstein and Gubrium’s (2011: 5) comment that, “Methods of analysis do not emerge out of thin air. They are informed by, and extend out of, particular theoretical sensibilities.” Such a stance allows stories not to ‘speak for themselves’ (Walker & Unterhalter 2004), but to be located within frames of analysis that are rooted in academic debates.

Taking into consideration that narratives involve various approaches of analysis, and there are no fixed approaches to the analysis of narratives (Holstein & Gubrium 2011), I adopt a descriptive experience analysis where students’ stories become data in the analysis of narratives that produce explanatory stories (Polkinghorne 1995) of students’ university experiences. Simkhada (2008) adopted a descriptive analysis of experiences in her thesis involving the experiences of Nepalese girls who are trafficked to India for prostitution. She organised her data into main and sub-headings (that are not necessarily coded and thematically identified) as common themes, but represent participants’ experiences descriptively. I adopt the same approach for my study, adding sub-headings where possible to describe students’

learning experiences without necessarily coding data, but presenting insights mainly into the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of students’ learning experiences. The ‘what’ part of experiences, which usually involves the coding of data, is subtly attended to without any coding, but through a presentation of what certain aspects of experiences look like since thematic and narrative analysis are not entirely incompatible. I bear in mind that analytic methods can be tweaked or even mixed, as long as they make data make sense (Holstein & Gubrium 2011). Bold (2013) suggests that there is no particular right or wrong way of analysing narrative data and encourages researchers to develop their own analytical approaches that suit their research, for there is no rigid analytic method. I thus present and represent data in ways that best suit my analytical goal of describing (for a better understanding of) the learning experiences of students with learning disabilities and the learning conditions created by the university.

4.8.1 Steps in analysing the data

The first step in the analysis of data involved hearing the stories with particular attention to each other’s emotions (Fraser 2004). At this stage, I asked myself these questions as suggested by Fraser (2004): what ‘sense’ do I get from the interview, and how does the interview start, unfold and end? I thus made brief notes at the end of each interview containing this information. I also detailed my emotions in my research journal as they are important in how data is interpreted (Plummer 2001). Through this process, I became very sensitive about how to use the word disability after realising that some students struggle with identifying themselves as disabled.

The second step involved transcribing the interviews — which I did personally and manually. Audio and typed records of the interviews are kept to serve as accurate records of the narrated

story (Cortazzi 1993). I transcribed the interviews word-for-word as told, guided by how words or statements were expressed. For example, where a participant laughed, I indicated (laughs) or capitalised words where the voice is raised.

The third step involved interpreting individual transcripts, noting the specificities of each transcript (Fraser 2004) through a brief synopsis of each interview that starts with a summary of the context of the narrative (Cortazzi 1993) and then what transpired in the interview. Fraser (2004: 190) suggests important questions that a researcher should ask him/herself at this stage, which are: “What are the main points in the story and what kind of meaning can be attached to the story?” Through this process, I noted important personal information about students, for example, how their socio-economic status is depicted in the schools they attended or the personal arrangements for software and technological applications that aid learning. I also could deduce, at that point, how students depict their disabilities — that is, do they view the learning disability they have in deficit terms or not.

The fourth step involved scanning across different domains of experience to examine how different environments interact with the students’ experiences (Fraser 2004). At this point, I incorporated data from complementary sources such as policies, academics and support staff to give explanations and contextual information that has a bearing on the students’ experiences. Students’ intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and institutional aspects of their experiences were also pointed out in this phase of analysis. The main idea is to attach experiences to the environment in order to get contextualised stories of experience (Goodson 2001) since the narrative approach is interested in people and the circumstances within which they experience their lives (Bold 2013).

Step five involved the interpretation of stories by reflecting on the wider meaning of the stories in relation to existing literature and theories (Cortazzi 1993) in what Fraser (2004) describes as the linking of the personal with the political. At this stage, I checked for the relationship that the stories have with the wider debates and theories used to frame participants' experiences. This is important in producing explanatory stories of students' experiences that are not stand-alone, but are embedded in the existing knowledge and its frames. A written analysis of the life narratives of students with learning disabilities from the stories they tell, the contextual influences, and my interpretations of their experiences is then presented, with an awareness that there are multiple representations of narratives (Plummer 2001) and that stories are a representation of realities, not the reality itself (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). Denzin (2005) puts it as: narratives are a reflection *on*, not *of* the world. Questions that were considered at this stage include; is my analysis answering the research questions, and is the interpretation and representation of the narratives fair? (Fraser 2004). This raises concerns about who owns a story in narrative research, and this is discussed in the sub-section on voice in narrative research.

4.8.2 Presenting the findings

There are 15 narratives from students in this study. I use all 15 narratives but I focus on certain narrative segments as micro units of analysis (Esin, Fathi & Squires 2014). All the students' stories are unique, personal and individual, although not atypical (Griffiths & Macleod 2008). Therefore, I would have used them all, but I selected two or more quotations that clearly articulate a narrative segment under analysis. For example, I use excerpts from more than one participant to describe how they ended up engaging the services of CUADS. Where necessary, I give brief contextual details for a better understanding of that student's experiences. Practices

at the university, deduced from the feedback from academics and support staff members, are also included in the analysis.

4.8.3 Voice in narrative research

Concerns are raised in narrative research on whose voice is present, and how it is presented in the final text, in communicating meaning to the audience (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). The writing of narratives usually faces four major representational crises associated with social texts. One cannot help thinking of how researchers produce narratives as they make sense of (a) the “real” and its representation in the text, (b) the text and the author, (c) lived experience and its textual representations, and, (d) the subject and his or her intentional meanings (Denzin 1997: 4). The researcher tries to tell others of the (real) world, known from the conceptions of research participants. Hence, the produced or ‘end narrative’ should be presented to represent the world as lived and told by the research participants, as influenced by the environment, and as the researcher understands the stories. In doing so, I contribute to the construction and understanding of reality for these students, as the writing of people’s stories is not only about capturing their experiences, but also about constructing their reality (Plummer 2001; Smith & Osborn 2007).

The participants’ stories and my interpretation of what they say were merged to form a coherent story that offers an understanding of the students with learning disabilities’ experiences of university learning. At this point, I can give a disclaimer that my interpretation of the participants’ stories is not final; it is open to manifold interpretations; and neither are the stories a factual representation of the reality faced by these students. There is a concern for intrusion in the interpretation and presentation of participants’ stories. For example, questions are raised

on whether the editing of the narrators' stories is an intrusion by the researcher. Some form of editing is necessary, especially where stories are primarily collected for academic purposes. Part of that is the removal of possible identifiers for anonymity purposes because data should be analysed ethically with participants in mind (Sakata et al. 2019). Excess verbiage in the original stories has to be trimmed too (the original story has to be 'tidied-up' for a better presentation and to add aesthetic appeal to the academic work (Plummer 2001). Personal narratives may contain repetitive utterances such as *uhm*, *er* or *you know* that might not add value to the presented work (Coates 1996). These need to be trimmed off for better readability (Flick 2014). Rather than taking it as a form of intrusion, I regarded the editing of personal stories as an act of adding value to the story so that individual quotes read better. When punctuating the stories, I stayed as close as possible to students' original voice, words and texture (Plummer 2001) because language has the power to distort reality (Polkinghorne 1988) since there can be tensions between textuality/language and experiences as told by narrators (Clandinin 2006).

Chase (2005) highlights three typologies of voice in narrative research. The first one is the *researcher's authoritative voice* whereby the researcher's interests dominate the narrators' original position. The second one is the *researcher's supportive voice* whereby the interference of the researcher is limited such that the narrator's story is heard more clearly. The third one is the *researcher's interactive voice* whereby the voice of the narrator and the researcher interact to produce a final story (Chase 2005). I adopt the researcher's supportive voice and the interactive voice in this study where students' stories are verbalised and my interpretation of their stories contributed to the final narrative. I interpreted students' stories in a balanced way such that my interests and understanding of things do not supersede those of the students. However, the researcher's interpretation and analysis of the stories should be convincing and

reasonable (Plummer 2001), mainly through providing evidence from narrators' stories to support theoretical assumptions (Riessman 2008) which I did by citing direct quotes of staff members and students and discussing their experiences within the existing literature and the adopted theoretical framework.

4.9 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted as responsibly and ethically as possible to preserve the dignity and wellbeing of participants and to uphold the credibility of the study. The first ethical consideration was to get ethical clearance from the UFS General/Human Research Ethics Committee (ethical clearance number UFS-HSD2019/0038, Appendix 1). Amendments made to the title of the study were also approved by the ethics committee (see Appendix 2). The study was initially titled, "Exploring graduate outcomes formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university". It changed to, "Narratives of capability formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university". The focus of the study (to explore students with learning disabilities' university experiences in terms of capabilities) did not change though.

Permission was also sought from and granted by the UFS authorities to conduct research that involves its students and members of staff (see Appendix 3). A pilot study was conducted to 'test' the interview questions and check if the main components of the study are covered. What changed was mostly the wording of the questions. The type of questions asked was not exact for all the students as some narrations are so detailed that they covered the most important aspects of the study without needing the reference points to be spelt out. Follow-up questions

differed too, depending on how the story was told. The ethical aspects below were considered in the study.

4.9.1 Written informed consent

It is an ethical research practice to ensure that participants decide to participate in a study freely and know what the research entails (Bryman 2012). Research participants' consent (through a signature) to participate in this study was sought without coercion or deceit. All research participants were informed of the study through the information sheet and informed consent form (see Appendix 4). The changes made to the study¹⁸ title and recruitment technique were explained to research participants, pointing out how the study was developing from just focusing on the formation of graduate outcomes to capability formation. Participation was voluntary and free, but there was a token of appreciation (R200 shopping voucher) to thank participants for their contribution to the study. Written consent to record the interviews was also sought since it is not a good research practice to record interview proceedings without the research participants' awareness or agreement (Wang & Geale 2015).

4.9.2 No harm to study participants

Appropriate measures were taken to limit any form of harm to participants even though I did not anticipate any adverse harm effects to participants. I counted on the experience I have in researching sensitive social issues¹⁹ and trusted that students who have disclosed their

¹⁸ The title of the study was changed before data collection commenced in May 2019.

¹⁹ I have previously interviewed people who are living with HIV/AIDS.

disabilities were better prepared to talk about their disabilities. Nonetheless, I made arrangements with the UFS Student Counselling and Development office, where professional counseling psychologists agreed to provide help where needed (see Appendix 5).

4.9.3 Anonymity

Anonymity was honoured during the research process and will be maintained in other subsequent publications involving the data from this study's participants. The actual identities of participants are protected through the use of pseudonyms and other personal information that can easily link a student to the findings of the study is removed or disguised in the presentation of the study findings. Participants were also informed that they could contact me directly using the clearly stated contact details in the letter of introduction and the research advert. This was a way of trying to protect the identities of research participants.

4.9.4 Data/information protection

All the information concerning study participants and their stories is kept safe through the use of passwords on soft copies on my laptop. I did not work much with hard copies, but the available few were kept in a locked drawer of my desk before being taken home in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 lockdown that forced the university to shut down. Unnecessary exposure of research information to people who are not working on the research was guarded against. All the information that was conveyed to the supervisors was stripped of any identifiers in the fear that information can be intercepted by unintended recipients (Ritchie et al. 2013), especially since we shared most information online.

4.10 Credibility of the study

A sound and believable narrative of students' higher education experiences is produced, for believability is better achieved in life stories than validity, reliability or any truth claims (Plummer 2001; Bridges 2003). The reason for this is that my study is not measuring anything, nor gathering hard facts, but is searching for meaning (Yang 2011). I therefore sought believability through the way I collected data (interactive one-on-one interviews), analysed (excerpts of first-hand accounts of experience) and interpreted (a sincere and balanced reflection of what participants mean in their narrations).

Furthermore, my conclusions are based on rigorously interpreted data that aligns with the theoretical framework and the relevant literature so that findings are supported theoretically and empirically, and not through taking participants' stories as ultimate truths or factual reports of their experiences. It is common in interpretive paradigms for narrators to un/consciously tell lies, forget some things, exaggerate situations, get confused, or just to get things wrong (Plummer 2001). There is a need, therefore, to corroborate personal stories with other commentary sources (Watts 2015) and I managed to do that by fusing students' stories with academics and support staff's perspectives. Nonetheless, the value of the stories lies in the fact that they are first-hand accounts of individual lives that are presented truthfully. Therefore, the burden lies with the researcher to identify discrepancies, what is not being told in the story, verify stories if possible, and try to understand why the narrator said the things that were said. There can be a gap between reality and experience (Denzin 1997) and there can be a further gap between experience and the account of the experience as different versions of reality can be actively constructed during the course of the interview (Gubrium & Holstein 2003).

Researchers, thus, usually get structured and expressed forms of experience during the interviews that can be different from the actual life experiences (Gubrium & Holstein 2003).

4.11 Limitations of the study

Students' test and exam schedules clashed with the time of transcribing the interviews and 11 of the 15 student participants were Honours students who were busy with their research projects throughout the year. Hence, it was difficult to get students' cooperation on confirming the contents of the transcriptions even though they were cooperative in responding to emailed follow-up questions. On top of that, these Honours students left the university before the data could be analysed and theorised for them to participate in a group deliberation of the identified capabilities. Therefore, this study could only establish a set of capabilities from students' narratives, not a publicly and deliberated list by the students involved. This study thus opens up opportunities for further discussions on this subject matter.

4.12 Conclusion

The chapter outlines the methodology used in the study. It presents the guiding philosophical and methodological assumptions and the nature of the adopted narrative study and justifications for using a narrative approach to study the experiences of university students with learning disabilities. Three reasons for using narratives are pointed out in the chapter [personal — who am I and why I am conducting the study? practical — use of students' voices to anticipate an improvement in conditions, and social justifications, theoretical — contributions to new

methodological and subject knowledge]. All three rationales support the adoption of narratives in my study.

Methodological coherence is maintained by locating the research within the constructivist paradigm and the adoption of an interpretive approach, which suits a narrative approach. A further link is made between interpretive research and qualitative study as the research seeks to get an understanding of the nature of reality as narrated by the research participants. The main data collection tools that are appropriate for a qualitative study, which are semi-structured interviews (for first-hand accounts) and document analysis (for contextual information) also suit a narrative approach. The thematic experience analysis allows participants' narratives to be interpreted and better understood as this approach makes it possible to present detailed aspects of participants' experiences for multiple interpretations. All in all, this study is conducted as ethically as possible to make it credible. Empirical chapters follow, starting with policy perspectives from support staff and policy documents. I begin by presenting contextual information from policies and academics and then end the empirical chapters with students' stories for better coherence.

CHAPTER 5: POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents empirical findings on the policy perspectives of the selected staff members who offer disability and academic support services to students at the University of the Free State (UFS). Policy perspectives are also gained from the UFS documents associated with disabilities and teaching and learning to examine how policies are framed and enacted or not. Since the narrative framework encourages contextualised stories (Clandinin 2011) or stories with relationships to add meaning to experiences (Goodson 2001), policy perspectives help to provide context and a broad understanding of students' university experiences. The chapter starts with introducing the participants and the policy documents that were involved in this study. Discussions on the teaching and learning and disability policies follow, indicating how they affect students' academic engagements. The structural and other challenges that affect students with learning disabilities are discussed before concluding the chapter. The policy issues are discussed along the disability models that are presented in Chapter 2, particularly to analyse how the university's handling of learning disabilities relates to the Social or Medical Model of Disability. These policy perspectives will be discussed in later chapters along with students and lecturers' perspectives to establish congruencies and discrepancies between policy enactment (through students' experiences) and policy texts.

5.2 A summary of study participants

Five staff members consisting of two section heads and three officers who are directly involved with students with diverse needs at the University of the Free State (UFS) took part in this study. The initial position taken in the proposal of this study has to be reiterated here, that these participants were selected purposively as gatekeepers of the information that is important for the study. Their identities are not concealed because of their position of sharing the university's policy position as office bearers of disability and teaching and learning support services. As such, they are not held personally accountable for how disabilities or teaching and learning are handled at the university.

I further analysed ten relevant UFS policy documents that could be accessed at the point of collecting data. The policies from CUADS and CTL were selected according to how they relate to students' university engagements. Included also are the overarching institutional policies such as the current (2019-2024) Strategic Plan and the Integrated Transformation Plan, to establish how they address issues of diversity at the university — which is relevant to learning disabilities. All the policies are freely available on the university website, except for the ones on disabilities that were forwarded to me upon request, for example, the Extra-time Regulation and Procedure and the Universal Access and Disability Support. All the policies are UFS documents, except for the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA) constitution that is external, but integral to the management of disabilities at the UFS. HEDSA is a non-profit organization, comprising of institutions of Higher and Further Education and Training, which the UFS subscribes to.

As pointed out in the literature review, the UFS has developed an Integrated Transformation Plan that recognises disability as an aspect that needs accelerated transformation. According to the Head of CUADS, they are exploring possible areas where they can integrate disability within the activities on campus. The UFS (2018-2022) Strategic Plan also emphasises the incorporation of teaching and learning methodologies and inclusive practices. Hence, the university commits to creating opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, to learn and succeed with limited hindrances by, for example, getting inputs from the disability office to be incorporated into the institutional focus areas such as teaching and learning. Even though the policies are very informative and guiding, most of them are yet to be fully implemented. For example, the policy on disabilities is still in draft form. The university is currently following the HEDSA policy on disabilities which encourages advocacy against inequalities in higher education but does not strongly articulate teaching and learning. The (2019-2024) Teaching Strategy is also relatively new. The Open, Blended and Engaged Learning approach is still being phased in and the Transformation Plan is being implemented and as noted above, CUADS is in the process of working on integrating disability in the university functions.

5.3 Policies on teaching and learning

The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is the Unit that collaborates with faculties to develop interventions that benefit departments, and learning that promotes success for students and staff (UFS 2020). The CTL designs and promotes all the teaching and learning policies at the university, including those involved in this study. Its overall approach to students' academic

engagements and diverse needs is that all students at the university require academic support. As pointed out by the Deputy Director of CTL, “All students require some form of scaffolding or a bridge in their studies because we attract many students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are good but not always top achievers.” She further states that the quality of students that the university attracts is dominantly low, which is evident in how the university has lowered the minimum admission point score from 32 to 29 in recent years. Hence, CTL does not deal with disability issues directly, but generalised diversity among students (disability or no disability). It is pushing for the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in teaching and learning (explained in Chapter 2) that emphasise the designing of learning materials, systems, infrastructure and practices with consideration for diversity so that no student is disadvantaged in their studies (Camacho, Lopez-Gavira & Díez 2017). UDL therefore stresses that the design of products, environments, programmes and services should be usable by all people to the possible greatest extent, without the need for special adaptations or specialised design (UNCPRD 2016). The UFS draft policy on disabilities defines UDL as:

... when the focus of attention is shifted from the individual with the disability to the environment. In this instance universal access demands that the environment and society need to be more adaptable and flexible. (Section 1.9)

There would not be any need to attend to individual needs as with the reactive current approach adopted through disability accommodations at the university. Rather, every aspect of students’ learning would be designed to suit students at the periphery or those who run the risk of being disadvantaged in learning. For example, a student who is challenged by not understanding the mode of instruction adopted in lectures and a student who struggles to understand written text due to dyslexia should have their needs met by a teaching design that is inclusive of all students’ needs.

5.3.1 The proposed diversification of teaching and learning modes

The Deputy Director of CTL indicated that the Centre is encouraging multiple representations of information and learning material, both during a lecture and on online platforms. Lecturers, for example, are encouraged to post a recording of their classes on Blackboard²⁰ for students to access them at any time and as many times as they want, rather than just delivering face-to-face lectures. There is also an emphasis on the pictographic presentation of content, where pictures support text to enhance student understanding. The Deputy Director of CTL stressed the need for multi-modal teaching and learning methodologies to afford students options in accessing learning material. Multiple modes of teaching are meant to be useful to all students, regardless of disability, to provide for the different diverse needs of the majority of students simultaneously.

The university has further developed and is implementing the (2019-2024) Learning and Teaching Strategy to augment the implementation of the UDL. The philosophy underpinning this learning and teaching strategy is stipulated in section 3 where it is stated that teaching practices should be “caring, inclusive, flexible and of good quality.” There is also a commitment to capacitate academics and provide guidelines on how to develop flexible teaching practices and to implement a variety of learning approaches that are inclusive (Section 5.4.1). As such, CTL is working towards adopting the open learning philosophy to educational practice by pushing mainly for the adoption of blended learning so that learning material and

²⁰ Blackboard is the university’s course management system that allows lecturers to communicate, provide content and grades to students in an electronic format. Students can submit assignments and self-assess where assessments are programmed for such.

support systems can be available to students as much as they like and for as long as they need it. Blended learning suits different contexts, purposes and audiences (DHET 2014) because it allows different teaching and learning approaches to be adopted, as explained below.

Blended learning is a learning method that combines online instructional resources and face-to-face facilitated activities. It includes, among others, formal academic instruction, group and individual study, tutoring, resource based learning, service learning, and cooperative learning that involves both online and in-person activities as stated in Section 2.2.1 of the Learning and Teaching policy. Blended, open and engaged learning is being advanced with influences of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). However, research done by authors such as Dalton et al. (2019) has shown that there are challenges associated with the blended learning approach, mostly lack of resources that sustain online and remote learning. At the UFS, blended learning was intensified after the 2016 Fees Must Fall²¹ protests and the COVID-19 pandemic that made the university campus inaccessible. The university indicated that lack of resources was among the challenges faced by the university in implementing blended learning that involves online learning among other factors such as lack of experience to undertake online teaching and learning by lecturers and students (CTL undated). Hence, it might be that not all students engage well with blended learning due to a lack of resources and the technological skills that support remote learning.

Disability and other inequalities such as race intersect to disadvantage those with disabilities (Emmett 2006). Literature indicates that students who register learning disabilities at a university are mainly represented among the socially-disadvantaged people (McGregor et al. 2016

²¹ Student-led protests against the high cost of university education across South Africa (Langa 2017).

[United States of America]; Riddell & Weedon 2006 [United Kingdom]) who can afford to make personal arrangements that sustain online and remote learning. In South Africa, such demographic components among students with learning disabilities are not yet established even though students in this study's personal stories suggest that they are socially advantaged. For example, only one student attended a non-fee-paying school and there were only 3 black students who participated in the study at a university where 58%, 84% and nearly 100% of students are Africans at the Bloemfontein, South and Qwa Qwa campus respectively (UFS 2012). The socio-economic advantage of research participants is also demonstrated in students who can afford to buy modern sound-cancelling headphones or secure assistive software that aid studying.

Nonetheless, online remote learning can suit some students with learning disabilities. It can reduce the challenges of having students understand content under pressure by accessing online resources at their own time and for as many times as they want. Some students with dyslexia in this study reported that they face challenges in keeping up with the speed at which lectures are delivered. Others with ADHD reported that they struggle to focus in lectures which are often longer than one hour. Some with ADHD reported that they react negatively to crowded lecture halls. Students with learning disabilities, therefore, might find learning from home or anywhere else that is secluded better, because face-to-face learning does not always suit them.

In addition, people with learning disabilities often experience secondary emotional challenges and they struggle to cope with emotions (Sainio et al. 2019). This is something that most of the students attested to as they reveal that they often experience depressive moments that deactivate interest towards learning. Students such as Duncan, for example, admitted that he needs to be in the "mood for learning," stating that when he is "outside that zone" he "cannot learn

anything.” Duncan can benefit from remote learning in that he can access learning material whenever he feels he is in the right state of mind to learn. However, it needs someone who is disciplined to ensure that what has to be done is done because flexible situations lack a strict structure and routine. On this point, some students, such as Brenda, reported that they “struggle with managing time” and are often “forgetful.” Therefore, having an approach that enables learning to take place in different contexts, at the student's own pace, while using different media and a variety of learning and teaching approaches, can be beneficial as well as challenging to students with learning disabilities.

The proposed teaching and learning approaches aim to neutralise any reference to a disability or any other form of diversity in the learning and teaching environment. Therefore, differences and needs that arise from, e.g. poor-schooling backgrounds or dyslexia, can be catered for with standardised learning designs that are considered inherently sensitive to diversity of any kind. Both internationally and locally, there is little evidence of the practicality and success of such learning designs, and neither are there any studies on its successful implementation in the literature. A further point to consider is that the successful and effective implementation of UDL is dependent on the availability of resources, and some of the universities in South Africa can face the challenge of limited resources to effectively implement UDL (Dalton et al. 2019). Therefore, as the Deputy Director of CTL alludes, the UFS may find it challenging to effectively implement and adopt UDL.

5.3.2 The recognition of disabilities in teaching and learning policies

There is a lack of recognition of disabilities in the university's teaching and learning policies. There is also no direct reference to learning disabilities in the teaching and learning policies. Disability is mentioned in passing but without specific guidelines or actions in this regard. For example, part of section 7.1 of the Teaching-Learning policy states that the "UFS should empower students to reach their full potential by encouraging a rich cultural, social and ethical environment that provides for students from different language, cultural, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, as well as students with disabilities." The UFS' Assessment policy is completely silent on disabilities and it emphasises assessments that are not to be referenced by norms but by a set standard, without an explanation of how normative assessment systems affect different students.

Considering some of the comments and complaints of lecturers quoted in the next chapter, for example Lecturer 2, who indicated that she only receives information on blended learning from CTL, and not communication on how to teach students with disabilities, it seems that academics are not well-informed about the reasons why blended learning is being phased in. It might also be the fact that lecturers disagree with suggestions from the CTL to diversity teaching modes. Hence, learning disabilities are not explicitly considered in the blended learning policy framework, running the risk of overlooking students' needs. Also, since blended learning was proposed after the 2015 Fees Must Fall protests to save the academic year (Section 4, paragraph 3 — UFS Learning and Teaching Strategy), it can be considered as an approach that cushion learning in times of disruptions of academic activities at the university campus. That understanding can overshadow the fact that blended learning can potentially cater

for diversity and reinforce ideas that it is a stand-in measure to be adopted during disruptions at the university campus.

5.4 The Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS)

CUADS is an official Disability Unit that handles different disabilities at the UFS under the support services category. The Deputy Director heads the Centre, and has a complement of seven staff members comprising of Officers and Assistant Officers. The CUADS team coordinates support systems for different disabilities including braille production, sign language, mobility support and alternative test and exam arrangements. The Assistant Officer who coordinates alternative test and exam arrangements is also responsible for issues concerning learning disabilities. CUADS offers disability support through what is known in the academic disability field as ‘reasonable disability accommodation’ to students with disabilities. These entail responding to individual needs by adjusting the ‘usual’ conditions to suit the needs of students with disabilities so that they can engage with learning without disadvantages emanating from a disability. The accommodations approach adopted by CUADS aligns with the Social Model of Disability that advances the arrangement of society suited for those with disabilities so that they participate in social activities without barriers. In this case, the university offers support in the form of adjusted assessment conditions that include extra time, scribes (also known as amanuensis) and separate exam venues, among other services. It is a way of facilitating assessment spaces so that they do not disable or hinder students from succeeding in their studies.

The Head of CUADS provided some context into the status of learning disabilities at the UFS. She noted that approximately half of the students on their disabilities database have learning disabilities. The officer responsible for learning disabilities at CUADS approximated the number of students with learning disabilities at 120 in 2019 (during the time of interviews), and substantiated what came out of the students' profiles that the most prevalent learning disabilities are ADHD and dyslexia, or a combination of both. However, the number could be greater because some students do not register their disabilities for various reasons, which the Head of CUADS thinks would be a result of students "convincing themselves that they are independent enough to cope with their studies without support, or lack of knowledge of CUADS and its services". There is also the possibility that some students are not aware that they have learning disabilities because not everyone has had an opportunity to undergo assessments that determine a learning disability. The Head of CUADS mentioned that the university does not offer disability support after assessing poor academic performance. It only acts upon formal requests for support accompanied by medical proof of a disability and having undergone university evaluations by the set panel. Students should undergo medical evaluations to have a learning disability diagnosis as in section 4.3.2 of the Extra-time policy. There might be many students struggling with learning disabilities that are unknown or unsupported. Hence, the university has a facility for disabilities that can be unevenly utilised for various reasons, but mainly due to lack of awareness of the available disability support services. Nonetheless, CUADS, upon request, is instrumental in processing support for students with learning disabilities.

Upon further enquiry on whether CUADS is making any efforts to engage students earlier on in their studies since ten of the student participants applied for disability support late into the academic year (3 in the 2nd year and 7 in the 1st year). The Head of CUADS revealed that

CUADS has different student recruitment initiatives. There is an option on the UFS application form²² to indicate whether a student has a disability and they make contact with those who have indicated this. This recruitment drive solely depends on a student's willingness to indicate that s/he has a disability and it is the student's prerogative to signal that s/he needs disability support. Although this can be a useful initiative, studies show that higher education students may not indicate that they have a disability for fear of not being accepted into the programmes of their choice (Riddick 2009) or they do not know that they have a learning disability. Therefore, this recruitment technique might not be very effective as is evidenced in the number of study participants who only disclosed a learning disability after encountering difficulties with their studies. Some students do not indicate that they have a disability unless it is explicitly stated that the services are there to support them to learn on par with others, and not just as an indication of a student's disability. A student might assume that an indication of a disability is just for statistics purposes or students might fear victimisation that can jeopardise their chances of getting a place at a university. Thus, those with invisible disabilities, including learning disabilities, might not be forthcoming. A statement (on the application form) affirming the inclusion of students could be helpful in why the university is interested in students' disabilities. Taking this point further, I examined how CUADS facilitates support for students with learning disabilities.

²² I personally created a profile and accessed the UFS online application form. There is indeed a section on the application form where a student indicates whether s/he has a disability. However, on the online form, the nature of the support required from CUADS only appears after one adds a disability.

5.4.1 Facilitating teaching and learning for students with learning disabilities

The Head of CUADS reported that they only contact students who indicate that they need disability support in order to determine their specific needs. At that point, the head of CUADS stated that a student might specify that s/he requires audio material, a scribe or extra time. Then, CUADS assists with the application process for those support services, following the university's extra-time regulations and procedures. According to the Head of CUADS, students themselves state the nature of support they require. This presents the challenge that most students might not be aware of their learning disabilities or the other services that CUADS offers, such as scribes and recorders. They might only be aware of the extra time and a separate exam venue, similar to what is mainly offered at schools. These are the two services that all the students in this study are given, save for some with dyslexia who make use of scribes. So, to ask a prospective undergraduate student what they require without a list of available services can be problematic as students might only ask for what they are familiar with.

Further to that, the Head of CUADS claims that they contact specific staff members who teach students with disabilities to make arrangements for the classroom needs of those particular students. The officer responsible for learning disabilities stated that she personally informs the lecturers that there is a student with a learning disability in their class. This claim went against lecturers' and students' claims as will be shown in the chapters that follow. Lecturers indicated that they are only contacted by CUADS for exam papers and are unaware of the nature of disabilities that students have, and some mentioned that this would be the first time that they realised that there were students with disabilities in their classes. Students reported that they manage learning on their own as there is no support for students with learning disabilities during teaching and learning, contradicting CUADS' claim that arrangements are made with

lecturers for students' classroom needs. This discrepancy might be arising from the CUADS officials stating the procedure that should be followed but not what is practiced.

5.4.2 The UFS extra-time regulation and procedure

The UFS has an Extra-time Regulation and Procedure that they follow to support students with any form of disability. Approved in 2015, the Extra-time Regulation and Procedure provide guidelines on how to support students with disabilities that affect their academic performance. The Extra-time Regulation and Procedure document is not part of the CUADS policy document; it belongs to the Student Counselling and Development section. The Student Counselling and Development section works in liaison with CUADS because it has professionals such as Occupational Therapists and Psychologists who can assess the level of complexity that students with disabilities face. CUADS only has a chair in the panel meetings, with a representative role, and not necessarily a facilitator's position — at the meetings that are held at Kopsie Health²³. The Assistant Officer in charge of coordinating alternative test and exam arrangements, who is also responsible for matters concerning learning disabilities at CUADS, usually attends these meetings. CUADS is responsible for coordinating the alternative assessment programme by providing the services mentioned earlier such as a separate exam hall and individual cubicles for students with disabilities to use during examinations. Such an arrangement, where interlinked support services are not coordinated under one unit, can be a source of confusion for students, resulting in the under-utilisation of disability services as will be discussed in the chapter on the perspectives of academics.

²³ Kopsie Health, the campus clinic, is not housed under the same roof as CUADS, neither are they in close proximity to each other.

Lecturers often advise students whom they suspect of having learning disabilities to visit Kovies Health and students do not comply because they do not understand why they have to go to a facility for sick people. Students are not clearly informed that Kovies Health assesses their condition so that CUADS can support them if any learning disabilities are detected. The adjusted test and examination conditions that CUADS offers to students with learning disabilities are summarised in an illustration below.

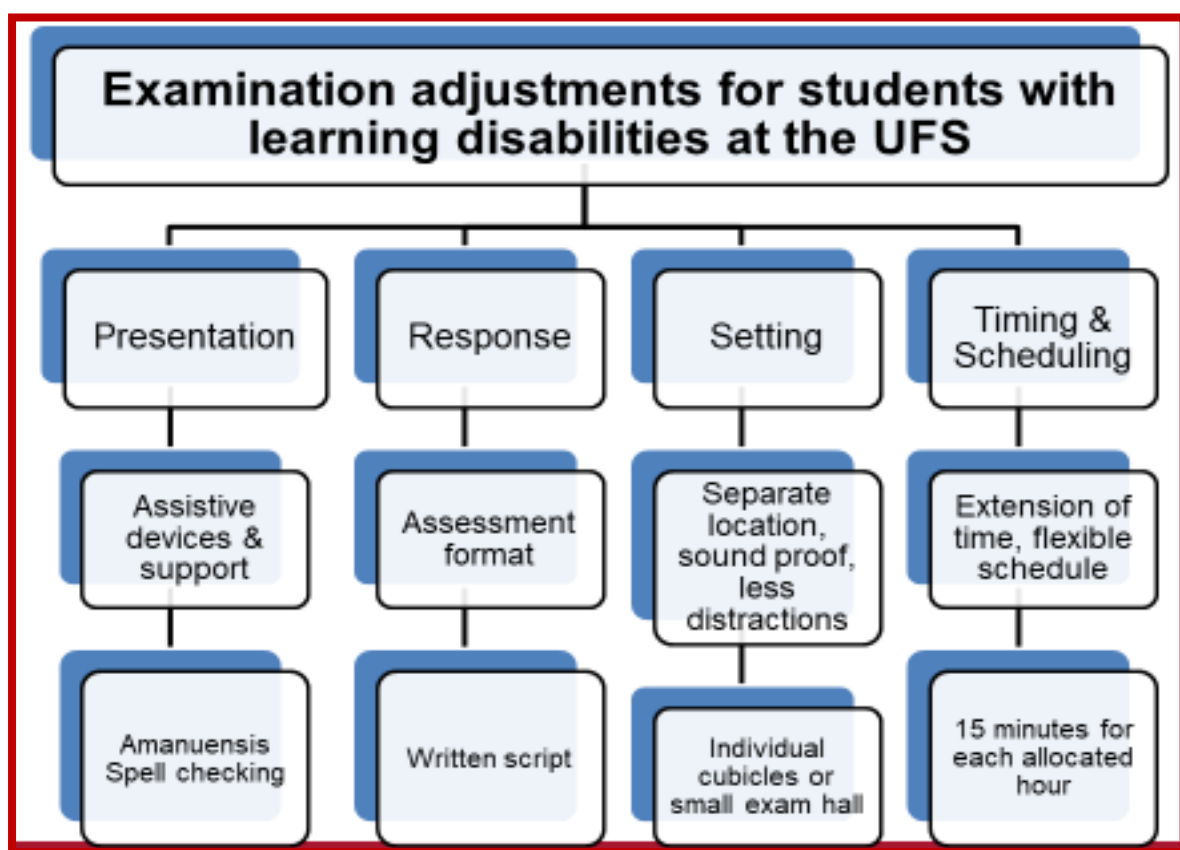


Figure 3: Adjusted test and examination conditions

Source: Adapted from Konur 2002, informed by the UFS extra-time procedure

Students receive concessions to have adjusted examination conditions in the form of 15 minutes of extra time per hour allocated to an exam, a separate venue to write exams in, individual cubicles and scribes who assist with reading questions and writing the verbally-given answers

from students. According to the officer in charge of learning disabilities, the exam hall accommodates only 16 students at a time, which the students find very helpful in optimising their performance because there are few distractions. However, the venue is inadequate to accommodate all of them at the same time as will be reported by students in Chapter 7.

A standard procedure is followed for students with disabilities to benefit from adjusted examination conditions. Section 6.2 of the Extra-time Regulation and Procedure stipulates conditions for applying for extra time. Students are required to:

supply supporting documentation, which must include all records such as psychological or other relevant professional assessment reports or medical reports not older than 3 months from date of application (depending on the nature of disability/impairment).

A panel known as the extra-time panel comprising the university's Occupational Therapists, Psychologists and a representative from CUADS validates the student's disability and eligibility for disability support by conducting different clinical and practical assessments on him/her. Section 7.4 of the extra-time policy and procedure states that psychometric and handwriting assessments are conducted on the student and the results determine whether a student gets extra time or not, among other recommendations that the panel might make. This is part of the process where the university applies the Medical Model of Disability to establish the biological deficits or impairments that are inherent in a student. It is a necessary part of the process to distinguish the extent to which a student needs to be supported. The medical components are necessary to support a diagnosis and intervention by the university (which then takes the Social Approach to Disability) by providing the adjusted examination conditions. Such response actions follow the basic principle of the Social Model of Disability where barriers that exist within the learning spaces are removed. The use of medical means to pave the way for a social

intervention supports the WHO's view of integrating the medical, social, and psychological components of disability rather than reducing interventions to only one model of disability.

Section 12 of the Extra-time Regulation and Procedure notes that examinations written at CUADS are invigilated and are conducted in liaison with the examinations department. The examinations are timed according to the stated time, but all the students in this study receive an extension of 15 minutes for each allocated hour on the exam paper. Upon enquiring about quality assurance and integrity around the use of scribes in the single cubicles, the officer in charge of facilitating learning disabilities stated that each session is audio-recorded. However, this does not remove the risk of cheating where tutors/scribes can just write down answers for the student instead of making sounds that can be captured by the audio recorder. This discussion could be expanded had the study's focus be around regulations, governance or quality and standards in higher education. At this point, it can only be said that CUADS assured us the examinations are managed well and students' answer scripts are sealed and sent to the respective lecturers for marking afterwards.

5.5 The university policy on disabilities

The UFS' disability policy is called the Universal Access and Disability Support policy for students with disabilities. The policy is still in a draft form and is expected to be effected in 2021, according to the Head of CUADS. As stated earlier, at present, the UFS follows the Higher Education (HEDSA) policy. HEDSA is a non-profit organisation, made up of higher and further education and training institutions in South Africa that collaborate to ensure equal opportunities for all students with disabilities (clause 3.1 of the HEDSA constitution). However, there are no clear guidelines on the practical ways to achieve equal opportunities for students with learning disabilities. Individual institutions, therefore, use their own initiatives in

dealing with disability issues. The policy states that HEDSA facilitates dialogues, networking and collaboration to create inclusive institutions of learning (section 3.1). There are no prescriptions in policy texts regarding the transformation of teaching and learning to have inclusive institutions.

A lack of policy is problematic because learning disabilities are overlooked in many learning spaces (Schabmann et al. 2019) and students and lecturers in this study substantiate these claims as will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. Students and lecturers' perspectives are based on this HEDSA policy since that is the one operational at the UFS. The UFS' draft disability policy is more comprehensive and it addresses teaching and learning which is pivotal to discussions in this study. However, the UFS draft policy is not yet effected for students and lecturers to base their perspectives on. To give an idea of how the university plans to cater for students with disabilities' needs, I discuss how teaching and learning are addressed in the UFS (draft) disability policy.

5.5.1 Teaching and learning in the draft UFS disability policy

The Universal Access and Disability Support policy for students with disabilities, as the UFS disability policy is termed, attends to teaching and learning in section 4.11 by stating that:

- a) The UFS will endeavour to make teaching methodologies and processes accessible to students with different types of disabilities.
- b) Universal access and design principles will be applied in relation to faculty instruction and curricula (including the content and design of training material, facilitation and teaching style, practicals, etc.) to facilitate integrated learning.
- c) The UFS will aim to improve the skills level of its staff — both academic and administrative – through training and advocacy programmes.
- d) Academic staff in particular will be trained to engage appropriately and equipped to deal with different reasonable accommodation needs.
- e) The staff of CUADS and Academic Departments will liaise to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities.

- f) Facilities appropriate to the needs of students with disabilities will be made available during assessments and concessions will be allowed, upon application and evaluation by the Reasonable Accommodation Panel.
- g) Special assessment arrangements will be available for students with disabilities.

Whether these commitments in the policy suit the needs of students with learning disabilities is something that requires empirical follow-up. However, point (b) above indicates a commitment by the university to adopt the universal access and design in teaching and learning which encourages multiple formats in presenting learning material and information (Kumar & Wideman 2014) where, for example, illustrations/classes can be accessed as typed text or audio. Universal access and design also encourages multiple means of engagement where teaching methodologies are not limited to only face-to-face interactions but includes online teaching (Kumar & Wideman 2014) or blended learning discussed earlier in section 5.3.1. There is the integration of services provided by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and CUADS because UDL is an approach designed to address disability needs in learning as well as the wider needs of all students (Cook & Rao 2018). The emphasis on removing barriers to access and usability of university spaces, services and learning material that is stressed in the UDL principles is a Social Approach to disabilities where most attention is given to the learning environment, not students' disabilities. Upholding equality through UDL also aligns with the tenets of the Capability Approach that stresses that every student is a subject of social justice.

5.5.2 The skilling of lecturers to cater for learning disabilities

The Head of CUADS addressed the matter concerning lecturers' lack of skills to accommodate the needs of students with learning disabilities. She stated that there is a commitment in the disability policy (see clause 4.11(d) above) to skill academic staff to handle the needs of

students with disabilities better, mainly through training programmes. She further explains that the current norm is that lecturers refer students to Kovsie Health or CUADS instead of assisting them with their needs, because they lack the knowhow to attend to needs associated with learning disabilities. The Head of CUADS finds this problematic and notes:

Lecturers, if they identify a student with a learning disability, they say go to CUADS, but CUADS is just here to provide support. The student remains your student and must be treated as one of your students. This is what is happening, that lecturers only refer students to CUADS, rather than finding ways to assist them. We are working towards making such cases end. (CUADS Head)

While lecturers reported not having any knowledge of handling learning disabilities in lectures, CUADS insists that the lecturers should help students because their needs are just like those of any other students, which are mainly content-related. The situation forces students to ask for extra assistance from lecturers, instead of lecturers delivering lectures in a way that caters for students' needs. Therefore, the UDL approach, if successfully implemented, might limit cases of students needing extra assistance.

The Head of CUADS stated that currently, lecturers are advised to allow students to record lectures and to be sensitive to learning disabilities as a way of meeting students' needs in learning. As it stands, lecturers are expected to allow students to record lectures, not necessarily that lecturers diversify their teaching methods, instruction and teaching tools. It is, therefore, the role of the student to cope with learning through the audio-recording of lectures, thus, reinforcing normative teaching practices that force students with learning disabilities to adapt rather than making the university fully inclusive.

Furthermore, students' concerns about lectures that are not engaging, are attended to in point 3 of section 7.4 of the UFS Teaching and Learning policy. The university commits to:

utilise a variety of innovative programme delivery methods and strategies, such as engaged learning, collaborative learning, experience-based learning, problem-based learning, reflective learning, community service learning, resource-based learning, E-learning, group work and directed self-study, which serve to advance lifelong deep learning.

However, students' narratives reveal that these kinds of learning modes are not (yet) practiced in their classes. Some lecturers also mentioned that they are not keen to adopt different or new strategies of delivering their lectures. One might view unengaging lectures as a problem that is not peculiar to students with learning disabilities, but these students are affected more because of the underlying psychological (depressive moments) and behavioural (attention, focus and impulsivity) that they report in this study. I further discuss the challenges students with learning disabilities face, with a focus on the environmental factors that stand as barriers to learning, and other university arrangements that are supportive in students' educational endeavours.

5.6 Educational facilities and learning disabilities

One of the issues that emerged from discussions with the students is the environmental barriers that make learning difficult for students with learning disabilities. These environmental barriers mainly include the set-up of learning spaces in the form of big, overcrowded and noisy lecture halls. The UFS teaching and learning policy (section 7.5) makes a commitment to providing learning environments that “create optimal favourable opportunities for learning and the construction of knowledge.” How this is going to be achieved in the context of diversity is not clearly specified. Section 4.11(f) of the UFS disability policy only states that a disability-friendly exam venue is provided to address infrastructural issues that affect students with disabilities. This is where infrastructural issues related to learning disabilities are specifically

addressed. Adaptations of the lecture halls to suit the needs of those with learning disabilities are not clearly articulated in the policy. As such, while the university addresses infrastructural barriers, it might benefit other students with, for example, mobility challenges where lecture halls are renovated to improve physical accessibility. Hence, when I asked the Head of CUADS what the university has planned to address the infrastructural needs of students with learning disabilities, she responded:

If we talk of the UFS as a transformed university in reference to all forms of disabilities, then something like CUADS should not exist. Everyone and everywhere should accommodate students' needs. Meaning that if everybody on the campus takes responsibility for students with disabilities, then CUADS doesn't have to exist. I am saying if all our venues cater for all the options available, then students don't have to write here, but they can write at any venue because there is a particular section at that venue that caters for them, instead of doing it separately. If we have a classroom set up, then it must be a set up that caters for all students to feel that they are accommodated. There is a ramp for the wheelchair users, there is a chair and a desk for that wheelchair to move into, visual and audio equipment is of such a nature that there are options for students to decide what they prefer to use. If there is a video, then there should be captioning and that video information should also be audio transcribed. So different options to accommodate all the students without referring students with disabilities to CUADS.

From what the Head of CUADS reported, there are currently inadequacies in the university arrangements such that CUADS is compensating for those inadequacies by offering adjusted test and examination conditions to individual students with learning disabilities. There appears to be a disjuncture between the enactment of policy and the policy text, which affects students' educational trajectories because the commitments to address infrastructural issues are not implemented. Hence, the Head of CUADS advocates for better arrangements to meet the student's needs, and from what she said in the above quote, the learning space has to be transformed to be more inclusive.

As will be discussed in Chapter 7, students reported that the physical space at CUADS is not sufficient to meet their needs. Regarding this, the Head of CUADS indicated that CUADS is

currently proposing to have more exam venues for students with disabilities. The Head of CUADS stated that they are liaising with the respective authorities to obtain space within one of the new buildings under construction (close to CUADS' offices) to house students with disabilities during exams. Such provision will address the complaint raised by some students that the present exam venue is good for its size, but bad for capacity. The Officer who coordinates exam arrangements for students with disabilities raised the same sentiments. She admitted that it is stressful during exams to organise the space for students to write in, as there are more students than the current exam venue's capacity. It is therefore difficult to manage accommodating 120 students with learning disabilities, plus others with different disabilities who write at CUADS, since learning disabilities are not the only ones catered for at CUADS. Therefore, the officer stressed the need for more but equally small exam venues to accommodate all students with disabilities without any inconveniences. Another structural challenge raised by students was that of big class sizes which is discussed next.

5.6.1 The perspectives of CTL and CUADS staff on big class sizes

There is a concern from students that over-crowded lecture halls make it difficult for those with learning disabilities to benefit from lectures, both section heads from CTL and CUADS responded that it is a concern for all students at the university and it is unfortunate that students with learning disabilities are considerably affected. The Head of CUADS regards the struggles with lectures as a transition issue, and explained that:

Big classes is an overall problem, not only for students with learning disabilities. It's a transition issue from basic education to tertiary. We find it with all our students, but more so with students with disabilities. They struggle to transition to university and they need professional help on that. The university offers such professional help on campus and also that is why we are focusing a lot on first

years in their orientation to the university for them to know as early as possible that they can get counselling on that. (CUADS Head)

The point raised by the Head of CUADS in a quote above supports observations that students with learning disabilities can experience similar challenges to other students at a university (Healey et al. 2006) although they are doubly disadvantaged because of the disability. However, CTL's response to the issue of big class sizes shows the predominance of economic rationalities in the institution with significant constraints to lecturers to attend to students' requests because of the work overload from servicing too many students. The Deputy Director of CTL indicated that:

I did a calculation sometime last year, where I said if you are in a class teaching 3 times a week and you have a class of about 1800 students, and there is not a big enough venue on campus. You have to repeat those lectures. We had lecturers repeating classes 5 times last year. That means, so you have 3 classes that you need to repeat 15 times. So, if you have to think about the impact that it has on the workload of an academic. Then, to actually sit with the student that comes to your office and says, "I have a problem. Can you explain X, Y and Z to me again". The academic is just likely to say that I don't have time, go and read the notes.

Overall, the university has recognised the challenges posed to the quality of teaching and learning through big classes and has instituted the CTL to develop the Learning and Teaching Strategy policy which currently applies to the period 2019 to 2024. The Learning and Teaching Strategy aims, among others, to:

Articulate an innovative vision and commitment to high quality learning and teaching and to develop approaches for addressing current learning and teaching challenges emanating from massification. (Section 2)

There is, therefore, an institutional policy on the challenges that over-enrolments are posing to teaching and learning. One suggestion in the Learning and Teaching Strategy (section 5.4) is

to develop flexible teaching and learning designs that enable both physical and distance learning (provided the provision of technological support is accounted for). Apart from infrastructural issues, I further enquired how the university addresses attitudinal barriers that can hinder students with learning disabilities from learning well.

5.6.2 Attitudinal barriers and learning disabilities

Section 4.12 of the Universal Access and Disability Support policy commits to upholding sensitisation and advocacy programmes towards reducing or removing attitudinal barriers at the UFS. Conversations with sectional heads and support staff at CTL and CUADS reveal that negative attitudes towards students with learning disabilities are rife at the university. The Head of CTL, for example, mentioned that:

There is stigma that many students with learning disabilities are not strong enough to enter higher education. As a result, many academics do not even think that a student with a learning disability is sitting in their class.

The Head of CUADS and the officer for academic advising mentioned cases where lecturers ask why students who indicate that they have learning disabilities are allowed to take up certain courses, mostly outside the humanities and social sciences field. The following quotes represent these sentiments.

But, the biggest part is the attitudinal barrier that we sit with every day. More advocacy and awareness is needed to break down that attitudinal barrier to be able to explain to people that one might have dyslexia or ADHD, it does not mean that one is stupid. One might be very intelligent for that matter. He or she was admitted to university because of his/her AP score. That should say something, and no one should doubt it. (CUADS Head)

We often have cases where lecturers take it upon us to explain why the university admitted students in Accounting or Chemistry knowing that they have a disability. We therefore hold conversations with students, trying to assist them

in managing their credit loads so that they can get their degrees, even if it means over an extended period. (Officer — Academic Advising)

Attitudinal barriers are commonly experienced by students with learning disabilities anywhere else (Denhart 2008) and can be deleterious to learning for students who are victims of such misconceptions. CUADS, in its disability policy, aims to conduct more advocacy and awareness to remove stigma within the university community (section 4.12) for students with learning disabilities to learn without interferences. The Head of CUADS explained that they are developing a more robust advocacy and awareness programme than what is available as part of the university's transformation plan. She noted that disability should be an integral component not to be overlooked in the affairs of the university. They are making efforts to make disability a theme that is discussed at the university on an ongoing basis. By doing so, they aim to change mindsets so that people become more sensitive and accommodating towards learning disabilities.

The Head of CUADS also stated that they are intensifying efforts to reach out to students and staff members through public dialogues, through participation in the orientation programme and through CUADS hosting information workshops for both students and staff members. On these platforms, the head of CUADS says, "We tell lecturers about all the different kinds of disabilities that we have on campus and we tell them about what the accommodations in class should be and the kind of support we provide and the relationship that we try to have with them so that we can support students efficiently." The involvement of CUADS in the orientation of first-year students and new staff members started in 2015 and would have been attended by some of the students and lecturers, but they did not attest to this. Only one member of staff who has not served the university for a long time indicated that he was involved in the orientation

programme organised by CTL for new members of staff. CUADS was part of that orientation programme, but he expressed his frustration about CUADS, stating that:

We went for training. There were a variety of speakers. I remember a question was raised about the issue that there is no information and no one tells you that you are going to encounter students who are like this or teach students who are struggling with this. I remember the lady from CUADS mentioned that it's not up to the university or CUADS to disclose the condition of the learner. The learner also needs to be upfront about it to the lecturers. I remember there was a bit of dissatisfaction and a bit of difficulty about that topic and I remember people were wondering how do we even know or how do we cater for students if we do not know their needs because sometimes students will not say anything. They will just die in silence, if we can use that phrase. It's something that was brought up. I remember, but I am not sure how one can approach it because the argument from the lady at CUADS was that the confidentiality of the student remains a priority. (Academic 4)

The lecturer regarded it as an attitudinal barrier emanating from CUADS (although it can be framed as a policy issue) when he approached CUADS for direction to assist a student and was told that it is the responsibility of the student to approach CUADS, not him. So, he saw no point in having those workshops if CUADS fails to give academics direction when approached with disability-related issues from students.

5.7 Conclusion

To conclude, there is an undertaking by the university to cater for the needs of students with learning disabilities through adjusted test and examination conditions to allow students to undertake their examinations well. The teaching and learning policies address diversity, but disability is mentioned in passing leaving questions on how this is going to address students with learning disabilities' academic needs. To have policies that advance making a university and teaching methodologies inclusive, but with no resources, particularly more teaching staff and training, infrastructure to accommodate new developments, and clear policies on how to

address diversity constitutes a form of institutional injustice that affects students' learning experiences. This may lead to the failure of policies informed by the Social Model of Disability, as it can result in no changes being made to these contexts and therefore in the engagements of students who are expected to benefit from the proposed arrangements. This is where the Capability Approach can be helpful as a source of information to develop policy because it offers broader perspectives where it does not settle only at pointing out students' challenges and providing services. The Capability Approach assesses and considers how students benefit from any arrangements meant to support students by taking into account students' limitations in utilising disability services as noted in the theoretical framework chapter. Lecturers' perspectives on students' learning experiences follow.

CHAPTER 6: LECTURERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON MATTERS RELATED TO LEARNING DISABILITIES AT UFS.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the perspectives of eight UFS lecturers on their engagement with students with learning disabilities and with CUADS, the challenges they face in teaching diverse students, and their thoughts on how best to deal with issues concerning learning disabilities at the university. Lecturers' perspectives also offer important contextual information to students' accounts of experiencing university education that will be covered in the next chapter. Eight lecturers participated in the study as described in Chapter 4, section 4.6.2.2.

Lecturers reveal that: first, they do not recognise and consider learning disabilities in teaching as they are not always aware of students with learning disabilities in their classes. Second, there are no formally instituted structures to support the needs of students with learning disabilities during contact teaching. Discussions with lecturers show that the support system for these students during teaching is fragmented such that each lecturer does whatever they deem fit, mostly out of the goodwill to support students. Third, big classes make it difficult for lecturers to cater for students' diverse needs even where they see the need to assist them. Big classes also make it impossible for lecturers to relate with students to promote knowledge production and academic support. Fourth, six of the eight lecturers feel that disability support is necessary and important, while two think that it is an unjust way of making students who cannot perform well get degrees. Hence, some lecturers misframe the nature of the support given to students

with learning disabilities as services that give students an unfair advantage. I report how lecturers interact with CUADS in the next section.

6.2 Lecturers' engagement with CUADS

All eight lecturers stated that they mainly interact with CUADS during tests and exams. CUADS requires them to send a question paper for each test or exam when they identify students with disabilities who use an exam venue at CUADS in their classes. After each exam, lecturers receive a sealed envelope from CUADS with students' scripts for marking. While lecturers are not against this arrangement, they complain that it is unfair for CUADS to engage them only during tests and exams without getting involved in teaching these students. Lecturers report that they need guidance on how to teach in a way that caters for students with learning disabilities' learning needs rather than just supporting students during tests and exams. The following quote represents lecturers' sentiments:

I see it when the assessments are done that CUADS sends an envelope (lifting one sealed envelope on his desk). That is when I realise that there are actually more of them [students with disabilities] in my classes. It's possible to have a lot more students that have learning disabilities considering that I have 700 students in one class. It's really not fair to have to teach without knowing of all this. (Lecturer 3)

All the lecturers acknowledged that they had encountered students with learning disabilities in their careers, but some were not entirely sure if there are any in their current classes, for there is no communication from CUADS to that effect. Most of them rely on their suspicions based on a student's poor academic performance until students disclose that they have a learning disability. The following three quotes (from Lecturer 2 and 6 with 10-15 years of service and

Lecturer 5 with less than 5 years of service at the university) represent lecturers' sentiments on this issue:

This year I'm not sure [that I teach students with learning disabilities]. In the previous years, CUADS would tell us there are students with disabilities and these are the types of disabilities they have. But, now they don't do that anymore. I don't know if it is a change in their policy or if it's a manpower issue. (Lecturer 2)

I used to get an email from CUADS about these students. Now, there is no communication on any students who are struggling. Now students come and ask for help, and we are not informed via CUADS, the actual university disability facility. (Lecturer 6)

CUADS says the students need to be upfront about their disabilities. It's made clear to us that it's not CUADS' responsibility to inform lecturers about students' disabilities because of confidentiality issues. (Lecturer 5)

The revelation that lecturers only become aware of students with disabilities in the modules they teach during assessments reflects a system that does not recognise learning disabilities in teaching. Students are thus treated as having the same abilities and skills in learning. There is an expectation from lecturers to be informed by CUADS of the disabilities that students in their classes have. As it stands, that expectation is not met and lecturers view it negatively because they feel it is unfair for CUADS to contact them only at the end of a learning process — and I add Lecturer 2's comment that, "... as if these students only struggle with exams." However, seven lecturers reported that they could identify a student with a learning disability through conversations with individuals who approach them or through discovering that the quality of the academic work is not up to standard.

Upon further enquiry on what the lecturers do when they notice that a student is under-performing, all the eight lecturers indicated that they encourage students to approach them if

they have any concerns about their studies. They however stated that students rarely do so. The following quotes are telling:

When I notice that a student has failed two or more times, I talk to that student and try to find out what the problem is. Obviously, students don't always come to you and disclose their disabilities, but some are open to say that they have dyslexia or those kinds of things. It is at that point that I hear some saying that they used to get extended time in high school. Then I ask them why they are not getting it now. They all say that they have no idea that the university can do that for them. (Lecturer 4)

Some students don't even know that they have a disability. They come to me and say, "Ma'am I'm a bit slow, ma'am I struggle to understand stuff." Then, you see in their tests, and after so many tests, that there is something wrong here. On the first test you might think that maybe something wrong happened. But, then you see a pattern of poor marks and you start to get worried. (Lecturer 2)

The above quotes show how lecturers can be instrumental in facilitating support for students with learning disabilities out of concern for their academic work. Unfortunately, identifying students who require extra support occurs later in the year, after a student had failed several tests. Such late identification and intervention can affect a student's self-esteem, resulting in a poor academic self-concept (Sainio et al. 2019). A student can develop a sense of inadequacy when failing to meet university standards or the social expectations within the university context.

6.3 Lecturers' perceptions of teaching and learning

The lecturers' views illustrate how students with learning disabilities are short-changed in learning. The fact that lecturers are unaware of students' disabilities results in lecturers delivering their classes with no obligation or conscious consideration of learning disability-

related needs. The major concern for lecturers is that they are not inclined to diversify their teaching methodologies, as highlighted in the quote below:

I never intentionally consider any special needs when teaching. I don't think I need to adapt to any need because I don't know what need is there to accommodate.
(Lecturer 4)

Three of the lecturers explicitly stated that they are not keen to change their teaching methodologies for the sake of students with learning disabilities because of associated work demands for inclusive teaching “forced on them without proper training.” Another lecturer indicated that diversification is not necessary for his teaching practice because, “My students who write at CUADS are happy with the classes and there is nothing special required from my side” (meaning there is no need for any adjustments in his teaching methodology). Yet, there are students in his department who complained that lecturers assume that everyone understands them as they teach. The other four lecturers subtly indicated that they care less about changing their teaching practices as evidenced in comments such as, “Students pass if they want to pass.” Seven lecturers who have been teaching at the university for more than ten years consider their teaching methodologies effective enough, judging by their work experience. Some of these sentiments are illustrated below:

We're afraid to change our teaching modes or let's rather say it's a bold move to do that. You have to understand that I have been teaching these modules for so many donkey years and I believe that I teach so well that everyone understands me and they pass. So, to tell me to do something else is formidable. (Lecturer 3)

I think that maybe it is also about the way we are transforming or changing the mindset of academics because I think in most cases, we are still very much afraid of shadows, if I can put it that way. We tend not to deal with change in a positive way and we're not willing to approach teaching and learning differently. (Lecturer 5)

I gathered from the lecturers that the common pedagogical practice is lecturing through projected slides. Most of the lecturers are convinced that this methodology works well, but one lecturer realised, during the interview, that his teaching methodology can be improved to incorporate ways that can address the needs of those with learning disabilities. He said:

My PowerPoint slides are up there and I speak about my PowerPoints. I am realising now, while you are talking to me, that I should do more. It's something that came as a wake-up call during this interview because we rarely talk about such kind of disabilities. I should think of whether my slides can be understood by everyone. (Lecturer 5)

Among the four who showed that they can stick to their usual teaching methodologies, three of them reported that they are willing to assist students who require extra academic support. However, they do not have the skills to meet students' learning disability-related needs because they have not been exposed to platforms where this is addressed. The quote below illustrates this:

You know it was difficult especially with that dyslexic student. I wanted to help him but I was new and never knew how to handle it. I just told him to go to Kovies Health (university campus clinic). (Lecturer 2)

In as much as lecturing styles are habitual and difficult to change (Brown & Manogue 2001), with more students with diverse abilities entering higher education, it is important that lecturers re-design the mode of delivery to engage with every student meaningfully. Doing so promotes active learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991), which Brame (2016) says focuses on developing students' skills and enabling them to explore their attitudes and values in learning rather than just transmitting information and imposing summative assessments in the end.

All the lecturers emphasise the importance of the availability of Kovies Health — which is pivotal to the wellbeing of students because of the physical and psychological health services

it offers. However, if it is not mentioned explicitly that Kovesie Health works in conjunction with CUADS²⁴, or if the design and offer of support is fragmented²⁵, then students with learning disabilities might not see the need to engage Kovesie Health. It appears, from both the students' and lecturers' narratives, that only students who approach lecturers with disability-related issues are made aware of CUADS. There is therefore insufficient cooperation between CUADS and lecturers, to the disadvantage of students who have to fail first before they get to know about CUADS and some might even never get to know about CUADS.

Lecturers' sentiments further illustrate how learning disabilities are not catered for in teaching and learning, as indicated in the following quotes:

There is training on diversity but nothing specific on disabilities, especially how best we can deal with learning disabilities. The doors to university were opened to all students without capacity and we now have all these students with different needs in our classes. I think some of the lecturers just passed students through because they did not know what to do and they started to treat them (students with learning disabilities) as special cases, which is not good. (Lecturer 1)

It is easy to organise that a student with a hearing or sight problem sits at the front, but what can I do for a student with a learning disability? (Lecturer 7)

There is not much literature on teaching students with learning disabilities at the tertiary level to strengthen this discussion, but this study's findings established that there are assumptions by lecturers that students are learning well, without them knowing that some are not coping due to learning disabilities (as will be shown through students' accounts in the next chapter). Inclusive education is therefore difficult to realise under such cases as lecturers conduct their

²⁴ At Kovesie Health, students are assessed for learning disabilities to qualify for disability support at the university.

²⁵ Where support services are offered as separate entities.

duties without much information on how best to meet students' needs. Hence, there is a situation where lecturers are not adopting inclusive ways of teaching students with diverse needs, but refer students to CUADS for support during exams. Students' learning needs are therefore left unsupported. Offering or intensifying disability accommodations during assessments can be interpreted as a system that is concerned only with the learning outcomes, not the process of or learning itself. The implications of focusing only on outcomes of students' university experiences can be negative as students' needs cannot be completely understood without taking cognisance of the challenges they face in the process of learning that leads to outcomes. While exploring lecturers' teaching practices, the issue of class sizes came out strongly as a challenge that lecturers face, and this is discussed next.

6.3.1 Problematic large class sizes

Insights from lecturers reveal that contact teaching and learning sessions are conducted under very stressful conditions because of overcrowded classes which, as Lecturer 3 and Lecturer 4 stated, can contain about 700 or 1200 students. This study established that big classes are a challenge to both students with learning disabilities²⁶ and lecturers. The major complaint raised by lecturers regarding big classes is that they cause heavy workloads that make it difficult to accommodate requests for extra support or even to think of accommodating students with learning disabilities. The following quotes illustrate this:

I have to admit that sometimes I walk into a classroom with plus or minus 500 students and I'm just trying to make sure that I teach and quickly cover a topic and get through it and leave because the conditions are not harmonious. I mean, 600, 700 students in one hall is just draining. So, I just teach and tell them that if you have questions come and see me. There are challenges around it because most

²⁶ Students, especially with ADHD and ADD, reported negative physiological reactions to crowded classes.

students don't come afterwards even though I encourage them to do so. (Lecturer 5)

When she came to me with a request for extra support, I must say that I was like, "Oh! I have got so much work, now I have to do this extra part." It was going to be difficult because I already have so much to do. It's added work. (Lecturer 3)

Just look at my desk. It's full with work that needs marking. There is more that need to be done in between. Tell me, how easy is it then for me to give an extra hand to a student, maybe more, who need extra help? It's impossible. It's always like more work to me. Academics are rewarded for research, teaching and learning, not additional support. (Lecturer 4)

The challenges highlighted above by lecturers regarding big classes are not unique to the learning disabilities context. The massification of higher education (Allais 2014) and the social inclusion agenda (ITP 2017) have increased class sizes to levels that are straining academics and the education infrastructure. If we rely on Allais' (2014) suggestion that the economy of education is in jeopardy because of big classes, there is reason to believe that this is a national (South Africa) or rather international (Altbach 2013) challenge that affects all students in general, and more so those with underlying disabilities. Students with learning disabilities can therefore struggle with learning under strenuous conditions that universities are currently experiencing.

Furthermore, even lecturers who have disabilities struggle to fulfil their duties in big classes. Lecturer 4, who has a hearing impairment, said that it is difficult to hear students when they speak in a crowded class. He stated that he needs "to see a student when s/he talks" for he "understands better" when he "reads a speaker's lips." In cases where he has a class with 1200 students (as he stated it), it is not only difficult to see the student, but also to hear what is being said when a student asks or responds to a question. Usually, he is not able to respond accordingly because of that challenge and he has to continuously ask students to speak up,

stand or come closer. Hence, big classes affect both lecturers and students with different disabilities in different ways. Nonetheless, I sought lecturers' perspectives on assessments since this is one component of learning where the university supports students, and also where CUADS seeks lecturers' cooperation. The insights of lecturers on this matter are discussed next.

6.3.2 Lecturers' perspectives on the assessment arrangements for students with learning disabilities

With students receiving alternative examination arrangements and lecturers being asked to send question papers to CUADS for such arrangements, I sought lecturers' opinions on it. All the lecturers, except for two, pointed out that they do not contest the idea of having adjusted examination conditions for students with learning disabilities because they see how students' academic performance is affected. Perspectives that represent this are captured below:

When one has got a problem, then they have got a real problem. They need to be helped at some level because people are not the same regardless of people saying that people are similar. They are not. (Lecturer 5)

People get disabled not because they want to. If there are ways to make higher education fair for everyone, then let the students get the support they deserve. I think what CUADS is doing is fantastic. (Lecturer 4)

Lecturers further indicated the usefulness of CUADS by remarking that the academic work of students who write at CUADS is impressive. They reported that they notice differences in performance from the time a student starts writing at CUADS. The following quotes illustrate this view:

But after I talked to him, he went to CUADS and by the end of the year he was a top achiever. Last year, a top student in my class was a blind guy. In the top ten,

you can also see that there is someone who is deaf, there is someone who is blind or one with a learning disability. (Lecturer 1)

I have known a few that have done very well in my modules. Probably not a few, many. So, CUADS is doing very well to make sure that students pass. (Lecturer 2)

Even though these academics' assertions might be interpreted as CUADS being there to support students to pass rather than having conducive conditions for optimal performance, they acknowledge the usefulness of CUADS. CUADS is therefore a functional facility at the university that is enabling the success of students with learning disabilities as acknowledged by these lecturers.

However, two lecturers object to the idea of students with learning disabilities being supported. They find no need for alternative assessment methods and insinuated that assessing students under different conditions compromises university standards. I use the following quotes to illustrate this:

I can't change the standards. Then you are not passing the course if you can't do what others can do. So, the standard stays the same and everyone has to write that exam in the same way, otherwise some students will be jumping less than others to get a degree. It is not ok to rely on support to make it through a degree. If you can't jump as high as others, there are other places to get a qualification and so many people are making a living out of it. You don't necessarily have to get it from a university. (Lecturer 8)

Surely, this is not a rehabilitation centre. There are other places for that. This is a university and every student is expected to meet the expected standards without any special arrangements. If you can't, well, then you can go somewhere else. (Lecturer 7)

Some academics consider that students with learning disabilities should not be doing the courses they are enrolled for because they cannot cope academically. By saying that students should be able to jump as high as others, it can be interpreted in the light that seeking support

is a sign of incompetence towards academic tasks. Such understanding of disability support can reinforce social prejudices that frame students with learning disabilities as those with low intellectual levels (Riddick 2009) and only make it through university because CUADS passes them. These are the same sentiments from those who refer to disability accommodations as giving unfair leg-up (Riddell & Weedon 2006). Hence, the perception is that these students' success is conditional and only rooted in the availability of support. The ability of a student is not recognised under such misconceptions as people disregard the fact that the environment matters for students with learning disabilities to perform well.

Lecturer 7 and 8's views on adjusted examination conditions for students with learning disabilities reinforce prejudicial comments that disability accommodations are a favour (Riddell & Weedon 2006). This view is consistent with Sharp and Earle's (2000) views who question the validity of alternative assessments in higher education for students with disabilities:

... universities and other qualification awarding bodies have a duty to ensure that their graduates do indeed possess, on graduation, the knowledge and skills which the qualification in question purports to demonstrate. To offer compensatory forms of assessment for disabled students would seem to violate this requirement, since the very principle of compensation is that those undertaking these forms of assessment are not required to demonstrate identical knowledge and skills as their non-disabled counterpart (Sharp & Earle 2000: 196).

Where alternative assessment arrangements are seen as compensatory, there is misrecognition of disability accommodations. Accommodations in the form of alternative examination conditions are recognised and recommended at institutions of learning as a form of opportunity equality (Hanafin et al. 2007) because students with learning disabilities learn differently even though they have the cognitive ability to tackle exams in the same way that other students do. After all, the alternative examination methods are not meant to be downgraded, but should be

an adjusted but equivalent exam, presented differently or else there would be misconceptions that examinations are made easy for students with learning disabilities to pass. This would then lead to associating learning disabilities with low intelligence levels — which is disputed as incongruous (NILD 2016).

The same sentiments on standards were reiterated when I probed whether lecturers mark the assessments they receive from CUADS (those belonging to students with disabilities) with consideration for the challenges students face. Lecturer 7 and Lecturer 1 feel that the quality of higher education can be lowered if they seem to be lenient to students with learning disabilities in their marking, as indicated in the comments below:

No, I just treat every paper equally. They have a special position there at CUADS, so it makes up for their challenges. I have to be very consistent when I mark because students' differences must not be catered for at the expense of quality. Otherwise, it would not be just or fair to give someone a degree on standards that are lowered. (Lecturer 7)

No, it's basically just a student as any other. The memo stays the same and we can't lower the standards. I don't even mark them aside from other papers. We combine them and then we divide them with my fellow markers and then we mark. (Lecturer 1)

However, two lecturers feel that they should be considerate of learning disabilities when they mark scripts as long as there is coherence and correct. Some lecturers therefore are more concerned with the correct content than spellings or presentation. For example, these academics said:

I know, a number of years ago there was a sketch. I had to mark the sketch differently for that student because the size was very small and the student couldn't make the sketch the way it should be. And when I spoke to the student and she could explain to me what was going on, I then got it that the student had understood the subject matter, but she couldn't draw it. (Lecturer 3)

Things like spelling are not something that can be a deal breaker. I believe that it's not something that I should be too harsh on. But the content needs to be correct. Something like spellings and spacing, I don't even have to look at it. For me, the main thing is that the content should be correct as similar to the one who is writing at EXR (exam room at UFS). But I am taking into consideration that I don't have to penalise a dyslexic student on spellings. (Lecturer 2)

A case highlighted by Lecturer 3 above, where a student drew something that only became clearer to the lecturer after explaining it verbally, reveals how important alternative assessment approaches are because some students' oral skills are better than their writing or drawing skills. Alternative assessment methods should be considered if a university is to be regarded as an inclusive one. It would benefit students with learning disabilities if there could be flexibility in the presentation of examinations because students with learning disabilities can "struggle to express thoughts in writing" and might "have the right answers only in mind, not on paper" as reported by Duncan.

6.4 Lecturers' recommendations related to learning disabilities

Lecturers pointed out areas that need attention for learning disabilities to be handled better at the UFS, especially in teaching and learning. Lecturer 1 indicated that:

CUADS should identify modules that have students with learning disabilities in them and we want to be informed of the types of disabilities that students in our classes have so that we adjust our teaching methods accordingly. (Lecturer 1)

There is therefore a need by lecturers to be informed of the disabilities that students have for them to accommodate students' needs accordingly. Lecturers recommend better coordination of teaching and support services is needed.

In addition, lecturers stressed that they need guidance on how to teach students with diverse needs, including those associated with learning disabilities. This is not only addressed to CUADS, but also to CTL that oversees the classroom engagements of both students and lecturers. The following quotes are telling:

Honestly speaking, I get communication from CTL based on blended learning and online assessments. I haven't really seen any communication based on addressing diversity in the classroom and also the inclusion of students with learning disabilities. I really need to be empowered on how to address the needs of these students with disabilities that are invisible. (Lecturer 1)

We need to be empowered. We are empowered on how to deal with issues of race and gender, but when it comes to disability, we are not. I think the first thing if we can be equipped on how to teach these students, because remember, someone who is dyslexic, even my presentations, they don't follow. It doesn't make sense to them. Now I need to be empowered on how do I make my class presentations, class slides accessible to all my students. (Lecturer 2)

CUADS should tell us who is sitting in our classes with disabilities and they must tell us how to help these students because they are the people with the best knowledge on disabilities. They are disability practitioners and they know better. So, they must give us guidance on how to teach these students. (Lecturer 3)

Surely there is need for skilling us when it comes to learning disabilities. They are often neglected and I don't remember myself being conscious of learning disabilities when I teach. (Lecturer 6)

Related to inclusivity and diversity on teaching methodologies, Lecturer 4 feels that strict action should be taken:

There should be honest and frank conversations on disabilities, asking if lecturers are doing what they are expected to do in the classroom in terms of diversity. Of which such conversations should be accompanied by action and monitoring, because lecturers, in the end, are the ones who deliver the curriculum. (Lecturer 4)

Lecturer 1 suggests that there should be space, resources and manpower to fully meet the needs of students with disabilities:

We are enrolling these kinds of students but do we have the resources to cater for their needs. We really need facilities to accommodate them. It also means the hostels should have arrangements for emergencies or enough rooms for these students not share with in case they need their own space. (Lecturer 1)

With the big classes identified as a challenge, Lecturer 3 recommends that:

I wish the university can reduce the classes. I think it is a good thing. We are chasing numbers and it's an issue because most students are being disadvantaged along the way. They fail to get the quality education they deserve. And it is a big thing. (Lecturer 3)

Lecturers also recommend a greater awareness of learning disabilities as they are not given the recognition that other forms of disabilities receive within the university space. Lecturer 1 admitted that he, and many other people, are socialised to understand disability as an impairment that can be easily seen.

I think we are programmed to think that a disability is only physical. We are programmed to think that there are two kinds of disabilities, mobility and sight, maybe even hearing, but what I have seen is that there are quite a number of disabilities and unfortunately, some of them you may not see that this person has a disability issue, and learning disabilities are one such a category. (Lecturer 1)

Therefore, Lecturer 1 is concerned and recommends that:

In fact my main worry is, "Does the university have structures to make lecturers at least become aware of the needs of students with different needs owing to their disabilities?" I think CUADS is not always marketed enough and the university community is not fully aware of learning disabilities. I think more has to be done in terms of awareness. (Lecturer 1)

Despite all the complaints and recommendations, lecturers identified the adjusted exam conditions as helpful. The effectiveness of such interventions also came out in students' testimonies that there are positive outcomes from CUADS' intervention. There is, therefore, a facility for students with disabilities that is very important and beneficial to students in terms

of opportunities for academic performance, but it has some shortcomings that lecturers wish to be addressed.

6.5 Conclusion

Lecturers' perspectives on their engagement with matters related to learning disabilities at UFS reveal a lack of recognition of learning disabilities in teaching and learning. The unrecognition of learning disabilities in teaching begins with lecturers being unaware that there are students with learning disabilities in their classes. It also extends to lecturers not having the skills to cater for students' needs. Big classes compound lecturers' inability to attend to students' needs for extra academic support where needed. Hence, lecturers are subjected to the university's structural conditions (large classes) that are not conducive to inclusive teaching. The narrative therefore is that there are students with learning disabilities at this university who might be disadvantaged in learning due to university environments and teaching practices that do not suit students with learning disabilities' needs. There is also a narrative by lecturers that students with learning disabilities are 'failing' students who need support, not students who need equal opportunities in learning. This stance pathologises students with learning disabilities and can influence lecturers so that they decide not to diversify their teaching methodologies with the view that it is the students who should seek support or find ways to manage their learning.

Furthermore, even though lecturers appreciate CUADS' offering of alternative examination conditions to students with learning disabilities, they perceive it as a way of making these students pass. For this reason, some lecturers might assume that whatever challenges students with learning disabilities face in the classroom, they will be compensated at CUADS during

tests and examinations. Yet CUADS does not do anything to that effect other than providing a supportive environment with nothing to do about how a student answers questions. Therefore, more awareness of, consciousness, and knowledge on learning disabilities can be helpful for finding ways to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. There should also be practical guidance on how learning disabilities should be addressed in teaching and learning to address the needs of students. The next chapter presents students' perspectives on their learning experiences.

CHAPTER 7: STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES' UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents students' perspectives on their university experiences and discusses the conditions within which they learn. I present perceptions of learning disabilities from students' own understanding of their conditions and how they experience learning disabilities. Students' narrated experiences are important in understanding how well they function under the institutional arrangements rather than relying on insights from the university policies only. This chapter demonstrates how multiple factors (biological, physical structures, social aspects and pedagogical arrangements) intertwine to impact students' learning experiences, based on what was reported by students. Hence, there is an emphasis on understanding disability broadly in relation to these multiple factors and that it should be responded to within that understanding. These discussions are followed by students' concerns on the non-recognition of learning at the university and students' experiences of learning and assessments. Further, the chapter presents students' perspectives on how they are benefiting from CUADS' services and the shortfalls in those services. The chapter also includes students' coping mechanisms and the forms of social support that they receive.

7.2 Students' understanding of learning disabilities

This study tries to understand learning disabilities through students' perspectives. Developing an understanding of how students identify with learning disabilities helps to establish their

identity around learning disabilities. Below are some of the quotes on how students understand their disabilities:

Let's be honest, there is nothing called a learning disability. It's a unique kind of learning ability. (Duncan)

Honestly, without trying to underplay my disability, I really do not think that I am disabled. There are students who totally cannot study without Braille or go to class without a wheelchair, but I can go to class. So, you cannot match me with those ones [with physical disabilities]. (Molly)

I always say that I don't have a learning disability. I just struggle with a small bit of learning. If you tell someone that you have a learning disability, they will think that I am dumb. I am not dumb. It just takes a bit more time and a lot more will power to do things that others take for granted. (Cici)

Why would I tell people that I have dyslexia. To a larger degree, it is a bit shameful when people realise that I can't spell or read words that appear simple to them. (Tony)

Upon further probing Molly, who feels that she is 'less disabled,' revealed that she prefers being called "a student with a condition that affects the way she learns." Related sentiments are shared by Duncan who views learning disabilities as unique learning abilities, to confirm how some students with learning disabilities struggle with a disability identity (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson 2005). The fact that people associate learning disabilities with negative attributes such as low intelligence (May & Stone 2010) can result in students resenting being associated with learning disabilities. If a student with learning disabilities fails a test, many people associate it with poor cognitive abilities without considering other factors, including lack of access to pedagogy that contribute to poor academic performance. Inflexible assessment modes is one example that can make a student struggle with tests and examinations (Orr & Goodman 2010) because of continuous failure to conform to the set institutional practices. This was demonstrated in Brian's case where he failed and left for a career in the hospitality industry

and later returned to the university. Yet, learning disabilities do not determine intelligence and these students can even be top achievers (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014) just like Frank, Sammy, Ziyanda and others in this study who reported that they are getting distinctions in their studies. Learning disability-sensitive learning designs are key in students' academic self-concept (Sainio et al. 2019).

Tony, whose quote is found above, feels uncomfortable with his peers knowing that he has dyslexia. His remark shows that he feels embarrassed by the prejudicial labels that learning disabilities attract in the education systems that privilege high intelligence levels as the recognised ability. Students who show signs that they have learning disabilities therefore attract demeaning labels associated with negative attributes (Riddell & Weedon 2006). Where people demean others, it reinforces the social constructivist idea that learning disabilities are produced by the failure to meet social expectations in education, especially according to who fails academically and what causes poor performance.

However, Frank and Sammy think that concealing a learning disability deprives them of the necessary support that is instrumental to good academic progress. Their sentiments are as follows:

I don't mind telling people that I have learning disabilities. Everyone knows and I am fine with that. If I had not disclosed to my friend about my disabilities, I wouldn't be at CUADS. (Frank)

I am very open about my learning disability. I am not shy about it. I am not embarrassed about it. I am open about it. I don't want to hide it. I tell people why I go to CUADS because in the past, it kind of disadvantaged me when people judged me because they did not understand how all of this affects me. But being open about my condition has been good because people now understand me. (Sammy)

On the points raised in the quotes above, it can be said that understandings about learning disabilities are varied and subjective. While Duncan and others refuse to form a disability identity in line with what they can or cannot do, others understand the need for disclosure for them to realise the necessary academic support (Frank's case) or to escape social ridicule (Sammy's case). The different forms of disclosure are engagements with the social and material environment through which they work on their opportunities to pursue their studies. With this study's focus on students' capabilities, which entails what they can possibly do or become, students' views on what they think they have gained from being exposed to university were sought and are presented next.

7.3 Students' perspectives on the value of education

While students' stories reveal that they have benefited from experiencing university in more ways than just progressing towards attaining a university qualification or having a degree in the case of seven Honours students, they indicated that what is most beneficial to them is to get an education that enables them to get a job. Students could not think of anything else more important than learning, passing, obtaining a degree and getting a job thereafter. The following quotes illustrate students' perspectives on what they value in higher education:

I think the number one thing for being here at the university is that I want to keep passing and leave this place with a degree, like having something that will actually help me get a job. (Liz)

I am hoping I will get a job one day after leaving university because we are not here for nothing. The knowledge we are gaining is actually power in itself. Doing a postgraduate degree makes my chances of getting a good job even better because I gain more knowledge and skills. (Sammy)

I got a degree. That's the most important thing that I achieved by being here. A degree secures or enables a good future in terms of jobs. Now I am doing my Honours and the prospects of a better future are bigger. (Ziyanda)

I really can't think of anything else I gained from being here other than knowing that I will leave this place with my degree in the bag and go straight away into practice, because we have already done our practicals. We got exposed to the real work situation and now I am ready to hit the ground. (Brenda)

These four quotes represent what all the students mentioned as the benefits of getting educated at a university. The economic value of higher education or human capital creation is prioritised as the dominant value of education (Walker 2010). Students, therefore, are accustomed to thinking first of securing a job before considering other intrinsic benefits of university education (McLean 2006). However, most of the students had not contemplated the reality of working in (learning disability) unsupported work situations. They aspire to get employed in their fields of expertise based on the fact that they are prospering in their studies, not considering that their success is anchored on supported examination conditions. The challenges faced by people with learning disabilities in work situations is captured by Fast (2004) who established that 4 out of 5 people with learning disabilities are unemployed or underemployed because they have difficulties in articulating their worth, securing and maintaining jobs that match their qualifications.

However, there was a moment of reckoning among ten of the fifteen students when I asked them how they would perform if their learning disabilities are not supported at workplaces or at private institutions where some are anticipating to further their studies. Brian, for example, admitted, "It's something I never thought of" because he is applying to pursue his studies at a private institution without checking if it offers the disability services that create an enabling environment as is provided in his current studies. Brenda, who acknowledges that she is "slow

in doing things even in practical settings” and relies on the extra time to finish her exams, only realised how different things could be at the workplace during our interview. All she could say was, “Yoh! I am scared now. I pray that God will give me people to work with who will understand my disability.” Cici, who is enrolled in the health sciences, came to the realisation that dyslexia might affect the way she performs her duties and had this to say:

It’s something that I am thinking of now. My job affects people’s lives. Like a person can die. What if I read a doctor’s prescription wrong? What if I make spelling mistakes in recording a medical procedure? (Cici)

The process of reasoning here is clouded by taking for granted that social arrangements are always supportive of their disabilities. Students assume that contexts will be learning disability friendly, yet this is scarce within workplaces (Fast 2004). The university should expand students’ capability for critical thinking and inform them of their opportunities and challenges for employability that will assist the process of reasoning, so that students can build their aspirations with consideration for possible hindrances. As it stands, and based on students’ accounts, CUADS is weakening this capability by giving students a false sense of security.

Furthermore, in this study, I had to probe about other benefits of education to students and they realised that there is more to the gains of education than they could consciously perceive. Students explained these intrinsic benefits in more detail than they did with regard to the instrumental and economic benefits. Here are their views:

I gained the ability to, I can say, self-drive. University taught me how to do that because at school I always felt like the teachers push you to do well and at university if you don’t do well, the lecturers actually really don’t care. Also the ‘fees must fall’ protest forced me to self-teach. So, I found it within myself to drive myself to do things that needed to be done. (Frank)

My perception on life changed for the better. I mean university changes your mental outlook on things that challenge you. I have learnt that I am capable of

thriving just like everyone else. This is something I never thought of myself because throughout my school years, I thought less of myself. (Tess)

I am better at personal relationships now. So, socially you also grow because you get to meet new people, different people, people of all different ages, races and religions. Before that it was like being with the same people you went to pre-school, primary school and then high school with and I wasn't really a people's person. Now, its new and different people and I have a few friends at least. So university puts you in an environment of diversity and you learn so much about people and the world. (Cici)

I personally grew, like growth in everything that I do. I no longer do things just for the sake of doing them. I now ask myself, what is the value of doing this? I now know better what is right and what is wrong, to differentiate how life can be. So, I have moved from being an immature person if I should say that, having childlike thoughts, to developing as an adult. ...I have also become a better self through the things I do here. I got a chance to do other things apart from my studies. I have taken a leadership position in the student affairs department, I am a radio presenter for KoviesFM (university radio station) and I am involved in the gateway programme (1st year orientation programme). (Liz)

I have discovered my voice. I now have a voice because normally at school teachers say you always have to listen to me, you don't have much of a choice. But, being at a university you realise that you have a voice. I can voice my opinion, I can talk about things and it's very nice to just feel like I can speak to another grown up as a grown up. So, I have learnt mutual respect. I also learnt that I am not less than anyone else necessarily. (Sammy)

Students achieved these opportunities for intrinsic growth and are yet to realise the capability for economic opportunities that they value as being of the most significant importance. Although some of these personal developments are difficult to differentiate from those that occur due to just growing up, students reported that they developed these personal growths when they got to university. Cici, for example, acknowledged that she might not have appreciated diversity had she not befriended people from other races and cultures at the university. Liz also reported that she could not have become a radio presenter or assumed student leadership roles had she not been at university. For Liz, radio broadcasting has even become an economic benefit that she had not set out studying towards. This is just an

opportunity available at the university as there is a campus radio station. Hence, other gains are embedded in the university space that students cannot consciously point to, but they are recognised within the Capability Approach. University education can, therefore be understood as a capability that enables other achievements (functionings). The study further explored the conditions within which these capabilities are developed and achieved, starting with how they experience learning disabilities.

7.4 Experiences of disability and challenges posed to university learning

The students' stories reveal how learning disabilities manifest and interfere with learning. They show that learning disabilities are real and have effects on how students operate. It is important for this study to highlight such personal challenges as they reveal the distinctiveness of students' challenges to require support under learning situations (for example, overcrowded classes) that seem to affect all other university students. In compliance with the principles of narrative research that place the voice of people at the fore (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett 2012), this study aims to provide detailed illustrations of the experiences of students with disabilities and how they experience learning disabilities in the students' own words (see Appendix 6). Doing so privileges students' voices to a wider audience and contributes to current literature, which in many cases is riddled with general and technical terms that might not make much sense to a layperson and tends to write over students' perspectives. Therefore, I gathered students' first-hand accounts of how they experience learning disabilities.

Tony, Brenda and Anna's narratives below illustrate experiences of slow reading and writing pace, difficulties understanding written text and poor spelling of words that is mostly associated with dyslexia.

I struggle with reading, I don't read with much grasp. I have somebody who reads for me during exams here. It's frustrating because I love reading. It takes me long to read and understand even simple questions. (Tony)

I can say that I am a bit slow when it comes to learning and understanding the things that I read or the things that I am being taught. I read and read and read over and again for me to understand and I need things to be repeated to me so that I understand. (Brenda)

My reading is very bad and my writing is very slow. My spellings are very bad too. There is someone who checks my spellings here, but they indicate on my answer sheet that someone has corrected the spellings. I can't finish my tests without extra time because of that. (Anna)

Ziyanda and Molly with ADHD and ADD respectively, reported high levels of anxiety and panic attacks as shown below:

I had to write my first exam in a massive venue, hall, with all the South Campus students. Just walking in there, I already started feeling anxiety. My anxiety also gets worse because of the noise, I couldn't concentrate. So, that exam I failed so bad, like in the forties. (Ziyanda)

I get overwhelmed very easily. Just passing many people coming to this interview made me feel very nervous. I don't like being around too many people. It unsettles me. So, it was very difficult in the first year when classes were very big. (Molly)

A summary of students' experiences of disability shows that they share challenges that are not too dissimilar and those with ADHD also experience the same symptoms as those with dyslexia. Even misophonia (a sound disorder) has symptoms classified under ADHD, ADD and dyslexia. Hence, even though a student can have only one diagnosed disability, 12 of the

15 students reported symptoms that overlap between dyslexia, ADHD and ADD. These disabilities can make learning difficult for students and they may not fully participate in lectures. Hence, students' chances of achieving educational functionings can be compromised where they struggle to learn. Students can thus fail to perform well and satisfactorily in their studies, particularly failing to finish tests within the allocated time. The effects of learning disabilities are demonstrated in more detail in section 7.9 covering the experiences of writing tests and examinations without adjusted conditions.

However, there is one student, Lerato, whose experiences locate her as an outlier in this study. Lerato's experiences of learning do not exhibit any signs of struggle. She was diagnosed with ADHD in high school and said she just wanted confirmation of what causes her to be "naughty" and "talkative". Lerato stated that she excels in her studies and passes her tests well, whether she writes at CUADS or not. In response to why she goes to CUADS despite getting distinctions regardless of where she writes her exams, she said, "I feel more relaxed writing at CUADS because of the environment." The difference lies in the speed at which she writes, which has nothing to do with the way she processes information — something that makes her an outlier compared to other students who require more time to calm down, read and understand questions, or to fix their spelling. Apart from the internal factors that affect students, discussions extend to external factors, starting with the facility for disabilities at the university.

7.5 The low visibility of CUADS

Students reported that many people do not know CUADS at the university and its physical location is hidden. CUADS is located in the main library and the directions to it are not very visible. Liz reported that, "I didn't know where CUADS was. I was walking near the library

and I said, “I heard it is at the library, but I just can’t see where exactly [it is].” Such sentiments are echoed by all the students as illustrated in the selected quote below:

Nobody seems to know and talk about the existence of CUADS on campus. Around Bloemfontein, I’ve never heard about CUADS. I was in res[idence] (on-campus accommodation) and also nothing [was said about CUADS]. Also, I think a lot of students aren’t aware that CUADS is not just for people in wheelchairs. (Molly)

This quote represents what all the students complained about CUADS’ low publicity and they are worried because such a functional facility is not evenly and fully utilised at the university. It has to be noted that students were speaking retrospectively. I am reporting what the students claim to have experienced from the year they started university, which is 4 or 5 years ago for some. Therefore, what is presented regarding the year they joined university might not reflect what is currently happening at CUADS. There is thus the need for triangulation of data sources so that students’ experiences are fully understood, not only through their accounts but also through other sources with a connection with students. However, I was curious to know how students ended up at CUADS considering that it is “invisible.”

Three of the students reported that they got to know about CUADS through friends — two of them after failing to get satisfactory marks as demonstrated in Frank’s quote where he was frustrated after getting 67% for a test for which he had studied very hard. He shared his frustrations with a friend who advised him to consult CUADS:

I didn’t say anything at first, but I later told a friend that I am unhappy with the marks that I am getting. My friend’s brother was actually at CUADS. So she said to me, “Why don’t you go and hear about CUADS? Maybe they can help you.” I then went to CUADS. (Frank)

Eight students were identified by lecturers out of concern for their academic performance. Anna, whose learning disabilities were diagnosed after joining the university, for example,

failed and blamed herself, thinking that she was not studying hard enough. She continued to fail but knew that she had studied hard. Eventually, she was summoned to one of the lecturers' offices as her de-registration date was nearing due to lack of academic progress. All she could tell the lecturer was that, "I don't know what to do anymore because I studied, but nothing is happening. I don't know where the problem is." The conversation led to a suggestion that Anna consults a psychologist at the university campus, and upon further assessments, Anna was diagnosed with adult dyslexia, ADD and ADHD.

Two students took the initiative to seek the services of CUADS upon realising that they were not performing well, as illustrated in a quote below:

I actually went to my lecturer and I said that I needed a bit of extra time because I could not finish my tests. I said, "Listen, I do have dyslexia and I do need extra time." Then she said I must come here (CUADS), but she didn't know the name, so I went up and down and I finally found CUADS. (Kristen)

One student, Lerato knew about CUADS after joining the university but was never concerned about failing because she was doing well. The other student (Duncan) knew about CUADS in grade nine during CUADS' community outreach visit to his school. The majority of the students struggled to achieve satisfactory results before they could engage the services of CUADS and they reported that they never knew about CUADS before joining the university. Kristen reported that, "I thought at a university, people just struggle on their own. When I joined this university, I was prepared to struggle." Tess also reported that, "When I applied, I didn't know about CUADS. I didn't know there is a thing like that." Hence, students did not seek disability support early enough and they ended up failing because they were writing tests and examinations under conditions that were not supportive of learning disabilities.

Frank's experience of passing, but with unsatisfactory marks, confirms the discrepancy between potential and ability (NILD 2018) that is common in students with learning disabilities

where one cannot optimise their potential to the fullest because of non-conducive learning environments. Thus, a student's best performance cannot be good enough for him/her or for the expected standard for that particular academic task. It is therefore necessary for universities to consider creating conditions that support students' needs. Kristen's perception that she could cope with university work without disability support is identified as common among university students with learning disabilities (Lombardi, Murray & Gerdes 2012) but is ruinous because students end up failing. However, students' lack of awareness of support systems at the university confirms CUADS' invisibility to the community from where it draws its students. There is a service disjuncture between the university and the community that needs to be attended to.

Even though lecturers can be instrumental in facilitating the process leading to students getting support (as noted in the previous chapter), this happens after some time into the semester when a student had already failed several tests. This could have been avoided had the students been made aware of disability services at the onset of their university studies or had there been proper coordination of services such that disability support is not detached from teaching and learning functions. So, as the case of Anna shows, learning disabilities are sometimes recognised after courses have begun and have been informed by assessment results. The effects can be ruinous and students can develop negative self-images when they face continuous failure in their studies (Chapman & Tunmer 2003). Students can also be stigmatised by others who expect them to perform better. So, students move from being "failing" students to being "students with learning disabilities" in the eyes of the lecturers who refer failing students to Kopsie Health for assessments. This sparked an interest in examining whether learning disabilities are recognised at the university.

7.6 Low recognition of learning disabilities at the university

Students reported that the recognition of learning disabilities by the university community (peers and staff members) is low. Students' general observation is that people associate disabilities with only those that are visible. The same sentiments are maintained by lecturers, including Lecturer 1 cited in section 6.4 in the previous chapter. The low recognition of learning disabilities can make it difficult, for example, for lecturers to appreciate the needs of students with learning disabilities because, as Ziyanda remarked, "People think you have to see a disability for there to be a disability." Students with learning disabilities are therefore not recognised as disabled by those who expect to see the physical manifestations. There were also revelations that students who are intelligent or are doing 'challenging courses' are not believed to have learning disabilities. Students echo their concerns in the quotes below:

Just because I am not blind or in a wheelchair, when they see me going to CUADS, they think that I am putting on a show. It's strange to my friends and lecturers. I have been judged and people think I am dramatic. People say, "No, you always get 80s, why are you even at CUADS?" Whereas, I don't know how to explain it. It's just my body that reacts to stressful environments. I perform well academically so people don't understand how I can academically do well and stress at the same time. (Sammy)

One day I was going to CUADS, neh! The security guard told me, "You can't go there, you're not disabled." (Duncan)

One day my friend asked me to spell a word and I couldn't. I asked her why she is asking a dyslexic person to spell a word, and everyone laughed. They didn't believe that I couldn't spell the word 'dissection' and they thought I was joking about this dyslexic thing. (Tess)

As confirmed by students' narratives, the invisible nature of learning disabilities contributes to wrong assumptions, misconstructions and even their mismanagement (Hadley et al. 2020). As noted in the quotes above, people expect one to be evidently disabled to recognise a disability.

Learning disabilities are not immediately apparent and there are no visible support aids such as wheelchairs for one to be easily identified as disabled. Without visible aids, it is difficult for others to know that one has a disability. It is therefore likely that students with learning disabilities' learning and teaching needs are not immediately recognised, as pointed out by the lecturers and also as discussed from students' accounts in the next section.

There is an assumption associated with this misconception that students with learning disabilities cannot do certain courses. Ziyanda, Tess and Brenda, cited below, represent the sentiments of nine of the students in the faculties of Health or Natural Sciences who complained that lecturers have difficulties recognising that students with learning disabilities can study science-related courses:

He put it to me like, "If you go to CUADS, why are you doing Maths, why are you doing Chemistry, why are you doing these sciences?" You know, I just stood there shocked and then I went to the Head of Department and asked to be removed from that class. (Ziyanda)

When it comes to sciences, some lecturers are just too smart to convey information properly, and that's hard. That's hard to have to teach yourself and figure out things yourself. Most of the time lecturers rush information through and before you know it, you are writing a test. (Tess)

University is very challenging because I am very slow when it comes to learning and also doing things practically. Things that people do in 15 minutes I take 25 minutes and it's tough with dyslexia to understand things, especially with the level of teaching here. Everything is fast and I get lost in the lecture. (Brenda)

7.7 University experiences of teaching and learning

Students' experiences of lectures reveal the challenges they face. They admit that it is difficult to benefit from lectures because learning disabilities are rarely considered in teaching. As

expressed by Liz, “Nothing really happens [in the lecture]. You go to class, you learn on your own.” Also, students reported, and the university policies indicate that disability accommodations are intensified²⁷ during assessments, leaving the greater part of learning unsupported. Most students with learning disabilities therefore struggle with learning without any support.

Among the problematic learning arrangements identified by students are big class sizes. For example, 11 of the 12²⁸ students with attention deficits complained of poor interference control as they get distracted easily in big classes. They complain that the class sizes are unfavourable for them to function at their best because they concentrate more on the sounds around them than on what the lecturer is saying, as remarked in the following quotes:

I must say first year was incredibly tough because we were 800 students. Some were sitting on the floor. I couldn’t learn anything because of that. (Frank)

When I got to university, I realised that the classes are much bigger than they were in high school and my condition is worse when I am around people. So, I was even more determined to get out of lectures. It is better now because we are now few (Tamara)

The quote from Tamara, who has concentration problems, reveals how the classroom set-up was a challenge when she joined the university. Her determination to get out of the crowded classes rather than to sit and fight how her body was responding to her surroundings is a challenge faced by students with ADD and ADHD and as a consequence, they skip classes because they do not have control over how their bodies react to people and stressful situations.

²⁷ Students can use the facilities at CUADS to study and also one of the participants has a tutor who helps him with academic work throughout each semester. Hence, it is not fair to say that accommodations are only available during tests and examinations.

²⁸ The number includes those with ADHD and ADD.

The lecture hall setting makes it even more problematic because so many different people make different noises at different times.

Among the reported symptoms of learning disabilities are high distraction levels and poor concentration as indicated below by Frank who has dyslexia, ADHD and dyscalculia, and Anna who has dyslexia and ADD:

My attention is very bad to the extent that if someone just clicks a pen, my attention goes there. Then I stop listening to the lecturer, and if it happens three or four times, I lose all attention. (Frank)

I worry a lot about sounds and what people around me are doing. If someone gets up, my eyes and mind go there and leave the lecture completely. After some time, I get back to the lecture. And then, if someone moves again, I go there as well and lose the lecturer again. It's bad because I take long to get my attention back. (Anna)

The captured accounts below indicate that some students lose interest in long lectures or they stop concentrating after some time. Students used terms such as; "I get bored" (Duncan), "I lose interest" (Liz), "It's torture to sit through two and half hours of class" (Brian), "My mind shuts down after forty-five minutes" (Tess), "I am with the lecturer, but I have lost him" (Ziyanda), "I can't function that long" (Kristen), and "I end up hearing only sounds, not the actual words of a lecturer" (Liz). The long duration of lectures, which students say can take up to 2 hours, is therefore problematic for some students with learning disabilities.

The challenge of big classes raised by students does not dispute versions from the available literature. Allais (2014) notes that the first-year classes are very large in South Africa due to massification in higher education, to include those who are or were previously marginalised. Classes can have 600 and more students, making teaching and learning difficult for both students and lecturers (Allais 2014). Particularly, big class sizes cause difficulties for students

to make relationships with lecturers (regardless of disabilities) (Allais 2014). Sammy highlights that she, “Does not want to be known just as student number 2015 blah, blah, blah, blah.” She says she needs a relationship with lecturers because, “If they know who I really am, including my challenges, then they tend to be much more accommodating.” Hence, Sammy needs an environment where she can freely talk about her learning disability and how she can be supported. But, students and existing literature (Hassel & Ridout 2018) reveal the challenges of establishing such relationships in big classes. Concerning the six students who attended private schools and the two from special schools, they reported struggling to cope because they were used to classes with smaller student-teacher ratios where they received a higher level of attention on any area of need.

7.8 Pedagogical arrangements at the university

Apart from students complaining about the lecture-hall setting, overcrowded and noisy classes, they also raised concerns over the teaching and learning process. Students, particularly those with dyslexia, reported that the way they are taught is not attentive to learning disabilities because the lecturers progress at a very fast pace and they assume that everyone understands them at the pace they teach. Students blame lecturers for being bad at delivering lectures and wish for teaching methods that will enable them to learn without necessarily having to listen to a lecturer physically.

While several studies, including that of Uleanya and Gamede (2017), indicate that students without learning disabilities experience challenges such as lecturers speaking too fast or not understanding the lecture, those with learning disabilities have additional challenges that are likely to exacerbate the situation. The pace at which they process information due to possible

poor auditory and visual perception (Understood.org 2019) can be a cause for difficulties experienced in understanding lectures. Of the eight students with dyslexia, five of them reported that there are times they only hear sounds, not the actual words of the lecturer, such that they end up day-dreaming in a lecture. As noted in the Understood.org (2019) fact sheet on learning disabilities, some students struggle to process auditory messages correctly and they cannot rely on memory. Hence, expecting students to learn by listening and memorisation is not helpful to most of these students. This is different, for example, in cases where students cannot understand a lecture on account of struggling with the language of instruction. Wajuihian and Naidoo (2011) and NILD (2016) state that disorders emanating from learning disabilities can occur despite having normal intelligence, appropriate educational opportunities and the absence of emotional disorders. Hence, even intelligent students can struggle with the things that others can understand easily, or they can struggle more than others who are encountering the same problems.

The blended learning methodology discussed in Chapter 5 that enables online remote learning can suit some students with learning disabilities. It can reduce the challenges of having students understand content under pressure by accessing online resources at their own time and for as many times as they want. As noted in this chapter, some students with dyslexia in this study reported that they face challenges in keeping up with the speed at which lectures are delivered. Some with ADHD reported that they struggle to focus in lectures which are often longer than one hour because they cannot sustain concentration for that long. Others complained that they react negatively to crowded lecture halls. Students with learning disabilities therefore might find it better to learn from home, or anywhere else that is secluded because face-to-face learning pose challenges to them. In addition, people with learning disabilities often experience secondary emotional challenges and they struggle to cope with emotions (Sainio et al. 2019).

This is something that most of the students attested to as they reveal that they often experience depressive moments that deactivate interest in learning. Students such as Duncan, for example, admitted that he needs to be in the “mood for learning”, stating that when he is “outside that zone,” he cannot learn anything. Duncan’s concerns show that he can benefit from remote learning for he can access learning material whenever he feels he is in the right state of mind to learn. However, it needs someone who is disciplined to ensure that what has to be done is done because flexible situations lack a strict structure and routine. On this point, some students, such as Brenda, reported that they “struggle with managing time” and are often “forgetful.” Therefore, having an approach that enables learning to take place in different contexts, at the student's own pace, while using different media and a variety of learning and teaching approaches can be beneficial as well as challenging to students with learning disabilities. Students’ challenges also extend to assessments, as detailed next.

7.9 Students’ experiences of assessments without adjusted conditions

Students’ stories reveal experiences of struggle with tests and examinations when they wrote under ordinary or usual exam conditions. As noted in students’ profiles, 10 of the 12 students attempted to write tests without support and they did not do well. Brian’s story demonstrates how he struggled with tests and examinations and is used to illustrate this. Brian, who experiences both the symptoms of dyslexia and ADHD, says he cannot read, write and spell well. He also struggles with body impulses that make it difficult for him to sit still and focus for long. As such, Brian struggles to finish his work under standard examination conditions. Some contextual information in the extract below can help us to understand Brian’s position:

I had fear each time I needed to read or write something because I knew that I cannot do that. It’s something that was reinforced in me from a young age that,

“You cannot read, you cannot write, you are not good enough.” I feared writing tests because it meant that I needed to read and write. Any test was incredibly stressful for me because I knew that I was going to make mistakes and fail. So, this whole education system made me feel invalid. It made me feel that I was sub-human because I couldn’t interface with the system. I thought I was a total failure. (Brian)

Brian failed on his first attempt of university education and left for a career in the hospitality industry where he says he did very well with the practical assessments. He returned to the university six years later feeling confident after successfully completing his hospitality studies, wrote tests under usual conditions and failed. It was through the advice from one of his lecturers that he later engaged CUADS. Brian stated that:

No matter how much effort I tried to put in, I would get nothing right on that answer sheet. I wrote my first tests at the normal venue and failed dismally.

All ten students who did not engage CUADS at the onset of their university studies experienced failure as we noted earlier in Ziyanda’s story of writing her first test in an overcrowded venue. Apart from those who struggle with exams that need to be read and written, some struggle with how they are assessed. Anna and Duncan prefer oral assessments because they can express ideas more clearly verbally than in written form. Anna’s spellings are very bad and when writing, her ideas do not flow as well as they do when she speaks. Duncan reported that his body and mind do not operate concurrently. Therefore, the speed at which Duncan thinks does not match the speed at which those thoughts are delivered on paper. Their experiences are described here:

I struggle with writing. In fact I can’t write and so I have a writer who writes down everything I tell her when I am answering a question. But, the main problem is that if I write, I miss a lot of information because my thinking and my talking do not correspond. So what I am supposed to write, I (would have) already thought of 2 minutes ago and then I already have new thoughts by the time I try to write it down.

So, there is a lot of things that cannot be on the paper but I (would) have (thought of) the correct answers. (Duncan)

I really wish that all the tests were oral. I have no problem with speaking. People think that I am very talkative because I have no problems saying what I want to say. But, writing is a challenge because I cannot write a full sentence without mistakes. (Anna)

Discrepancies between ability and achievement noted in the literature (NILD 2016) are confirmed in Duncan's narrative because what he thinks and what is presented on paper is different. Duncan can, therefore, fail a test, not because he does not know the answers, but because he cannot adequately convey his thoughts on paper because of the poor coordination between his brain and his hands. Therefore, inflexible assessment methods can leave students with learning disabilities at a disadvantage, yet, they can do better if, for example, they have to be assessed orally (viva voce) rather than through written assessments. The way the assessment system (in the departments where students are based) is structured to consider a written final examination as a determination of what a pass or a fail is, is not designed with consideration for students with learning disabilities. There is an option, at the university, for lecturers to structure tests using online platforms (Blackboard tests and Question mark tests) but lecturers in the departments where the research participants are based prefer paper tests.

7.10 The value of CUADS based on students' narratives

CUADS is reported as creating an environment that enables students to perform well academically and to realise personal growth that promotes wellbeing in the broader life experiences of students. There is an understanding from students' stories that those who failed before engaging CUADS did so not because they have low intelligence levels, but because they

lacked an environment sufficiently supportive of their needs. Students' perspectives on this matter are represented below:

Your whole environment has an impact on your potential, not this medicine. People don't realise that a supportive environment makes such a big difference. If you have to write with about 500 students compared to 20. It's a big difference for someone like me with ADHD. I feel automatically comfortable. Although I am still nervous, the environment is not feeding that nervousness. It's taking it away. And CUADS does that for me 100%. I can function 100%. (Ziyanda)

When I started to write my tests at CUADS), I had a jump of 50% in my marks. My average shot from like 40 to 80%. It was the first time in my life that I had such good marks. It was just amazing to see CUADS making such a difference in my life. (Brian)

I will be honest, I wouldn't have obtained my degree with a distinction without CUADS. My average used to be around 60% before I started writing at CUADS, and ever since I started writing at CUADS my average is around 85%. Honestly, I wouldn't have done this without CUADS. (Frank)

The stories cited above are not unique. The other students (excluding Lerato who never had any struggle with her studies) testified that they have seen improvements in their marks because of the supportive environment in which they can write their exams at CUADS. All the students spoke of how they can count themselves among exceptional students or achieve better progress in their studies from the time they started engaging CUADS, because the environment enables them to perform optimally. Even Lerato who does not struggle with learning admits that CUADS is very useful in her writing and feeling calm without being pressured of time. Cici remarked that, "Among the students who are writing at CUADS, only one person failed and left in our department, the rest of us remained. So, CUADS supports us in a way that we didn't drop out and we didn't give up." Thus, the support students receive from CUADS is valuable and important for them to display their potential fully and pass with satisfactory marks. This finding supports existing knowledge that disability support lessens drop-out rates caused by poor

academic performance among students with learning disabilities in post-school education (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014).

Students' stories also confirm misconceptions as established by Sniatecki, Perry and Snell (2015) that people think that disability accommodation is a form of unfair 'leg-up' for those with learning disabilities. There are instances where other students thought there was some underhand business going on at CUADS that ensures that students pass. Sentiments like the following, reported by students, were mentioned; "You guys pass because they give you answers" (Lerato), or "What really happens over there, do they tell you what to write?" (Tess), or "How can I join you so that I also pass like you?" (Kristen). These quotes indicate that peers do not fully understand the nature of, and reasons for supporting students with learning disabilities. Peers also do not notice any ongoing support for students with learning disabilities apart from the support offered during assessments. Therefore, they can misconstrue disability support as support for students to pass, not as a social justice strategy to allow those with disabilities to realise their full potential.

Apart from having a place where students can write their exams without feeling disadvantaged, CUADS enables students to express their emotions and bodily reactions freely. As pointed out in the literature, students with ADHD can experience difficulties in controlling their impulses (Daley & Birchwood 2010) which might attract prejudices from non-disabled peers. Sammy describes CUADS as the only place where she can be "insane" without anyone judging her. Brian also revealed how he can freely get up and walk around when his body cannot sustain a sitting position for long. Walking around is something that he can freely do at CUADS as opposed to anywhere else at the university, as cited below:

It's amazing to be around people who understand and who do not make me feel like I make up my condition. CUADS is a safe place for me. I can go in there and shoot anything at them. I can have a panic attack. Should I feel like I want to break down, I can. I can stand up and go outside to breathe and no one thinks it's funny, and no one wonders what's going on. They calm me down and help me to write my exams feeling better because, gosh, I literally cry in there. (Sammy)

I need a little break for me to get up from my seat. I cannot sit still and function that long in one position. So, I usually get up and have a little walk in here (CUADS cubicle) or I go to the bathroom without worrying about what people think about me. Just to have a little break is very important for me to think properly. Otherwise, my mind just shuts down. Whereas, in the halls, people wonder what's wrong with me. (Brian)

There is also a human interaction dimension to the exam setting at CUADS. The staff members at CUADS are described by Sammy and other students, including Brenda and Anna, as being very understanding of the nature of disabilities that students have. In Anna's words, "The people (invigilators) will say, "Ok, you must look at your time. You must finish now." They don't say, "Time is up, come, come, come, give your papers now." To which Anna remarked that the proctors are "really angels." Brenda also reported that:

... like I said, CUADS is a quiet centre. It is a safe environment because you come [sic] there and see people who are also going through what you are going through and you become motivated. You are not worried about what people think if you behave differently or express your feelings. Also, the invigilators they come to you and they ask you what you need. "Are you ok." So, they are very friendly, and for me it is a blessing to write at CUADS. (Brenda)

There is an aspect of care that emerges from the students' narratives on their engagements with staff members at CUADS that does not exist at the usual exam venues for all the other students. For these students, some of whom experience unrelenting anxiety and panic, this is instrumental in conditioning their minds to the extent of referring to the staff members as 'angels' (Anna), 'understanding' (Sammy) or a 'blessing' (Brenda). As such, what is termed

by the university as adjustments to test and examination conditions are students' valued conditions for assessments. There are certain behaviours and practices that are impossible in "normal" educational settings or the "normal" forms of assessment that are allowed at CUADS to show that the university recognises diversity and has accommodating ways to offer a balance for students who are disadvantaged by certain assessment settings. Students report these different exam settings to be vital for their satisfactory academic performance. Further accounts on the value of CUADS for students are presented next.

7.10.1 Positive self-concept

Students highlighted how satisfactory academic achievement (through writing exams at CUADS) can influence other personal developments. They admit that they developed new ways of understanding and appreciating themselves. Because they are achieving better grades, they start to value themselves as worthy of, and fit for university education. Students became more confident and experienced marked improvements in their social skills. They report on developing a positive self-concept, which includes more positive self-esteem, self-image and self-value. The intrinsic value of disability support is thus reflected in students' stories of personal growth. Brian, who felt he was "not human enough" and thought he was "not meant for university education" had these negative self-views. These waned when he started getting better marks upon engaging CUADS' services, as illustrated below:

When I ended up at CUADS and started achieving 80s and getting all those good marks, it was like a weight being lifted up. I am definitely confident to say that when I started getting good grades, I could then value myself higher, and I am not shy anymore. I can make friends and I can talk to people with confidence. I am not afraid to read anymore when they ask me to read a bible at our cell group (church). It's sort of that fear went away and I can be validated. I can finally see myself as somebody who is worthy to be a human. I really wanna say, I sort of

grew a little bit and I am motivated to keep the standard high because it just feels good and I managed to stay at varsity because of that. (Brian)

There is no doubt that my self-esteem grew a lot. I had reached a point where I thought I was a misfit at a university. (Anna)

In any situation now, I consider myself as a winner. I can do anything now without hesitation. I used to think that I am a failure. (Tess)

Students' admission that they developed personally in realms outside the academic aspects shows that the effects of disability support are multi-dimensional. They go beyond upholding academic excellence that universities mainly focus on when they support students with disabilities. Yet, available knowledge focuses on how positive personal temperaments uphold academic standards (Marsh & Martin 2011) where students with high self-concept develop a high academic concept, meaning that those who have a positive self-view perform well academically. In this study, students who did not initially seek support under-achieved, and had negative self-esteem. Ziyanda, for example, got to a point where she "cared less for her marks" when she was failing her tests. Students' narratives indicate that their self-esteem only grew when they started to pass well, and only after writing examinations at CUADS. The low academic achievement thus affected students' self-esteem to support claims that students with learning disabilities who struggle to achieve well academically often lack a positive self-concept (Chapman & Tunmer 2003), resulting in them feeling inadequate and/or developing feelings of detachment from the university due to low academic achievement (Sainio et al. 2019). Disability support is, therefore, not only good for academic excellence, but for other self-improvements that enable students to achieve wellbeing even though universities institute support to promote academic success.

7.10.2 Inadequacies in the disability services at CUADS

Amidst the positive effects, there are also complaints raised against CUADS by students. There are systematic challenges that involve mainly poor coordination between CUADS and the departments where students are based. Sammy and Ziyanda indicate that sometimes they feel they are at a disadvantage when writing exams at CUADS. They complained because there is poor communication on any changes or decisions made about the exam at the main venue where everyone else writes. Students recounted their experiences as follows:

There are a few things that don't work for me. I don't know if it's CUADS or it's my department. I don't know who is not working with who. But I sometimes feel like I am at a disadvantage writing at CUADS. A lot of the time they will give others that write at the department extra time. Which means I need extra, extra time, do you understand? Or they get told of a mistake, I also need to be told there is a mistake on the paper. Communication between CUADS and the lecturers regarding that, is not good at all. This other time they accidentally wrote 2hrs on the paper and it was actually a 3hr paper. That's a lot of time to lose. So, now I get anxious thinking there can be a mistake that I am not gonna be told about. (Ziyanda)

Another complaint raised by students involves administrative blunders where students sometimes fail to get their results, or even the test papers on time. Most of them acknowledge that things have gotten better lately, but such cases invoke unnecessary stress for students, as highlighted in these quotations:

Last year I had one lecturer who forgot to send my paper here at CUADS and he also forgot to pick it up. So, I was waiting for my exam mark and only found out on the day we were writing the second opportunity that my script was at CUADS. It was stressful because I had to study again for this second exam. (Kristen)

I got an incomplete for a test that I actually wrote and I got stressed a lot. The lecturer didn't know that there were CUADS students in his class. So, my test was never marked because he received an envelope from CUADS, but never really took it up because he didn't think it was a test paper from one of his students. It is a serious problem because if I didn't notice that there was an incomplete on my test, what was going to happen to my predicate mark? (Liz)

In addition, Tess gets anxious and stressed each time she has to wait for her turn to use the exam venue. Students reported that the exam venue at CUADS is conducive for their needs, but there is only one hall to accommodate them as there are other students with different disabilities who use that venue. Tess explains:

I'd say CUADS should be bigger. Not the rooms, but having more halls. There is one venue and more would be better to facilitate more students at the same time. Because a lot of the time there are students struggling to use the venue when exam times clash. People have to wait for one group to finish, causing delays and more anxiety and stress just waiting for your chance to write. (Tess)

These complaints raised by students against CUADS reveal inadequacies in the services provided by CUADS due to administrative and structural challenges. The administrative deficiencies can counter the efforts being made to improve student academic engagements because they trigger maladaptive reactions that can be detrimental to students' performances. Inadequacies in the disability services were also identified in the lack of support during teaching and learning. Tony, for example, expresses that "It does not help much just providing a reader during exams because most of the time I struggle to understand things when I study in preparation for tests." He stated that had it not been for the privately-sourced computer reading programmes where he gets audiobooks, he would have been frustrated each time he studies using written texts.

Providing for students separately in the form of adjusted test and examination conditions has negative effects on some students. Molly, for example, does not feel comfortable to be seen going to write her exams at CUADS. Molly is a student who feels that her disability is not as severe as others with physical challenges. She mentioned that, "When it is exam time, I just sneak to CUADS without anyone knowing." She explained that going to write exams at CUADS makes her feel that she is a "different student." Therefore, there are concerns about

the services that are meant to support students with learning disabilities even though there are positive effects as explained in section 7.10 and 7.10.1.

7.11 Students' coping strategies to learn better

Students revealed that in addition to CUADS support and the medication they take²⁹ to regulate the effects of learning disabilities, they have coping strategies that they employ for them to learn better as they take responsibility for their success in higher education. Students devise ways of managing learning given that most of the support they receive is during tests and examinations.

Apparent in students' stories is that they try to avoid situations that expose their disabilities. For example, Tony, who uses e-readers when studying, manages to cover-up dyslexia by employing "tricks" when reading. This is how he recounts his experiences:

Other than pattern recognition, I think the one trick that I know most dyslexics do, and I do it quite efficiently and up to today, I don't really read a word. I start by looking at the first three letters and the back [sic] three letters and predict what the word is. And I actually do it so well that no one suspects anything. And up to today, I don't do spellings well. I can't understand language rules like which comes where. I have no clue. So, I memorise the word, every single letter in the order it comes, so that I get to spell the word. But, especially when the word gets harder, I can spell the word, but still can't read it. So, there are a lot of tricks that I still use today, which I apply to pretend like the problem does not exist. I have done it throughout my life to pretend like I know (laughs). I read slides like that. But, it definitely has emotional distress because you know that you don't know even though you appear to know. (Tony)

²⁹ For the nine students who self-reported that they are on medication.

The way Tony disguises his learning disabilities is common, especially among students with dyslexia. They employ tricks when reading as a compensatory and/or cover-up strategy (LoGiudice 2008). The reasons are subjective and from what Tony reported, there are two main reasons he employs tricks — to complete an academic task or to remain unrecognised as having a disability. The issue of concealment is so apparent in students' stories that, for example, Duncan and Frank are strategic in their career paths, choosing to focus on careers such as educators and lab technicians (respectively) that 'disguise' any shortfalls emanating from learning disabilities as reflected in the statements below:

I am afraid that people are going to judge me. That's why I want to go into a career in which I stand as the strong one. That's why I want a job where I learn [sic] people. (Duncan)

I prefer working in Western countries where conditions are more supportive of those with disabilities in the work environment, and I would like to continue working in the lab where most of the work is practical because I do not have any problems with my practical subjects. (Frank)

Students' stories therefore show how their aspirations are shaped by the disability they have and the environment in which they operate. These factors (learning disability, work environment and social prejudice) compel students to be mindful of what they can do or how, concerning their career trajectories. It is apparent that some students feel that they will be judged if people know that they have a learning disability and others feel that it is better working in other (Western) contexts. It can be said that students' capability sets or their freedoms are limited in cases such as these.

Tamara who has a sound disorder, mentioned a coping strategy that can be viewed as semi-productive but which she has to employ given the fact that she has to attend a certain number

of lectures, failure of which can affect her progress. Tamara survives lectures by blocking sounds around her:

I always have earplugs every time to lock out sound, even if that means I won't hear the lecturer. That's very difficult but I follow slides on the board. Many times I sit with my hands like this (putting her hands on her upper-face as if to indicate blinkers), just to focus. That's the best way I remain sane, otherwise I'd be stomping out of the class every minute because sound makes me aggressive.
(Tamara)

Tamara's survival strategy of blocking the lecturer's voice and following the slides is something that she says is challenging because, "Not so many lecturers make good slides." Thus, she has to figure out most things at most times because she cannot follow the lecturers' explanations of the information contained on the slides. Blocking her ears at least keeps her in a lecture "Just to avoid absenteeism" as she says. Tamara's technique might not work for other students with dyslexia because reading is one of the areas that they struggle with, as noted in students' stories and also in the literature (Kemp, Smith & Segal 2019). Hence, it can still be difficult to read the slides as indicated by Kristen who points out that, "Usually I just listen, because I get lost trying to read the slides."

All the students' stories (except for Lerato) therefore reveal that they employ task-oriented coping mechanisms to ensure that they learn with less difficulty where disability support is not holistic. Students act on their challenges to ensure that they progress well in their studies amidst rigid teaching arrangements that are ill-suited for learning disabilities. Hence, it is not only the opportunities that the university can offer that are conducive to meaningful learning, but also the actions of individuals, who also transform their environments to function better.

Apart from using task-oriented compensatory methods to learn better, others apply methods that help them psychologically (emotion-oriented). As noted in Tony's earlier quote, there is an emotional attachment to learning disabilities. Brenda who acknowledged that she is "slow and struggles to understand things" such that she "cannot do tasks as simply and as quickly as others" applies positive self-talk and self-affirmation as a way of keeping on. She says she feels like she is not good enough, something that she says causes "negative thoughts" most of the time. She narrates her experiences as follows:

It's something that I am trying to work on, that, "Oh, I am normal, I understand everything even though I am not understanding anything." Or telling myself that if someone can do tasks in 30 minutes, it's still fine if I do it in 45 minutes as long as I get the job done. (Brenda)

Similarly, Ziyanda tries to overcome the negative labels she grew up receiving, and which have affected her academic work, by self-affirmation. Ziyanda has ADHD and describes herself as a very hyper person. She stated that she could not sit still in class and had problems following what her parents and teachers asked her to do, which attracted negative labels from her parents and teachers. She reported that she was called "naughty, a rebel, stupid, disobedient and that she does not listen" as people regarded her learning disability as a character flaw. Ziyanda confessed that these negative labels affected her and she manifested what she had been called all along by becoming a "problem child." As a result, she ceased to care about her grades. She also admits that her self-esteem dropped drastically, something that she tried to compensate for by not being bothered about how she performs academically. Caring less about her school work contributed to her enrolling into the university through an extended programme to top up her credits. Now, she is slowly building her self-esteem as indicated below:

Negative labels affected my self-esteem more than anything else because at the end of the day, I didn't really care about my grades. I just wanted to be seen as a good person, not just any person because that's what I felt I was. But everyone else didn't see that, and I became what everyone else thought I was. I was

branded as a naughty child without them realising that I wasn't naughty, I just have a learning disability. So, my self-esteem, still today, I am struggling with it. Because I've been told almost my whole life that I am stupid, and I believed that. ... I tell myself that, "No, you are worthy. No, you are not stupid. All those things happened because you weren't treated correctly." (Ziyanda)

Ziyanda's story confirms claims within the psychology of disability that the labels that people give to children while growing up can be destructive (Nicholson 2020). Ziyanda's response to how she was portrayed while growing up confirms four effects of labels noted by Nicholson (2020), namely that labels stick, speak, cost and live on people because: she became what she was called (stick-on) and ended up in trouble³⁰ (cost). She ceased to care about schoolwork which landed her in an extended programme at the university (cost). She is still struggling with her self-esteem (stick-on and live-on) even at the university where she sometimes feels that she is not good enough. Nonetheless, students such as Brenda and Ziyanda use positive self-talk for them to get by in university, proving effective for them. Other forms of support for students are discussed next.

7.12 The influence of family on students' academic engagements

The role of family in students' university engagements is noted in almost all of the stories in this study. On the one hand, students value the social support that nuclear family members provide towards their studies. For example, Sammy indicated that, "My family is always there for me. They just accept me as I am. I chose to study at this university because I cannot survive being away from my family." Duncan, who admits that, "I struggle to learn" says his mother

³⁰ Without divulging much personal information, Ziyanda had her high school disrupted because of the mischiefs she did as she was living as a "rebel".

“always has his back.” His mother also defends him in moments when other people fail to understand his behaviour as indicated in a section where he says:

My grandfather really struggles to understand me. He once asked me if I am crazy, just because I am hyperactive. My mother didn't like it at all and she rebuked him. ...The first time I went to a bar with my mother, I never talked to one person. One guy tried to talk to me. I just keep [sic] quiet, I just looked at him. He asked my mother, “What's wrong with your child?” She said, “It doesn't matter, he won't talk to you about it.” (Duncan)

Family and friends are also instrumental in ensuring that students are on track with what they are supposed to do. Brenda and Tess rely on their family and friends for reminders about exams and other important appointments because they admit that they are very forgetful. Cici reports that, “My brother is my inspiration in my academics.” Cici provided the (disability-related) context in why she refers to her brother as her inspiration by recounting that her brother became physically disabled through an accident he had when he was young. The doctor's determination on his state was that he would never walk, talk, do any physical activities with success or even pass a grade in school. At the point of the interview with Cici, her brother was training to become a mechanic. Therefore, Cici says she has someone to look up to in moments of self-doubt.

On the other hand, family members can be a source of influence that is detrimental to students' academic progress. An example of this is Anna's younger sister, whom she labels as controlling such that she partly contributed to Anna's failures at the university. The younger sister has no learning disability. At one point she made it clear that she disapproves of Anna writing her exams at CUADS, telling her that, “No one needs to know that you are here at this special place (CUADS). In fact you can still do well without going there.” Anna obliged and wrote her tests with the rest of the class and ended up failing her subjects. At the point of the interview with Anna, she was in the 6th year of doing a 4-year degree due to these failures. Anna's narrative

reveals that while family can be a positive factor, it can also reproduce broader social stereotypes or labels that reduce them to inferiority.

Her sister later accepted that CUADS is a better place for Anna and things later improved as Anna started showing better progress, as narrated here:

I also believed that I don't need CUADS but then I saw later on that CUADS actually makes a difference and I think my sister changed when she saw that I pass each time I write at CUADS and fail each time I don't. I came back to CUADS as I was about to lose my bursary because I was taking too long to finish. They called me a risk student. (Anna)

There are thus relationships that are both discouraging and influential to students' learning experiences. Another form of support for students in this study was identified and is discussed next.

7.13 Social support from non-humans

Three students narrated how their pets are instrumental as support structures. Cici, Tess and Sammy share stories of how therapeutic their dogs are in coping with the challenges that learning disabilities and learning conditions pose. Social support from non-humans is an area that has not received much attention within the Capability Approach, although Nussbaum (2009) recognises non-humans as subjects of justice on her list of ten central capabilities. There was no specific question targeting non-humans in this study, but this theme emerged when I asked students about the coping mechanisms they use to deal with challenges in learning related to learning disabilities. Cici, Sammy and Tess' narrations on animal therapy as a natural

support system are used as examples because they capture well how non-humans can condition the emotional states of students for them to feel ready to learn.

Sammy reported that her dogs help her “to feel better” each time she experiences stressful university work. She shared how the dogs help her ease the anxiety during tests as she highlighted that, “University without tests is okay because my stressors are tests.” Her dogs facilitate her emotional functioning as they boost her mood every morning before coming to university, thus enabling her to have the right frame of mind to help her write her exams as illustrated in the quote below:

I have two dogs that absolutely lighten my day. You know about the therapy animal [sic] concept? My dogs provide me with that therapy. In the mornings when I wake up, my dog is next to me and he is always happy to see me. I just feel loved and accepted. I hug him and he follows me like a shadow. So, when I wake up feeling down around exams, I hug him and say, “Good morning!” It actually helps to start my day positively. (Sammy)

Similarly, Cici says that she feels accepted and loved by dogs more than people. She alleges that people are judgmental of her ADHD and dogs are not. Hence, Cici talks about how she prefers being around her dog more than humans. Her dog refreshes her mind that can sometimes be clogged with intense emotions caused by university peers who “frustrate” her:

I always call my dog my therapist. He is my natural support system. A dog doesn’t judge you the way people do. If I had a bad day here at the university, I grab my poor Jack Russell, hold it by its stomach, put it on my bed, close the door, sit there and then I start telling him all the horrible stuff that happened to me. So my dog will be sitting there, coming closer to me if it sees that I am upset, lies next to me or lies on top of me because he is a small dog. He’s just supportive. I feel better afterwards. (Cici)

Tess, who struggles with oral assessments, practices them in front of her dog. Tess admits that it is better to practice with her dog than with people because she fears being laughed at as her speech fluency is underdeveloped. Her experiences are demonstrated in the quote below:

A dog is different. A dog stares at you and even if you do something imperfect. It does not judge or laugh at you. Sometimes I don't know what happens to my tongue because I can say a weird word in the middle of a conversation and people will just say, "Jislaaik!"³¹ (Tess)

Learning disabilities are associated with emotional difficulties as noted in a study by Nelson and Liebel (2018). Depression is one such emotional state that most participants in this study reported. Liz says that, "I have those depressive moments that can take long to go away and I can't function during that time." Duncan also says that he cannot function well in class if he is feeling low. He admits that, "I want to be in that zone of I want to learn today. If I don't want to learn, you don't get anything from me." The way these students interact with their dogs shows connections that people can establish where human relationships are lacking or threatened (Keefer, Landau & Sullivan 2014) as students fear prejudice and ridicule from others without learning disabilities.

Three students rely on their religion to get university going. Molly, who says she is a Christian reported that she has rituals she observes to manage exam anxiety. She narrates it as follows:

I pray before writing each exam. I also have other rituals that help me to know that I am in control of things. I go to the exam venue just on the minute we are about to start writing because I forget everything if people talk to me about anything to do with schoolwork. I then make sure that I have my water bottle placed on one side and my stationery on the other. Without these things placed on the right positions, I completely lose it. My exam will be ruined if I don't have a sense of control over my environment.

Molly's experiences, especially of praying before or during the exam is a common practice reported by students in this study. Cici indicated that, "Believing that God can enable me to do

³¹ Jislaaik is an Afrikaans (one of South Africa's official languages) expression of shock.

anything motivates me.” Brenda admits that she relies on prayer in her studies and in life in general because, “God has unlimited power that can make me to be successful in what I do.” She even quoted a bible verse that says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Brenda thus believes that even though she struggles with learning disabilities, God can sustain her. This finding shows that the resources offered by the university are important, but they become effective in the relationships that students establish with others, themselves and with nature.

7.14 Conclusion

Having presented students’ stories on how they experience university, it can be concluded that there are multiple sources of disability within the learning space if we understand disability not only as a medical condition but also as a state of being where learners are obstructed from performing meaningfully in higher education. To start with, the social construction of what learning disabilities are associated with within the context of education (which is mainly prejudicial), affects students’ disability identity and attitudes towards seeking disability support. In this case, there might be a risk of students not achieving the educational functionings they value the most — which is passing and attaining a degree that enables them to get a job.

In addition, the personal challenges that students reported as a result of how learning disabilities manifest in their bodies bring an understanding that disability (as an impairment) is real and it can be detrimental to academic engagements if the education system is not designed to contemplate disability. Students’ stories reveal that learning disabilities can interfere

negatively with a student's academic progress. Stressing on students' disabilities and not considering external factors that can affect students' engagements is the medical understanding of disability, explained in the theoretical framework, that emphasises a focus on impairments and advocates for medical means to "fix it" — of which some students are on medication as part of their own arrangements. The university focuses on the impairments that students have through the assessment of students to establish the nature of disability and support to be made available to them.

The university structures and practices that affect students in learning, which include the invisibility of CUADS and the services it offers, reflect a university system that lacks proper coordination of teaching and learning functions with students' support services. The common practice where students engage CUADS later in the year, after poor academic performance, mainly because they are not aware of CUADS, warrants an investigation into better organisation so that students do not have to be identified as failing students before they are recognised as having learning disabilities.

The university's physical set-up that students report as not always being accommodative of their needs reflects environmental barriers to learning and difficulties in accessing pedagogy that can be avoided if the design of university structures takes cognisance of different forms of diversity, including learning disabilities. The lack of consideration of learning disabilities extends to the teaching modalities that limit students' meaningful participation in learning. In view of these limitations, it can be said that students with learning disabilities are "disabled" in their learning. However, the adjusted test and examination conditions indicate a form of social response to students' disabilities that removes barriers in assessments. Analytically, the

positive effects reported by students is an indication of students' capability sets being expanded, as explained further in Chapter 8.

This study therefore acknowledges that although there is a learning disability, a student can become dysfunctional under certain external institutional arrangements that are not disability-friendly. The fact that students receive disability support at the university is an acknowledgment by the university that disability as a medical condition is real, but its effects on a student's academic trajectory change as institutional arrangements change. For example, if the way we understand an ideal university student is not strictly conceptualised along ability, then students such as Brian would not feel sub-human at a university. If there is a flexible assessment system to focus on elements that do not expose the disabilities that students have, then students' abilities will not be overshadowed by their disabilities. University arrangements that are considerate of learning disabilities are therefore important in how students engage with learning.

CHAPTER 8: A CAPABILITY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

8.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the university experiences of students with learning disabilities through the lens of the Capability Approach. The illustration of students' experiences is framed within narrative research to understand students' perspectives based on how I read their stories. The policy, lecturers and students' perspectives presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are integrated in this chapter as students' stories are not understood without connections to other components of the university. The chapter discusses the opportunities leading to what students with learning disabilities can possibly do or become (referred to as capabilities in this study) in and through university education (Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015). It also examines how the university conditions support students' wellbeing, not only in educational contexts, but overall in life. The study therefore examines university arrangements to establish how they expand or diminish students with learning disabilities' capabilities. The usefulness of the Capability Approach is demonstrated in advancing students' wellbeing in the formation of their capabilities through university arrangements and what students with learning disabilities value to achieve as they experience university education. As noted in the theoretical chapter, the Medical and Social Models of Disability limit the exploration of students' experiences to only the diagnosis and removal of barriers to learning. They do not consider what students value and the freedom they have to achieve what is valued, which include the students' ability to convert a disability service into valued achievements. The Medical and Social Models of Disability therefore narrow the understanding of disability and limit the informational base for disability policies.

In this study, nine capabilities that were expanded through university education and also through engaging disability services offered at the university were identified from students' narratives. The capabilities appear in almost every narrative of participants to warrant inclusion in the identified set of capabilities. Further focus is on how students converted various services into functionings or achievements. The study thus takes into consideration the intervening conversion factors that influence students' achievements while acknowledging students' agency and their role in working towards achievements they have reasons to value. I also outline and explain the students' capabilities that were diminished to demonstrate the influence of external factors in shaping experiences. Hence, the study also discusses the conditions of learning that affect students negatively apart from those that expand their capabilities, to give a broader understanding of students' learning experiences. Some of these capabilities are drawn from Walker (2008) and Mutanga's (2019) work, but they are represented along with this study's focus where learning disabilities in higher education are under study. As such, the capabilities identified in this study validate some of the existing ones identified by other scholars. The capability for affiliation is redefined along the findings of this study to include relationships with non-humans that are part of this study's findings. The capability for knowledge is expanded to include both professional and self-knowledge. The capability for confidence is also expanded from being confident to express an opinion, to succeed with learning tasks, being encouraged and supported in learning (Walker 2008b) to include, and not to feel shame, embarrassment or fearfulness in university settings.

8.2 Capabilities grounded in students' narratives

Nine capabilities were drawn from students' narratives by engaging analytically with their responses to questions that were framed within the Capability Approach concepts. Research questions (i) (What do students with learning disabilities value in and out of their university education?) and (iii) (What and how do conversion factors enable or inhibit the formation of valued capabilities for students with learning disabilities?) are framed in 'capability' terms and thus the interview questions solicited responses fit enough to extrapolate a set of capabilities. Research question (ii) (How has the University of the Free State constructed and implemented interventions that target students with learning disabilities? How do these interventions meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?) though not framed in the capabilities language, have 'capability' undertones. The question can be understood in capability terms as how the university has enabled students function towards the achievement of what they value in higher education? A set of capabilities identified in this study was therefore drawn from the empirical data that sought to answer this study's research questions.

Students' academic trajectories are impacted positively by the adjusted examination conditions which are part of the concessions they receive when writing tests and examinations. Five of the students' capabilities are associated with the disability accommodations available at the university. Four capabilities are associated with the overall university experience. Institutional arrangements and students' achievements are central to the formation of capabilities as we assess whether or not students' capabilities are expanded within a set arrangement. Conditions for capability formation matter as much as what students end up achieving. What is important to ask is whether the conditions support the formation of students' capabilities or diminish them. The impact that CUADS has on students' experiences extends from academic to personal

benefits as students noted improvements in their marks and certain personal dispositions. Thus, capability formation here is demonstrated, not only through the effects of assessment arrangements on academic achievement, but also in opportunities towards human flourishing beyond university. This analytical framework makes the use of the Capability Approach useful because students' success is not only limited to academic performance, but to the enhancement of students' capability set and overall wellbeing through higher education. A summary of the identified, empirically grounded capabilities is illustrated in Table 7 below.

Table 6: Capabilities for students with learning disabilities

Capability	Defined as
1. Capability to demonstrate full potential	Being able to fully display one's ability in academic engagements — this study's definition.
2. To acquire professional and self-knowledge	Being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject and self, using critical thinking, reflexivity and imagination for career, social, political, economic opportunities and personal development
3. To have economic opportunities	Having opportunities to have economic gains through higher education (Walker 2008a).
4. To have confidence	Being confident to express an opinion, to succeed with learning tasks, being encouraged and supported in learning (Walker 2008a) and not to feel shame, embarrassment or fearfulness in university settings.
5. To develop resilience	Being able to navigate studies, persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and be adaptive to constraints (Mutanga 2019).
6. To develop affiliation	Being able to connect or having social interactions with others (Walker 2008a).

7. To aspire	Having hopes for a good future (Mutanga 2019).
8. Having emotional integrity	Being able to express feelings or emotions without constraint or judgement (Walker 2008a).
9. Developing 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, being able to deliberate ethically (Walker 2008a).

The capabilities tabulated above are explained below to demonstrate how they are presented in students' narratives. The capabilities are grouped according to what they are associated with, starting with those that are enhanced by experiencing university education. These capabilities demonstrate what higher education can potentially do for students with learning disabilities. The capabilities that are aligned to CUADS are presented last, demonstrating how the adjusted test and examination conditions impact students' education trajectories.

8.2.1 Capability for economic opportunities

The capability for economic opportunities is understood as having possibilities for economic gains through higher education (Walker 2008a). All the students in the study indicated that they want to excel in their studies to get a job that matches their qualifications, given that graduates have better prospects of finding employment (Mncayi 2016) despite other intervening factors. However, as mentioned in Chapter 7, most students never thought of the probability of working in unsupported spaces. Students admitted that they can now value themselves and are confident to do anything such that they have a positive outlook for a successful future because of the influence of the positive effects of the disability support they get while at the university. Their

process of reasoning does not expand to the reality of working in unsupported conditions, which many did not take into cognisance. Students are unaware of the fact that 90% of people with learning disabilities are un/underemployed because they struggle to fit into labour environments and cultures that do not support learning disabilities (Fast 2004). Therefore, they struggle to perform to the satisfaction of employers in terms of meeting deadlines, time management and self-organization (Fast 2004).

Students' stories in this study reveal that they hope to transition into the workplace without being realistic about the difficulties they might face. However, some students had considered the challenges they might face at work, as demonstrated in Duncan's narrative, that he chose to become an educator because he wants to stand out as the person with knowledge and in control of situations to make it difficult for people to notice his learning disabilities. Frank prefers to work as a technician in a laboratory where he does not interact much with people for fear of exposing his disabilities, and Ziyanda wants to emigrate to Western countries where she thinks learning disabilities are supported better at workplaces. These students indicated that they are making these plans based on the fact that they understand their disabilities very well to know what they can and cannot possibly do, given that certain learning and working conditions can limit their potential.

8.2.2 Capability for professional and self-knowledge

The capability for professional and self-knowledge is redefined from Mutanga's (2019) capability for knowledge that is defined as being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject, using critical thinking and imagination for career, social, political and economic opportunities. This study identified the capability for knowledge, but with different dimensions of knowledge

— subject or professional knowledge, and self-knowledge. The capability for knowledge described by Mutanga (2019) is expanded from, ‘gaining knowledge of a chosen subject’ to include knowledge of oneself through reflexivity. This study therefore redefines this capability to capability for professional and self-knowledge, understood as being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject and self, using critical thinking, reflexivity and imagination for career, social, political, economic opportunities and personal development.

Students’ stories reveal that they increased the capability for self-knowledge more than they had increased the knowledge of a subject or discipline. However, students value gaining subject knowledge because it is instrumental in getting a degree that they value to achieve. Thus, valuing knowledge is embedded in wanting to understand subject knowledge and also in wanting to get the degree despite the challenges students face in acquiring subject knowledge. Clear in students’ narratives is that they encounter obstacles towards the gaining of discipline knowledge because of lack of support during teaching and learning. These obstacles were mentioned in Chapter 7 where students face difficulties in accessing pedagogy due to, for example, the way lectures are delivered and the physical setting of the learning space that does not suit students’ disabilities. When students skip lectures because the learning conditions trigger negative bodily reactions, they are disadvantaged from gaining the subject knowledge and they risk failing because assessments are based on knowledge of the discipline. In such cases, students’ chances of achieving educational functionings such as good grades can be diminished. However, students refuse to consider their situation as helpless, as they strive to manage learning and make efforts to understand subject content by adopting task and emotional-oriented coping mechanisms such as recording lectures and self-encouragement, as highlighted in section 7.11.

Students in this study mentioned, as part of university gains, knowledge of self and self-understanding. This capability is represented in students' responses to a question that solicited what students think university education has enabled them to do. Ten of the students admitted that they came to know themselves better because of experiencing university mainly because their perception of their disabilities had changed. Tess, with dyslexia, learned to embrace her disability and asserted that: "I cannot change what I have (learning disability). I have accepted the fact that it is not going anywhere." Tess explained that she now knows that she is going to live with dyslexia for the rest of her life and will worry less about hiding it from others. Brenda, who copes with learning through positive self-talk and self-assurance, admits that she has accepted that she cannot perform academic tasks like other students. Hence, when she tells herself that: "It is okay to do things 15 more minutes than usual" or that: "It is okay not to understand the lecture now, but I will understand it later", she understands how she works and tries not to let it hinder her academic progress or discourage her from pursuing her academic achievements. Tamara, who has ADD and struggles with a sound disorder admits, "I have come to know that I don't like people that much." Being around so many students at the university is uncomfortable because she cannot tolerate any form of sound. Hence, Tamara skips a few classes to avoid a meltdown but has managed to attend some lectures where she blocks sound using sound-canceling earphones. Wearing earphones in a lecture is something that is partly beneficial as she can only follow a lecture through projected slides, but misses the lecturers' voice with explanations. Therefore, the process of gaining self-knowledge involves reflexivity as one experiences university.

8.2.3 Capability for resilience

Resilience in higher education can be understood as being successful in academic endeavours against all odds (Wilson-Strydom 2017). The capability for resilience is described as being able to navigate studies, persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and to be adaptive to constraints (Mutanga 2019). This capability is identified as students manage the challenging effects of learning disabilities in constraining learning conditions and progress well in their studies without allowing themselves to be the victims of circumstances. As noted in students' stories, lecturers do not recognise learning disabilities during teaching and learning and students devise task and emotional oriented coping strategies to manage university work. Students thus use their agency to take the initiative to record lectures for future access using their cellphones since many of them struggle to process information in the way that lecturers deliver it. Others employ study methods that enhance memory since poor memory is one of the symptoms of learning disabilities (Hollins & Foley 2013). Also, some such as Tony, use personally-sourced digital methods to support the comprehension of text while studying because he struggles to read with understanding and complains that having a scribe during tests and exams is not sufficient. These initiatives undertaken by students to enhance chances of passing demonstrate resilience. Resilience as an internal capability opposes Michael's (2004) findings that students with learning disabilities lack persistence and resilience especially concerning things that challenge them. Although this study cannot conclusively state that all students are independent and self-directed in their learning, their narratives illustrate resilience towards ensuring that they learn and pass against all odds.

8.2.4 Capability for affiliation

The capability for affiliation is understood as being able to connect or having social interactions with others (Walker 2008a). A capability for affiliation is represented in students' ability to form relationships that are important in their academic endeavours and instrumental in students' academic goals. Students developed connections with those they can produce and share knowledge with, and also with those outside the university campus who contribute towards their wellbeing. Affiliation with lecturers is constrained given the prohibiting big class sizes. Students' and lecturer's perspectives on the lecture arrangements revealed that large classes make it difficult for students to interact and form relationships with lecturers as noted through Sammy's complaint that she is just known by a student number because there are too many students to be accommodated by a lecturer. Sammy reported that she needs to connect with the lecturers because, "If they know who I really am, including my challenges, then they tend to be much more accommodating." Lecturers in this study also highlighted that it is difficult for them to form academic relationships with students because there are too many to know, including their needs. This is demonstrated in Chapter 6 from Academic 4 that, "It's difficult to build a relationship when there are over a thousand students in the class. I don't know my students. I think I know only nine or ten, that's all." These worries are confirmed by Hassel and Ridout's (2018) comments that student-lecturer relationships are difficult to establish in big classes, and Allais (2014) singled big classes out as one of the major disadvantages of massification in higher education because it affects the quality of education and the learning experiences of all students, regardless of their disabilities. Nonetheless, there is a specific impact on students in this study as they explained in the previous chapter. They already struggle with disability-related learning challenges and large classes do not help.

However, affiliations with both humans and non-humans that advance positive university experiences for students with learning disabilities were noted in this study. Students in this study have disabilities that are not apparent and many people do not easily understand how and why these students behave or do things the way they do. All the students acknowledge their families as their greatest support systems whom they have bonded with and whom they rely on for support. Some, such as Liz who declined an offer to study in another city, cannot stand being far away from their family members. Duncan reported being strongly bonded with his mother such that they go out together and his mother “protects” him from people who are curious to know about Duncan’s problem when they notice something odd or different about him.

Duncan also relies on his mother for support in his studies, which he admitted is challenging because he struggles to read, write and has secondary emotional problems that affect learning. He revealed that at some point he wanted to quit university studies to pursue his favourite hobby (archery) but his mother encouraged him to get a university qualification first. Relatedly, Cici, with dyslexia, has bonded with her brother (who has physical disabilities too) such that she relies on him for inspiration and encouragement each time she is confronted with difficulties related to dealing with her learning disabilities in her studies. Sammy cannot study anywhere else that is away from her family because they are supportive in her studies. Hence, students’ affiliation with people who are close to them is beneficial in their studies.

The capability for affiliation is also demonstrated in the ways that three of the students attach and form relationships with their pets. Three students reported that they have strong social ties of affection with their pets and get the social support that enables them to “relieve the frustrations” encountered at the university or to do practice runs for oral presentations. Such interactions contribute to students having “the right frame of mind” before leaving home for

university (Cici, Tess and Sammy's words). Keefer, Landau and Sullivan (2014) established that attachment with pets is very important in providing psychological security and support (which is constitutive of students' overall wellbeing). For Cici, to get home and 'grab' her Jack Russell, put it on her bed, close the door and tell the dog everything that has made her sad on that day, is a form of affiliation that is necessary for her emotional wellbeing, especially since emotional difficulties are common among students with learning disabilities as reported by students in this study. The pet therapy that students adopt enhances their mood and can be a source of comfort (Keefer et al. 2014) and students rely on it for their emotional wellbeing.

Three students (Brenda, Cici and Molly) have an attachment with God — they rely on prayer for their success and thus draw comfort and support from their religion. People often draw feelings of support from supernatural powers (Keefer et al. 2014). Brenda indicated that she is a Christian and always asks God "to place people who are patient" on her path since she admitted that she is "slow in performing tasks, even in practical settings." Molly reported that she conducts certain rituals, which include praying before tests and exams, to induce feelings of security and confidence that she can tackle them well. Cici trusts God for her success in whatever she does. These kinds of relationships and attachments enhance students' capability for affiliation that is crucial for their learning. Given the nature of this affiliation, Walker's (2008a) definition of the capability for affiliation, which is, "being able to connect or having social interactions with others" is redefined as, "being able to connect or having social and supernatural interactions with humans or non-humans." Next is a discussion on the capabilities that are associated with CUADS.

8.2.5 Capability to demonstrate full potential

The capability to demonstrate full potential is understood in this study as being able to fully display one's ability in academic engagements. This capability is represented where students acknowledge the value of CUADS in their university engagements. What has led most students to engage disability services is that they were not performing well in their studies. Two factors contributed to this — learning disabilities can prevent the optimal demonstration of abilities (Shecter-Lerner, Lipka & Khouri 2019) which is noted through discrepancies between ones' potential and actual ability (NILD 2016). Also, non-accommodative structural designs, teaching practices and non-inclusive forms of assessment can limit a student's potential, as established by this study. Hence, students' full potential in learning cannot be fully displayed under the existing institutional settings. The university is seemingly designed for those without disabilities, where those with disabilities have to fit in through special arrangements such as adjusted test and examination conditions.

From a Capability Approach perspective, learning spaces that do not recognise learning disabilities demonstrate a lack of real opportunities that support the achievement of what students have reason to value — which, in this case, is the opportunity to learn without feeling disadvantaged or limited towards the achievement of good grades. It is established in the literature (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014) and in this study's findings that students with learning disabilities are not inferior in their intellectual capacities, but their abilities can be restricted by learning conditions or institutional arrangements that expose their disabilities. Hence, students reported that those who engaged CUADS at a later stage in their studies did so after failing tests or exams because they could not articulate exams well under 'usual' examination conditions. Even those (Sammy, for example) who could afford to go to schools where learning disabilities were detected early and applied for disability accommodations at the onset of their

university studies had experienced difficulties with schoolwork prior to entering university. The challenges these students face in learning can, therefore, be traced to the naturalised education settings, systems and practices that appear to be meant for students without learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities can struggle with their studies in such conditions, not because they are intellectually weak, but because the learning conditions are not supportive enough. There can be intelligent students whose academic achievements are undermined by the environment in which they operate.

In this study, students are enabled to display their full potential during examinations by writing under adjusted conditions where they get a separate exam venue, extended time, scribes, and spell checkers, owing to the difficulties posed on their ability to process information efficiently or negative reactions to crowded places. The adjusted examination conditions offered at CUADS are helpful for students to write well and the fifteen minutes extended time offered for every hour of an examination enables students to finish their work without feeling disadvantaged in cases where the processing of information is slow. Those who use individual cubicles (alone or with a scribe) find value in this arrangement because they can work with fewer challenges related to reading and understanding questions or writing down the answers. Students reported that they witnessed a considerable improvement in their marks and that they had successfully completed each academic year after engaging the services of CUADS. Thus, students can achieve the academic standards and the progress they value because their potential can be fully displayed under adjusted tests and examination conditions. Students' intellectual capacity and acquired subject knowledge (internal capability) deployed in a supportive assessment environment (external capability) enhanced their capability for demonstrating their full ability (combined capability).

8.2.6 Capability for confidence

The capability for confidence involves “being confident to express an opinion, to succeed with learning tasks, being encouraged and supported in learning” (Walker 2008a: 483). This definition is expanded to add, and not to feel shame, embarrassment or fearfulness in university settings, in line with the findings of this study. Evident in students’ narratives is that they developed self-confidence due to the satisfactory marks they started getting after utilising the adjusted examination conditions that CUADS offers. This can be demonstrated using two examples from students’ narratives. Brian thought at some point that he was ‘sub-human’ (Brian’s words) and thought he was not meant for university education because his literacy skills are under-developed and at that point he was not enrolled in any disability support services. He admitted that he was scared to read in front of the class or at church gatherings and feared to tackle anything that involves reading and writing. This meant that he even feared examinations because they required him to read and write. By getting satisfactory marks after engaging the services of CUADS, Brian admitted that “the fear was lifted” and he feels that he is “human” for he can now undertake academic and non-academic activities with confidence.

The same applies to Ziyanda whose character was ridiculed by her family to the extent that she thought less of herself than her sibling who seemed to possess all the attributes that her family praised. Ziyanda lost her confidence and cared less about her academic work. It was only after she started receiving disability support through adjusted examination conditions that she started to excel in her studies and felt that she could do anything, including advancing her studies and working overseas. While Brian experienced withdrawal symptoms, Ziyanda adopted an ‘I don’t care attitude’ towards her studies. Adjusted assessments contributed to the restoration of their

confidence, indicating that this was constitutive and an enhancement of the capability for confidence, which was further realised by students.

8.2.7 Capability to aspire

The capability to aspire entails having hopes for a good future (Mutanga 2019). This capability reveals the university's role in expanding human flourishing beyond its walls, into the future (Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015). Supported assessment conditions that enable students with learning disabilities to display their full potential and obtain satisfactory marks have positive effects on students' views of their future life. Therefore, being successful in their studies leads students to have a positive outlook about their future to such an extent that some are considering working overseas (Frank and Ziyanda), pursuing further studies (Sammy, Tamara, Lerato and Brian) or just having a job (Duncan, Liz, Tess, Cici, Anna, Molly, Kristen, Brenda and Tony). Setting low standards for fear of failure is one thing that Hitchings et al. (2010) view as common in students with learning disabilities. This study's findings dispute this view, identifying that students are hopeful of success and are motivated to pursue and attain further education or to secure jobs. Such aspirations are adaptive (Conradie & Robeyns 2013) to the extent that students are satisfied with their academic achievements through the disability support they receive and they are confident that they will remain successful in future endeavours. However, the disability support offered at the university perversely seems to provide a false sense of security because students are dependent on support that is not sustainable in unsupported situations away from the university. This would affect many who end up at workplaces or private learning institutions that do not support learning disabilities. Regardless, CUADS offers conditions ideal for students to hope for better things in their lives.

8.2.8 Capability for emotional integrity

The capability for emotional integrity is defined as being able to express feelings or emotions without constraint or judgement (Walker 2008a). This capability is identified in this study in response to a question on the relationship between students and CUADS. Brenda spoke of CUADS being “a safe place for her” because she is not judged, and Sammy acknowledged that CUADS is the only place where she can do the things that others regard as “insane”, “funny” or “staged” reactions (Sammy’s words). At CUADS, Sammy can cry before writing an exam as anxiety overwhelms her, Brian can walk around without feeling embarrassed when his body cannot endure one sitting position, Tess can “take a short break to think properly.” Students therefore can display bodily acts openly without shame or fear of being judged, reprimanded or ridiculed at CUADS than anywhere else around the university campus. This capability offered at CUADS is realised by all the students, making it a important functioning in students’ university experiences. Expressing emotions promote psychological wellbeing as it is a form of stress management (Stanton & Low 2012). Therefore, students need to have an opportunity to release any test and exam anxiety (for Sammy who cries) or to condition the mind by taking a short break from writing in the case of Brian and others who reported that their mind “shuts-down” if they sit in one position for a long time. Such bodily and emotional expressions can be received with prejudice or even forbidden at ordinary examination venues, but students are free to express their emotions and impulses at CUADS.

8.2.9 Capability for imagination, care and empathy

Walker (2008a: 483) defines the capability for imagination and empathy as “being able to understand the lives and worlds of others, being compassionate, being able to respond to human

need and suffering, being able to deliberate ethically.” The capability for imagination, care and empathy is identified in students’ responses to a question on how they relate with CUADS. Students reported that they do not judge each other when they are at CUADS even though they encounter students whom they feel have more severe disabilities than they have. This indicates that students put themselves in each other’s situation and picture or even know and understand what life is like for that student. Cici, for example, highlighted how people at CUADS understand each other and appreciate the fact that they are “all different.” This is something that Cici observed as not common anywhere else at the university campus because she reported that her non-disabled peers behave in the following way: “When they see that you look or act differently, they pick on you.” At CUADS, there are students and some members of staff with different disabilities and they appreciate and care for each other’s needs in a supportive way.

There are also a set of social norms and forms of care in the space of CUADS’ adjusted assessment conditions that are not common in other university sections. The invigilators, for example, are singled out as caring in their approach as they speak in a calming tone that eases students’ pressure when they are writing exams. For example, the way in which they remind students of the remaining time does not feed students’ panic and anxiety levels such that students can manage to finish writing their tests at ease. The invigilators understand the nature of students’ disabilities such that they create a supportive environment that is often lacking at the ordinary examination venues. Therefore, the capability for imagination, care and empathy is enhanced and realised by students with learning disabilities through the conditions for writing examinations that are offered at CUADS.

The capabilities identified in this study show how university arrangements affect students’ experiences. Students’ academic and personal lives were transformed by experiencing

university and also by the conditions set by the university to undertake their studies in. The discussions that follow involve students' abilities to convert resources into achievements.

8.3 Conversion factors influencing students' university experiences

As discussed in Chapter 3, conversion factors concern the ability of students to convert resources into functionings or achievements that students have reasons to value. These conversion factors can be grouped into personal, environmental and social factors. In light of the findings of this study, they stand between students' opportunities to learn well and the actual achievement of, for example, the marks or the degree that students have set out to acquire, and the educational benefits (economic or not). The study thus reveals the role of circumstances (Terzi 2008) and demonstrates how students' conversion abilities are crucial in the formation of capabilities. Specific details on conversion factors that shape students' educational trajectories are discussed next.

8.3.1 Personal conversion factors

This study established that a learning disability can affect students' engagements with learning and has implications that can deem a student a failure in higher education. Students acknowledged the challenges that learning disabilities pose to meaningful learning, revealing how they struggle with, for example, understanding lectures, getting organised, focusing, anxiety, poor concentration, reading, writing, emotional disturbances, remembering things and controlling impulses, among other conditions that are mentioned in appendix 6. To a greater degree, learning disabilities, in the absence of opportunities that expand meaningful learning,

can have negative consequences that deem a student incapable of staying in the education system. Hence, it is unfair to regard students with learning disabilities as lazy or those who seek an unfair ‘leg-up’ in their studies through disability support, as implied in the studies by Riddick (2009) and Riddell and Weedon (2006), because learning disabilities have a real effect on how students operate. These factors can therefore be classified under personal conversion factors.

8.3.2 Environmental conversion factors

Factors that are associated with the institution or university are discussed under environmental conversion factors because that is the space within which students undertake learning. The study observed institutional factors that both diminish and expand students’ capabilities. As mentioned earlier, the effects of learning disabilities can be compounded by university arrangements that are not suited for students with learning disabilities’ needs. The low visibility of CUADS, a facility that offers disability services for students with disabilities, is the starting point for examining institutional factors that can deprive students’ capabilities. If students with disabilities are not aware of support services offered by the university, yet those services are crucial for their academic trajectory, then opportunities to achieve valued learning outcomes are strained. Students in this study testified that they struggled with learning and passing before they engaged the disability services of CUADS because they did not know that the university has a facility that caters for their disability-related needs. Hence, there is a threat to students’ freedoms or the achievement of wellbeing and overall flourishing, where opportunities to support students are not known, inaccessible or inadequate.

8.3.2.1 Teaching practices

Having lecturers that are not aware of students with learning disabilities in their classes because they are not informed of such means that lecturers do not consider the needs of these students in teaching. Also, having lecturers who are not skilled to address the needs of students with learning disabilities (as reported by Academic 7 that he does not know the kind of support to give to a student with learning disabilities) means that learning disabilities are overlooked in teaching. Liz, one of the students who have ADD and ADHD, complained that, “Nothing really happens [in the lecture]. You go to class, you learn on your own.” Or, learning from Molly that, “There is nothing done [in the class] for people with anxiety like me.” When Lecturer 4 indicated that he is not aware of any special need to consider when teaching or Lecturer 1 saying that he “cares less about how he teaches” because he is not aware of any students with learning disabilities in his classes, they demonstrate how learning disabilities are not recognised in teaching. The non-recognition of learning disabilities in teaching is also evident in the university policies that generalise disabilities and have no practical ways of attending to learning disabilities in teaching and learning. Such generalisations can create inequalities in learning where students with learning disabilities are mainstreamed and treated as having the same abilities as others without learning disabilities. Yet it is not the case. Students with learning disabilities have different learning styles that require flexible teaching styles. Hence, teaching and learning arrangements can affect the ability of students to achieve their valued functionings.

Therefore, teaching practices appear in this study as a constraint towards students’ ability to be successful in their studies. Students do not benefit meaningfully from lectures whose delivery modalities are not conscious of learning disabilities in their design. Lecturers too alluded to

students' complaints as they admitted that they do not know how to respond to these students' needs or are not aware of students with learning disabilities in their classes for them to adjust their teaching methodologies. Learning disabilities therefore are not recognised during teaching and students have to devise their own coping mechanism to manage learning. Students, mostly those with dyslexia, reported that the speed at which lectures are delivered is too fast for them to process all the information being taught. Students have to record the lectures so that they can later refer back and process the information at an eased pace.

We also learnt from students that active learning [(letting students do and think about what they are learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991)] is rarely practiced as teaching methodologies are too transmission-based [(teaching by telling (Brame 2016))]. Students often cannot function well in such settings, thus diminishing their capabilities, particularly of knowledge production, transfer and usage. In addition, support for students with learning disabilities is intensified during tests and examinations (at the end of the learning process). Thus, if the recognition of learning disabilities is low in teaching and learning, then students are left with un-catered for learning needs.

Furthermore, the rigidness of the assessment modes reflects inequalities in the normalised educational standards at the university that define academic excellence or success because they are not well-suited to students with learning disabilities. Academic expectations that are established with no regard for diversity or learning disabilities in particular can be interpreted in capability terms as constraining conversion factors, meaning that students cannot meaningfully convert them into achievements. The adjusted tests and examination conditions, however, enhance students' capabilities and open up new possibilities, but this is an isolated arrangement that meets students' needs at the end of a learning process.

8.3.2.2 The physical learning environment

The lecture halls in which students are taught are identified as an environmental factor that disadvantage students with learning disabilities in learning. The overcrowded halls are a cause for concern for students with learning disabilities that cause severe anxiety, attention and concentration challenges. We learnt from, for example, Frank and Anna, that they get distracted easily by sounds and movements to the extent that they concentrate more on what distracts them than what the lecturers will be teaching. What mostly affects these students is that they can totally lose concentration for the whole lecture especially where distractions are continuous or prolonged. Examination halls too, in which students initially wrote exams before using the venue at CUADS, contributed to the poor academic performance that students reported. Ziyanda's negative reaction to an overcrowded exam hall and the resultant failing mark confirms how the physical environment can cause difficulties for students from learning, articulating exams well and achieving the good grades they value. This study thus identified the learning environment (overcrowded halls) as a conversion factor that negatively interferes with students' ability to achieve the educational functionings they value.

8.3.2.3 Disability accommodations

Disability accommodations in the form of adjusted examination conditions form part of the university's institutional arrangements to cater for the needs of students with disabilities. In that sense, they are considered as one of the environmental conversion factors because students can articulate examinations well and produce satisfactory results that facilitate meaningful progress in their studies — a functioning that is valued by all the students. The struggles that students experienced before engaging the services of CUADS and how that changed after

involving CUADS, reflect the enabling nature of support services. Except for Lerato, who never mentioned any challenges to learning, and the two students who engaged CUADS from the onset of their studies, the rest failed or did not get satisfactory results to match their abilities without the adjusted examination conditions. Students' chances of successfully completing university education to get a job (students' most valued opportunity) were at risk. But, the disability accommodations, although reactive and inadequate in the whole process of learning, offered students a chance to undertake their exams successfully and display their full potential such that they obtain the results they are capable of producing rather than results that reflect their disabilities. Therefore, disability accommodations stand as an enabling conversion factor in students' education trajectories.

8.3.3 Social conversion factors

This section presents aspects of students' learning experiences that show that students' ability to achieve what they value in higher education can be influenced by factors related to the actions of others or the relationships they have with others. These can be relationships with lecturers, peers or family members. It is established in the existing literature that social support from parents, peers and friends is instrumental in the meaningful participation and academic success of students with (any) disabilities (Orr & Goodman 2010). This kind of support forms part of external capabilities because connections and relationships are external to a person but are crucial in enabling a person to function. Thus, I demonstrate, from students' accounts, how the role of family, friends and non-humans (pets) is crucial to students' wellbeing.

8.3.3.1 Social support from family members and friends

The social support that students receive from their families (whom students report as caring, understanding and supportive) is instrumental in students' meaningful academic engagements. Students' families and friends are supportive to the point of reminding them of the examination dates and times, in the case of Brenda, Molly, Anna, Tamara, Kristen and Tess. Missing an exam would mean that a student could fail and would not get the much-valued degree that everyone looks forward to achieving. Hence, when reminders are sent to students, whose memory is affected negatively by the brain processing and storage deficits (NILD 2016) to make them remember the date and time of an exam (that determines the acquisition of a degree that they value the most), then the social support from family becomes an enabler towards students' academic achievements.

The same analytical framing applies to the encouragement and inspiration that Duncan, Sammy, Ziyanda, Brian, Tony, Cici and Liz get from their family members. For example, we learnt that Cici's brother, who has disabilities and is studying to become a Mechanic, inspires her not to give up on her studies. The encouragement that the brother gives to Cici is influential in her academic achievements in that she feels the will to keep going and become qualified for what she is studying towards, no matter how challenged she is. This kind of support is important to students with learning disabilities as they are reported to lack motivation and persistence (Fast 2004) when facing challenges. Within the Capability Approach's conceptual framing of social conversion factors, this kind of social support is an enabler towards the achievement of students' educational functionings.

However, the influence of family members can also be constraining when it hinders students' academic progress. Anna's story illustrates the 'bad influence' her sister has on her studies. At a certain point in her educational journey, Anna had failed some of her modules because her sister did not approve of her using the services at CUADS that are crucial in her passing of exams. Consequently, Anna took six years to complete a four-year degree and was on the verge of being de-registered and losing her study bursary, mainly because of those setbacks. The relationship with her sister became a constrainer of Anna's academic progress.

8.3.3.2 Social support through animal therapy

Students regard the affiliation they have with their pets as therapeutic and necessary for successful learning experiences. Cici, Sammy and Tess showed how important their pets are in helping them overcome the emotional frustrations that engagements and interactions at the university bring (in the case of Sammy and Cici) or helping students to prepare for oral presentations because dogs do not judge and laugh when they stammer, mispronounce words or look confused (in the case of Tess).

In these cases, pets contribute positively towards students' articulation of assessments that are important in students' academic and career trajectories. To practice and present an oral presentation successfully or write an examination feeling calm is important to students as assessment outcomes influence students' progression and even their careers. The therapeutic social support provided by pets to students is, therefore, considered as an enabling factor towards students' positive engagement with their studies.

8.3.3.3 Attitudinal barriers

The university community's attitudes, perceptions and stigmatising actions create a negative social environment for students with learning disabilities with the effect of discouraging them from participating in class or from fully utilising the available disability support. Lecturers who feel that students with learning disabilities should not have enrolled at a university, and students who do not appreciate and respect differences by teasing those with learning disabilities, affect students' dispositions towards learning. When a student is afraid of social prejudices if s/he openly displays bodily reactions, or when a student prefers to use a dog for oral practices for fear of being mocked, or when a student does not participate in group discussions for fear of being laughed at, these are all indications of a negative social environment that affects learning. There is a risk of students getting discouraged in participating in the generation of knowledge that is necessary for the achievement of the valued qualification. Hence, a negative social climate that limits students with learning disabilities to engage meaningfully with learning, is considered as a constraining conversion factor. Ways in which students exercise agency in learning are discussed next.

8.4 Students' agency in learning

Having discussed opportunities that expand students' capabilities and factors that enable or constrain students' ability to achieve the educational functionings that they identify as important to them, the role of agency is brought into the discussions to identify students' contributions towards the achievement of passing grades and a qualification they value. The Capability Approach addresses individuals' agency with regard to the achievements they have

reason to value (Sen 1999). The agency of students in this study can be observed as they work on the barriers that inhibit their academic progress. To begin with, the decision of students to apply for disability support shows the agency of students towards achieving the passing grades they value. The university policy clearly states that disability support is granted upon request and students did that either through their initiatives or they complied when asked to do so by the lecturers. Students' agency is also demonstrated in them devising coping strategies where access to appropriate pedagogy is limited. However, the study identified factors that limit students' agency in learning. These include low or poor awareness of the availability of CUADS and the services it offers. Many students reported that they did not apply for disability support because they were not aware of CUADS when they joined the university. In addition, the university's physical and social structures limit students' participation in the production and sharing of knowledge. The prejudicial attitudes that other students and staff members hold towards students with learning disabilities also contribute to limiting the agentic role of students in learning as students are always worried about how people react to their disabilities. Hence, students with learning disabilities' participative role in learning and towards the achievement of their valued educational functionings needs to be analysed in relation to the conditions within which they learn.

8.5 Conclusion

To sum up the discussions in this chapter, the role of the university in expanding students' capabilities is shown through the arrangements instituted for students with disabilities to have adjusted tests and examination conditions. The nine identified capabilities contribute to students' meaningful and successful engagement with the state of them being students, as

discussions are based on what students can possibly do or become under the circumstances they learn. The study observed that what the students have managed to become or do is not limited to fields of studies, but extends to personal development. This study is thus not only interested in learning and academic success, but in the enhancement of freedom and wellbeing (and, therefore, human flourishing) through capability formation. These capabilities reflect the university's degree of inclusiveness, particularly how it addresses inequalities that affect students' chances of participating and succeeding in higher education.

This study established that even though students write examinations under adjusted conditions, they are disadvantaged from acquiring and sharing discipline knowledge because of the teaching practices and structures that are ill-suited for learning disabilities. The disability accommodations offered during assessments do not sustain meaningful learning as they are offered at the end of the learning process, leaving the greater part of learning unsupported. After all, having disability accommodations exposes the inflexibility of the design of learning spaces, material and practices, such that those with disabilities can only manage to learn and succeed with support. The university, therefore, is making efforts to deal with a disability, not the institutional structures, systems and practices. Hence, students with learning disabilities continue to learn and write examinations under special arrangements instead of having inclusive education systems. There seems to be a paradox where a university policy that aims to address students' needs encourages marginalisation and sustains students' status as disabled and needing support.

Through the Capability Approach's conceptual framing, capability formation for students with disabilities includes opportunities to succeed in and through higher education, and also what students have managed to do or become in relation to the educative environments within which

students develop capabilities. This study therefore promotes institutional arrangements that account for students' overall wellbeing and human flourishing anchored in what students have reasons to value. Therefore, capability informed university arrangements and practices are those that consider students' wellbeing beyond obtaining a degree and enhancing economic opportunities. Furthermore, university arrangements ought to also consider the interaction a student has with disability services to ascertain the extent of functionality a student gets from a service rather than settle for what services are available as is the common practice within the Social Approach of Disability that the UFS adopts. Thus, universities should take into account different (conversion factors) and their influence on students' abilities to achieve valuable functionings from availed opportunities or services. The Capability Approach discourages separate systems of support and encourages normative systems where a university treats all its students as subjects of social justice such that educational components (teaching, learning and assessments) are diversified or options are availed, to suit the needs of all students, including those with learning disabilities. By this, no student would feel that they have to go through special processes to learn meaningfully or to demonstrate their full potential in examinations.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

This study examined the learning experiences of university students with learning disabilities, focusing on ways in which higher education can contribute to the formation of students' capabilities. This is an analytical thesis that makes conclusions based on how I read the data collected for this study. This study was not framed as an evaluation study, even though students' stories have contributed to informing policy. Therefore, I give analytical conclusions that are deductively derived from the data. Different or additional conclusions can be made by other readers at different points in time. As noted in the methodology chapter, narrative data allows multiple interpretations, with room for alternative possibilities in as far as recommendations are concerned (Clandinin 2013). Hence, it is possible that other people can draw more or different conclusions based on my analysis.

This chapter explains the usefulness of the Capability Approach as a conceptual lens in analysing students with learning disabilities' learning experiences. It further gives an overview of how students with learning disabilities experience learning. This is followed by explaining how the research questions were addressed. The chapter further presents a summary of the capabilities identified from the students' narratives, followed by an explanation of students' experiences of capability formation in higher education. Recommendations, the significance of the study and limitations of the study are presented before concluding the chapter.

9.2 The value of the Capability Approach in understanding students' experiences

This study uses the Capability Approach as a descriptive-analytical tool to examine students with learning disabilities' learning experiences. The Capability Approach is concerned with social justice and encourages institutional arrangements that enable all students to function well towards the achievement of what they have reason to value in their educational engagements. The Capability Approach thus takes into consideration what students value to do or become, their agency and factors that affect the conversion of disability services and other opportunities into actual achievements. Such aspects of students' university experiences are not strongly accounted for within the Social Model of Disability that is dominantly adopted by universities, including the UFS.

The Social Model of Disability narrows the focus down to the removal of barriers to learning with less consideration of the freedom students have. The adjusted test and examination conditions instituted by the university and informed by the Social Model of Disability allows education systems to be inflexible and encourages students with learning disabilities to cope with their studies under separate conditions. Separate arrangements also encourage students with learning disabilities to be pathologised and perceived as intellectually inferior if they experience university under inflexible systems and teaching practices.

In addition, the adjusted conditions give students a false sense of security that is not sustainable in situations where there is no support. Students aspire to do great things based on successes propped up by university support systems without critically imagining how they can operate in unsupported situations. Despite these shortfalls, the adjusted test and examination conditions enhance students' capabilities as there are noted positive effects associated with engaging the

services of CUADS. However, currently, students' capabilities are enhanced to a certain extent as adjusted conditions are only offered to tests and examinations and not during teaching and learning.

Within the Capability Approach, every student is considered as a subject of social justice who should be enabled to function within the education system at equal terms with others or have equal claims on access to pedagogy and other components of university education. The Capability Approach therefore accounts for any form of disadvantage and upholds transformed education systems that cater for diversity such that students can function well towards the achievement of what they value in their academic engagements. Therefore, rather than having separate arrangements that can only be accessed after disclosure and confirmation of a medical diagnosis of a learning disability, university systems ought to offer students conditions of learning that are all-encompassing and mindful of students' wellbeing. Nonetheless, students value the education they receive, even though they have a limited understanding of the value of higher education compared to what the Capability Approach offers.

The dominant framing of higher education is within the Human Capital Approach where the economic value of education is prioritised. The Capability Approach furthers this understanding to incorporate students' wellbeing, which is not limited to academic success within the human capital framing, but addresses the expansion of opportunities that contribute to it. The Capability Approach's expansive conceptualisation of the benefits of higher education encompasses its instrumental value and other intrinsic accomplishments that constitute a flourishing life, such as education that enables the appreciation of diversity or people's civic roles in upholding equality in society. This study thus further argues that the framing of students' benefits in terms of academic excellence, and for economic gains, is a

narrow framework with which to make sense of students with learning disabilities' trajectories, student experiences and educational outcomes.

9.3 A general overview of students' learning experiences

Students' narratives of experiencing university show concerns over the physical and social environment. The narratives also reveal that teaching and learning arrangements that constrain them from accessing pedagogy, learning well, and achieving satisfactory academic results. The overcrowded lecture halls disadvantaged (ten) students with ADHD who get easily distracted and experience negative bodily reactions to learning environments they find stressful. Such conditions force students to contend with conditions that cause them to draw very little benefit from lectures. The long duration of lectures is unbearable for students with ADHD who have short concentration and focus spans. Students therefore can only be attentive to the lecturer for a short period. Students with dyslexia find difficulties in benefiting from lectures as existing teaching modes do not suit their processing abilities. Of concern to most students in this study is that most lecturers do not recognise learning disabilities in teaching, leaving them with unmet learning needs. The lectures are fast-paced such that those with poor auditory perception have difficulties understanding them. The common use of projected slides creates problems for students with poor visual perception and poor reading fluency as they fail to capture and process information correctly in class. Lecturers too allude to their lack of skills to accommodate students with learning disabilities in addition to the challenges they face in satisfactorily attending to students who need extra academic help. The main problem facing lecturers is that they are overloaded with work due to big class sizes that leave students to manage most learning processes on their own. Lecturers only become aware that students with (unspecified) disabilities are in their classes when CUADS asks them to send the exam

questionnaire to their office. Hence, lecturers teach, assuming that all students are coping. The difficulties that students with learning disabilities face in learning can affect the achievement of the educational functionings that contribute to the attainment of the qualifications that students value.

This study also established that even though students have learning disabilities, their difficulties in learning are exacerbated by learning conditions that are not considerate of their disabilities. It is the learning conditions that negatively affect students' academic performance. Where the university supports learning disabilities, which is during tests and examinations, students reported that they perform well. They are able to demonstrate their full potential because of adjusted conditions in the form of extra time, scribes to assist with reading out questions and writing students' responses, and exam venues with fewer distractions. More information on this is presented in the next section where I explain how the research questions were addressed.

9.4 How the research questions were addressed

The following research questions were addressed as explained in this section. The study's main research question is, "How can a university foster capability formation for students with learning disabilities?" The sub-questions are:

- i. What do students with learning disabilities value in and out of their university education?
- ii. How has the University of the Free State constructed and implemented interventions that target students with learning disabilities? How do these interventions meet the needs of students with learning disabilities?
- iii. What and how do conversion factors enable or inhibit the formation of valued capabilities for students with learning disabilities?

Research question one on what students value in and out of university education is addressed both empirically in Chapter 7 and analytically in Chapter 8. Students gave accounts of what they perceive a university is for, and what university education has enabled them to do. All the students indicated that a university is a place for them to learn and attain a degree that enables them to get a job. Students indicated that they value passing and progressing well academically, for them to achieve a university qualification. They also mentioned the other benefits they derived from experiencing university education such as appreciating diversity, self-knowledge, maturity and improved personal relationships. Students mentioned these gains only after probing them on the non-academic benefits they think university education has enabled them to do. In analysing the sentiments raised by students, it can be said that students value higher education as human capital formation and prioritise being educated for economic benefits. However, the additional benefits that students reported are intrinsic and recognised within the Capability Approach as necessary for the wellness of life. Thus, the Capability Approach views the benefits of education expansively to include both instrumentally economic ones and those that are intrinsically good. With capability formation being the focus of this study, it can be said that university education opens up opportunities for wellbeing (individual or communal), which can be achieved not only through academic success with economic value, but also through personal developments that are intrinsically valuable.

Research question two on how the UFS has constructed and implemented interventions that target students with learning disabilities was addressed empirically in Chapters 5 by analysing university policies and support staff perspectives. As mentioned earlier, the university allows students with learning disabilities to write tests and examinations under adjusted conditions. Adjusted conditions are thus offered at the end of the learning process, leaving teaching and learning unsupported. Students complained about such an arrangement saying that they do not

draw much benefit from lectures and have to devise coping strategies to manage learning. By intensifying support to students with learning disabilities at the end of the learning process, it reflects a university system that is more interested in the outcomes (that are usually pre-specified) than the process of learning that contributes to outcomes. Focusing a lot on outcomes means that the capabilities associated with learning, such as the capability for participation, are diminished.

Nonetheless, the proposed university policies on teaching, learning and disability indicate its commitments to implement multi-modal teaching and learning designs in addressing diversity. The university is encouraging blended learning, multiple ways of presenting information, multiple ways of engaging with students and multiple ways of assessing students (UDL). It is also encouraging teaching strategies that suit increased enrolments at the university but with no commitments to avail the resources that enable that. The university also promises to train staff members and conduct more awareness campaigns to conscientise and skill lecturers, but there are no practical guidelines to indicate how it would work for students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, the policies in which those commitments are made are not yet fully implemented as they are new or still in draft form (in the case of the university's disability policy at the point of data analysis). The Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA) policy that this university follows does not address teaching and learning in much detail. Therefore, this study is investigating policies whose contributions to the formation of students' capabilities are not fully operational and might not offer much help in assessing how the university contributes to the formation of students' capabilities, especially during teaching and learning.

Analytically, research question two is addressed in Chapter 8 where the university arrangements were examined to establish what expands or diminishes students' capabilities in their academic engagements. The satisfactory marks that students have been able to attain are credited to adjusted test and examination conditions that students with learning disabilities receive. All the students reported that this form of disability accommodation helps them to display their full potential during exams, resulting in them progressing well with their studies. Ten students initially got poor marks when they wrote examinations at the usual examination venues where conditions are not adjusted. The conditions at the conventional examination venues limit students' academic potential. Hence, students reported that they experienced difficulties in performing at their best levels under standard exam conditions. Some students with slow reading and writing pace, poor attention span and focus ended up producing incomplete work. Those with bad spelling skills, high levels of anxiety, and excessive panic attacks produced poorly articulated work. Students depend on extra time, the help of scribes who read questions to the student and write the verbally presented answers (from the student), and the small sound-proof venue to articulate tests and examinations optimally. Satisfactory marks and successful progress in their studies are important to students, who indicated that their most valued achievement is to earn a degree. Hence, in terms of capability formation, students are enabled to work towards the achievement of the degree they primarily value.

Besides having an environment supportive enough to display students' full potentials that yield good marks, students reported the positive effects of obtaining satisfactory marks. Brian, for example, developed confidence in undertaking academic tasks and other social aspects such as reading the bible in church and making friends. The positive progress all the students reported making in their studies due to the supportive examination environment created at CUADS also contributes to their ability to aspire to achieve great things in their lives. Students have hopes

for a bright future because they are experiencing success in their studies. For example, Sammy and Ziyanda hope to further their studies and Frank expressed a desire to work overseas. There is thus, a chain effect in the expansion of students' capabilities that emanates from the disability accommodation that students receive and this extends to successes in other aspects of their lives.

Apart from the beneficial adjusted examination conditions, CUADS (the place) itself is viewed by students as a "sanctuary" or a "safe" place that offers protection from social ridicule or rebuke. For example, Sammy who struggles with bodily reactions reported that she can freely express her emotions and actions at CUADS. Sammy cries before each exam and is now not worried about being judged because students and staff members at CUADS understand her condition. Such an opportunity to freely express oneself reflects CUADS as a place that expands students' capability for emotional integrity, which students reported as important.

Furthermore, all students reported that there are forms of care, empathy and imagination in the space of CUADS that are not common anywhere else at the university. For instance, Cici stated, "they all look different" and the way staff members entertain the needs of students, particularly the "polite" invigilators, means that the capability for imagination, empathy and care is expanded at CUADS. Hence, while the university focuses on students' academic success by making arrangements for exams to be written under special conditions, there are multi-dimensional effects on the students. The effects do not only sustain academic success, but they also contribute to the broader wellbeing of students.

However, it can be said that disability accommodations are helpful to students' academic engagements, but they also present certain inadequacies. The ten students who engaged

CUADS after failing tests or modules were first regarded as “failing” students before they were considered as students with learning disabilities. Such situations mean that it is through students’ poor academic performance that they could be identified before confirmation of, or support for learning disabilities was granted. Such a scenario can encourage unnecessary stereotypes against students with learning disabilities as literature notes that underperformance attracts the stigma of mental incompetence. Stigma can affect the way a student engages with learning such that one fails to realise opportunities that contribute to the achievement of educational functionings, as explained under conversion factors.

Furthermore, students have realised that even though CUADS has a positive effect on students’ academic endeavours, there are functional problems. Sammy, Ziyanda, Kristen and Liz, for example, raised concerns about the administrative and structural problems associated with writing exams at CUADS. Among them are, the poor communication between departments and CUADS or poor communication between a student writing at CUADS and his or her department to address discrepancies on the question papers that affect students negatively. Furthermore, there are cases where answer scripts are overlooked because the lecturers forget to mark scripts delivered to them in envelopes from CUADS, causing students to have incomplete results on their modules. Also, the single venue that is good for being small and less distractive is not large enough to accommodate all the students who need to use it, such that some have to wait and write exams after prolonged moments of experiencing stress and anxiety. Students thus reported that they sometimes feel “disadvantaged” when they write tests and exams at CUADS while the university and other students see nothing else other than students being supported. Within the Social Model of Disability, such nuances are not accounted for, but the Capability Approach encourages the identification of intervening factors, as subtle as they might be, that can interfere with students’ ability to benefit from availed

services. Therefore, university arrangements that support students with learning disabilities might seem to be everything that students need if we only consider distributional aspects of responses to learning disabilities.

Research question three, which asks what and how conversion factors enable or inhibit the formation of valued capabilities for students with learning disabilities, is addressed analytically in Chapter 8 where students' experiences are examined from a capability framework. The identified conversion factors are grouped into personal, environmental and social factors as summarised in the diagram below.

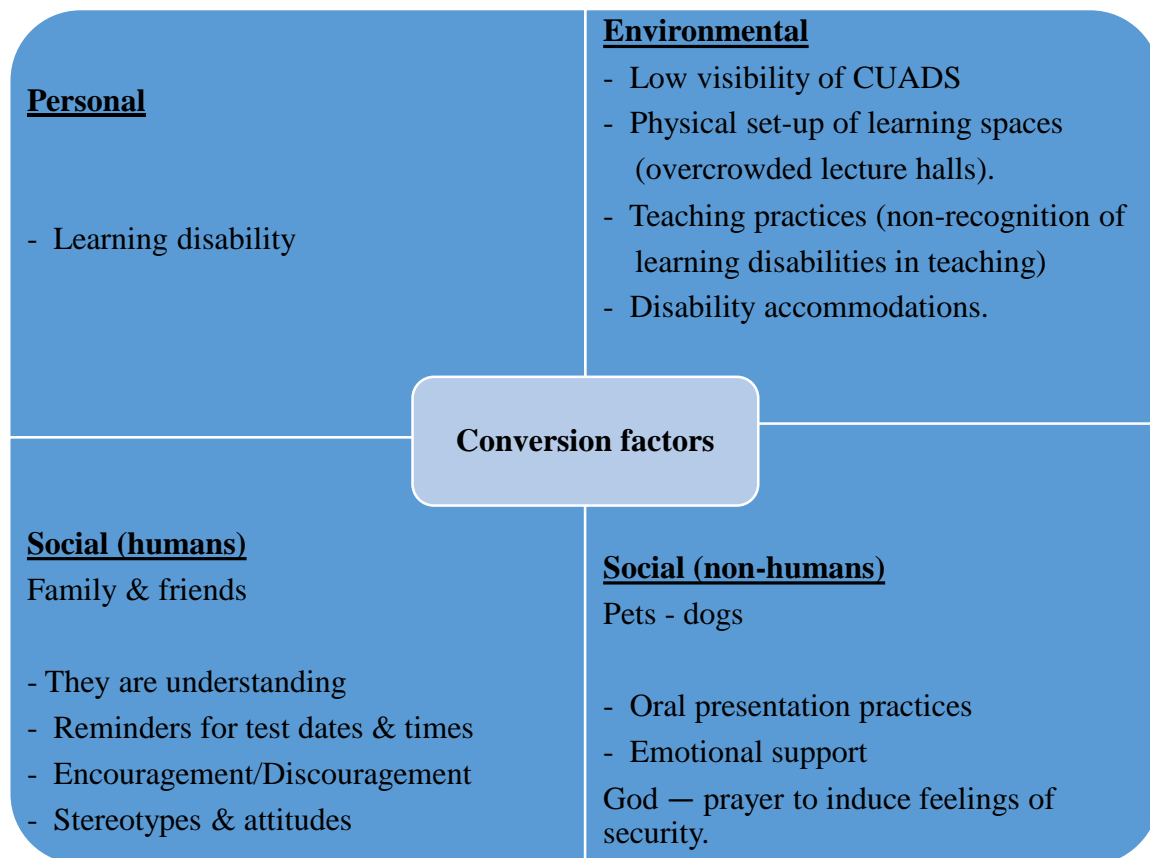


Figure 4: Conversion factors affecting students' experiences (author's own illustration)

All the conversion factors are discussed with respect to their relationship to learning disabilities and how they affect students. There are conversion factors that diminish students' chances of learning well and stand in the way of them achieving functionings that are important for their educational and personal wellbeing. Conversion factors with a positive effect on students' educational trajectories, for example, disability accommodations and social support, expand students' capability sets and enable them to engage well with their studies. The conversion factors with a negative effect reflect university arrangements that do not adequately attend to the needs of students with learning disabilities. The non-recognition of learning disabilities in teaching, for example, disadvantages students who require more time to process information during lectures. Conventional teaching methods that are conducted with the assumption that students have the same abilities, or they can all focus and understand lectures and follow a linear progression path, affect students with learning disabilities such that they struggle to acquire discipline knowledge or to contribute to debates during the lecture. Conversion factors are thus important to consider when assessing how students with learning disabilities experience higher education.

Furthermore, having adjusted test and examination arrangements meant to support students with (learning) disabilities reflects the university's conformist approach, whereby students with disabilities are expected to meet the expected academic standards under special arrangements or adjusted conditions without any alternative ways of accessing pedagogy. There is less room for students with learning disabilities to access pedagogy in ways that do not challenge or disadvantage them. Thus, disability accommodations do not transform pedagogical practices that make students feel that they cannot make it without support instead of them being in control of their learning. Students with learning disabilities are therefore pathologised under university arrangements that sustain differences among students and positioning those with learning

disabilities outside the norm. Thus, CUADS' adjustments to tests and examinations do not overcome the approaches that pathologise students with learning disabilities.

9.5 Capability formation for university students with learning disabilities

As stated in the introductory chapter, capability formation in this study involves developing opportunities that shape what students can be or do. As such, capability formation involves how institutional arrangements affect students' educational trajectories and how or what students can benefit from higher education. This approach to students with learning disabilities' learning experiences addresses opportunities to function well (availed by the university) with the aim of promoting students' wellbeing.

The removal of barriers to learning (which refers to anything that hinders students from participating and succeeding in their studies within the Social Approach to Disability) through disability accommodations is part of the university's arrangements to support students with learning disabilities. This study notes that the university organises adjusted test and examination conditions for students with learning disabilities, which contributes to academic excellence as students can demonstrate their actual potential. This university arrangement is recognised as central to the formation of students' capabilities because it creates conditions for students to do and be what they have reason to value.

The Capability Approach expands the understanding of university arrangements by taking into consideration a number of factors that contribute to capability formation. First, it considers institutional arrangements not as support services as they are commonly known within the

existing literature, but as opportunities granted to students with learning disabilities such that their wellbeing is improved. Hence, students are not regarded as needing support, but as subjects of justice who should learn under conditions considerate and ethical enough to ensure that they function well and achieve wellbeing. Therefore, institutional arrangements are viewed in terms of how they expand or diminish capabilities. They are also assessed for factors that interfere with students' abilities to utilise disability services maximally. The university might be conscious of constraints that students can face, but the Social Approach to Disability considers these as barriers that impede student success. The Capability Approach regards them as constraints against the achievement of what students value, with the ultimate result of diminishing opportunities for wellbeing. Thus, the formation of students' capabilities does not only involve how a university responds to learning disabilities but also students' abilities to convert disability services into valued achievements that contribute to wellbeing. For example, reported negative attitudes that constrain students from freely identifying with the Disability Unit (CUADS) are taken into consideration instead of assuming that students' needs are fully met because there are disability services at the university. A further example could be students who feel disadvantaged by writing exams at CUADS, while the university assumes that adjusted examination conditions address students' needs.

Second, literature shows that disability services are often meant to support academic success, which is dominantly framed in terms of human capital creation that contributes to employability and productivity at work. The Capability Approach conceptualises disability services as university arrangements and regards students' success in relation to the various dimensions of students' lives. Education is regarded in its instrumental and intrinsic values for capability formation, not only for workforce formation. Thus, university education is not only good for enabling students to get jobs, but also for opening up opportunities that contribute to

living well (wellbeing) or to human flourishing, such as valuing relationships or being confident to participate in social issues (reading a bible in church as in Brian's case). Therefore, students' personal developments that are both academic and non-academic, economic and non-economic, are acknowledged within the Capability Approach. Thus, the approach exposes limitations in nurturing students and the benefits they gain from experiencing university education that are embedded in the human capital approach, where education is reduced to workforce formation instead of capability formation. A summary of students' capabilities follows next.

9.6 Capabilities for students with learning disabilities

Although this study established some university arrangements that have shown inadequacies in responding to students with learning disabilities, it also revealed how other arrangements have contributed to the formation of a set of students' capabilities. Nine capabilities were established, four of them linked to university education and five to the disability services offered by the university. Starting with the capabilities linked to CUADS and the accommodations it provides, these capabilities are:

- **Capability to demonstrate full ability in learning** — being able to fully display one's ability in academic engagements. This capability has been enhanced by CUADS' expansion of the conditions of possibility for students to express their acquired knowledge in tests and examinations.
- **Capability for confidence** — being confident to express an opinion, to succeed with learning tasks, and being encouraged and supported in learning and not to feel shame, embarrassment or fearfulness in university settings. Students became confident to articulate

learning and other personal tasks beyond learning after receiving disability support that helped them show better achievement.

- **Capability to aspire** — having the ability to hope for a good future. After achieving satisfactory marks because of conducive examination conditions, students developed a positive outlook for the future such as furthering their studies and working overseas.
- **Capability for emotional integrity** — being able to express feelings or emotions without constraint or fear of judgement. At CUADS, students can express their emotions freely unlike anywhere else at the campus where students are afraid of social ridicule if they openly show bodily reactions.
- **Capability for 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, being able to deliberate ethically. At CUADS, students with different disabilities care for each other because they all understand what it is like to have a disability. The staff members, too, are described by students as being very caring and understanding such that students articulate their work well.

The capabilities associated with university education are as follows:

- **Capability for professional and self-knowledge** — being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject or self, using critical thinking, reflexivity and imagination for career, social, political and economic opportunities and personal development. Students demonstrated that they value the knowledge that contributes to them getting a degree (that is instrumental in getting employment). The valuing of professional knowledge by students shows in how students wish learning conditions to be improved so that they can access pedagogy with less difficulties.

However, from the narratives given by students, the capability for self-knowledge is more explicitly represented than for subject knowledge due to the obstacles students face in acquiring subject knowledge. However, The exposure to university and the interaction students have with different people has enabled students to understand themselves better than they did before in relation to the limitations they face that are associated with their learning disabilities. Thus, there are students, for example, who now embrace diversity more than they did before having come to university.

- **Capability for economic opportunities** — having opportunities to have economic gains through higher education. Despite students not thinking of the reality of working in unsupported conditions, they all stated that they have a good chance of attaining a qualification that enables them to get a job.
- **Capability for resilience** — being able to navigate studies, persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and to be adaptive to constraints. Students indicated that the demands of university education has caused them to improvise and develop dispositions towards their work that are important for them to succeed. Students too sought disability support upon realising that they were not progressing well with their studies.
- **Capability for affiliation** — being able to connect or having social interactions with others. Students are able to form relationships that are instrumental in sustaining their studies. Apart from establishing relationships with family and friends to support learning, some students reported their affiliation with pets and God for social support in their studies.

Students have formed and achieved these capabilities to different extents, making them functionings. It is important to note that a list of capabilities focusing on university students

with learning disabilities has not yet been established elsewhere, and that this study could serve further research with such goals.

9.7 Recommendations

This study is not framed as an evaluative study, but as an analytical study that can contribute to policy improvements. Recommendations in this study are given, based on students' experiences, not the evaluation of the university policies. It can thus be said, even though the university arrangements towards supporting students with learning disabilities during tests and examinations have positive effects on students' educational engagements, there are aspects that negatively affect their learning. To start with, waiting until a student produces failing marks, months into the academic year before a student is identified as having a learning disability, can be very detrimental to students' academic self-concept. A student can develop a low self-concept towards educational tasks if they demonstrate that they are not meeting the expected standards. The ten students in this study who initially failed to perform well academically because they had not registered for disability accommodations at the university reported that they were not aware that the university offers disability services for learning disabilities. Most of them thought less of their academic potentials, with one student having had to leave university for a more practical qualification. The university could therefore do well to intensify campaigns and find effective means to encourage students to register learning disabilities at the onset of their studies. An example would be approaching students individually through emails containing information about CUADS, the services it offers and why students who qualify for its services should enrol for such services.

The existing method of recruiting students, where they indicate on the application form that they have a disability that requires support, might not be very effective as this study's participants revealed. It is clear that students do not disclose information about their disabilities before they start studying because those who do so are contacted by CUADS to be enrolled to access disability accommodations. The non-disclosure of disabilities when applying for university enrolment confirms findings in the existing literature that some students do not disclose disabilities for fear of rejection into their preferred study programmes. On the application form, it is better to explain, but briefly, why students should indicate that they have a disability and the support services that the university offers. Students can assume that information on disabilities might only be for statistics purposes or for identifying 'at-risk' students, given the fact in the literature that learning disabilities are associated with the stigma of mental incompetence. Therefore, it could be helpful to include a statement that describes why the university requires information on students' disabilities in the hope that students would be convinced to disclose their learning disabilities.

In light of learning disabilities not recognised in teaching and learning, and in light of the challenges students face in unsupportive face-to-face learning conditions, this study makes some recommendations. The university should ensure that the teaching and learning designs and methodologies attend to all forms of diversity so that all students engage well with their studies. Lecturers can be skilled in designing and presenting learning material that is accessible and easily usable to every student. Alternative means of accessing pedagogy such as options for remote and online learning and assessments can reduce the disadvantages that students with learning disabilities face. While the university's teaching and learning policy addresses blended learning and other open learning methods (where students can make contributions to what and how they are taught), it should be a typical university pedagogical approach, not just a

contingency plan, e.g. in response to disruptions to on-campus learning activities as is the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this study recommends flexible mainstream learning systems that allow those with learning disabilities to learn and fulfil all their degree requirements without feeling disadvantaged. Institutionalising the Universal Design for Learning principles in the development of learning spaces, content, teaching and assessment modes is recommended to improve accessibility and usability of learning material for students with diverse needs.

The study also recommends the mandatory skilling of teaching staff to deliver lectures in ways that cater for diversity so that even if they are not informed of the disabilities among students, students can still learn well and benefit from lectures. For example, lecturers can be trained and necessitated to present learning material in multi-modal formats that include digitally recorded lectures, notes accompanied by visual and auditory aids or making blended pedagogies a university norm. Progression expectations should also not be expected to be linear. As it stands, some lecturers assume that all students are typical university learners who can sit still, listen and understand, and produce the expected learning outcomes afterwards. Yet, there are students with attention and other processing challenges that require diversified ways of learning and assessment. Hence, capacitating lecturers to consider students' diverse learning and assessment needs would allow students with learning disabilities to engage better with learning than they currently do.

In addition, disability support is limited to students' academic trajectories as they enhance students' chances of achieving satisfactory grades, but adjusted examination conditions cannot sustain students beyond university. Students are being supported to go through university, not to have capabilities or life-long skills that can sustain them in work situations. Hence, there

were moments of reflection when I asked students about how they would manage work situations if learning disabilities are not supported, given the fact that most people with learning disabilities are unemployed or underemployed as they fail to be productive in unadjusted workplaces. Therefore, a university (that trains the future workforce) should not only be concerned about learning outcomes that qualify students for jobs, but also about how students will be able to pursue what they have reason to value through those jobs, and in life in general. It would be more helpful if the university or the higher education and training department liaised with the labour department to institute structures to support graduates with learning disabilities. The university too, through the expertise it has in disabilities and students' development, can devise sustainable forms of support that benefit students beyond university activities. An example of this could be adopting programmes that impart life-long skills that are important in managing life and its demands. By this, students' capabilities can be expanded beyond the university context to enhance their general flourishing. On this note, further research can be conducted on the transition of students with learning disabilities into the workplace and how they get along with the conditions they face.

9.8 Significance of the study

This study contributes knowledge on the growing discipline of learning disabilities in higher education. The reviewed literature in this study reveals that learning disabilities in higher education is an under-explored area, particularly within South Africa where physical disabilities get more scholarly attention than learning disabilities. Little knowledge on learning disabilities in the higher education context can result in students' experiences of pedagogy and assessments being less known, leaving students with unmet academic needs. Therefore, by

focusing on university students with learning disabilities' learning experiences, what they value in higher education, how a university responds to learning disabilities and how students experience those responses to reflect the contribution made towards students' (multi-dimensional) success, this study furthers knowledge on an under-researched area.

Apart from the empirical contribution this study makes, it also offers conceptual contributions in understanding students' learning experiences as those that should not only be understood in relation to academic excellence, but to students' overall wellbeing (using the Capability Approach). It further contributes a conceptual view on how to respond to learning disabilities. While the Social Approach that the university adopts is important for its emphasis on the removal of barriers to learning, the Capability Approach embraces that but goes further to account for what students can potentially become and do (capabilities). It also strongly accounts for the intervening conversion factors that influence the ability of students to convert disability services into valued achievements (functionings), and the role students play (agency) towards achieving what they value. The Capability Approach therefore goes beyond just provisioning or distributive justice as a way of attending to inequalities as is the norm within the Social Approach to incorporate process justice. Process justice involves assessing available resources or disability services to determine how much functionality a student gets from them in light of different impeding factors. It also encourages a normative stance in responding to inequalities in education where universities should regard every student as a subject of social justice so that no student is disadvantaged in learning and succeeding in higher education. Therefore, the Capability Approach offers a more nuanced approach that deals with the issues of the existing disability approaches. The Capability Approach also offers an expansive understanding of what education is good for, which this study established as broader than the economic value. Hence, the Capability Approach's conceptual expansiveness is useful in

offering policy insights on how a university can contribute towards the expansion of opportunities that are essential for students' wellbeing at the university and life in general. However, further research that establishes a list of capabilities through public deliberations (which is a key methodological aspect within the Capability Approach) with students with learning disabilities would enrich the capabilities knowledge base.

9.9 Conclusion

In sum, this study reveals that the arrangements that the university put in place to address the needs of students with learning disabilities are enhancing on the one hand, and marginalising on the other. There is a set of capabilities that is 'double-dimensional' or paradoxical in purpose in that the same capabilities that enable students to engage well with tests and examinations encourage the separation of the abled and those with disabilities. Therefore, within the broader university structure, there is a set of policy actions that is important in addressing students with learning disabilities' needs, but has effects that perpetuate difference and encourage inflexible assessment systems.

The thesis' focus on students' experiences as capabilities is important in the field of learning disabilities in higher education because it, not only addresses opportunities for students to learn well, but also opportunities for living well. Literature notes that learning disabilities are chronic and can be regarded as a life-long disability. Therefore, insights on students' experiences that account for wellbeing in general life are important for sustaining students' engagements in other aspects of life outside the university context. The Capability Approach adds value to the existing Social Model of Disability by expanding the understanding of learning disabilities and

how they should be effectively responded to. This study is therefore relevant and timely as little knowledge exists on students with learning disabilities' university engagements within South Africa, where inclusivity is topical, given its political history that is associated with exclusion. Internationally, the study contributes to debates on inclusive education that is advanced by, among others, the United Nations (through the Sustainable Development Goal 4). This study is also relevant as critical disability scholars, including Shakespeare (2014), have called for alternative or new approaches to disabilities because they regard the Social Approach as outdated because of its weak consideration of impairment in understanding disability.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethical clearance letter



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

29-Mar-2019

Dear Ms Manase, Ndakaitei N

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Exploring graduate outcomes formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university

Ethical Clearance number: **UFS-HSD2019/0038**

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Petrus Nel

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix 2: Ethical clearance letter with amendments



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

29-Oct-2020

Dear Ms Manase, Ndakaitei N

Amendment Approved

Research Project Title:

Narratives of capability formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2019/0038/2903/2507

We are pleased to inform you that your amendment application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for notifying the ethics committee of the changes/amendments that have been made to your study; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee



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Appendix 3: Authorities approval



Office of the Vice-Rector: Research and Internationalisation
Kantoor van die Viserektor: Navorsing en Internasionalisering

18-Apr-2019

Dear Ms Ndakaitei Manase

UFS AUTHORITIES APPROVAL

Research Project Title:

Exploring graduate outcomes formation for students with learning disabilities t a South African university

This letter serves as confirmation that your request to collect data from students and/or staff members at the University of the Free State for your research project has been approved.

Kind Regards

PROF RC WITTHUHN
VICE-RECTOR: RESEARCH & INTERNATIONALISATION
CHAIR: SENATE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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Appendix 4: Information sheet and consent form

RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

DATE: _____

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Exploring graduate outcomes formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Ndakaitei Manase

Student No. 2014214742

Cell: 0767969196

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Economic and Management Sciences

Centre for Development Support

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr Pablo Del Monte (2017558871)

Contact Number: 0712243722

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The proposed study aims to explore what students with learning disabilities find valuable from being educated at a university. These valued gains are referred to as graduate outcomes in this study. Apart from identifying which ones are these valued outcomes, the study also examines the conditions within which they are formed and achieved – which mainly includes social and institutional arrangements that enable or constrain the formation of graduate outcomes or the presence of a learning disability. These gains are both instrumental and intrinsic to include, among others, personal developments, aspirations and general life opportunities that have been opened up and are considered important by students. I am conducting the study because learning disabilities are less explored in higher education in South Africa and graduate outcome policies are mostly formulated with less regard for students' dis/abilities and other contextual factors that impact on what the students with learning disabilities value to do or become.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

Ndakaitei Manase, a PhD student is conducting this research project to fulfil the requirements of a Doctorate study in Development Studies under the SARCHi Chair in Higher Education and Human Development in the Faculty of Economic & Management Sciences at the University of the Free State.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: ... UFS-HSD2019/003.....

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You are invited to participate in this research because you meet the criteria for participating in my study, which is: you are a registered UFS third-year student with a learning disability who is on the CAUDS database (that is why CUADS contacted you about my study). If you are willing to participate in my study, please respond to me directly as soon as you can (preferably not later than 30/04/2019. My contact details are stated at the end of this form.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

If you agree to participate in my study, I would like to interview you about what you have found valuable about your university education. You will be among approximately twenty students that I intend to have not more than two hours long face-to-face semi-structured interviews with. There is a possibility of a follow-up interview if necessary. Feel free to tell me about your experiences as truthfully as possible for there are no wrong or right answers. For the purpose of this study only, the interview will be audio-recorded, with your permission. I would like to have a record of your exact words to represent your expressed voice. You are also invited to participate in a half-day workshop (for a group discussion at a later stage after the interviews) where you will be asked to bring along symbols of inclusion and exclusion of students with learning disabilities at UFS (in the form of pictures, videos, poem, etc) as points of discussion. The reason for this discussion is to explore the conditions within which graduate outcomes are developed and achieved. Therefore, your participation in this workshop will enable me to establish the extent to which UFS is inclusive for students with learning disabilities.

Depending on how you respond, interview questions to be asked include, but not limited to: (a) Introducing yourself/background information (b) Your higher education experiences and the graduate outcomes that you value. These include what your university has enabled you to do that you could not

do before you enrolled as a university student, opportunities opened up for you after having been to university and any personal changes that you have undergone owing to your status as a student at this university, things you aspire to do in life and the freedom you have to achieve them. (c) Questions on learning disabilities. These include type of learning disability you have and how you understand it. How you manage university with a learning disability. Whether a learning disability has influenced what you want to get out of university and whether a learning disability is going to hinder you in future from doing the things you want to do and living the kind of life you want to live? Your nature of relationship with CUADS? - What works or/and what does not work well for you - the services you get at CUADS? Any suggestions on measures that you think are best to accommodate students with learning disabilities. The closing question seeks to support the use of narratives as a methodological strategy, therefore I would like to know why you agreed to talk to me about your experiences of studying and living with a learning disability.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation in the study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. You will not lose anything or be penalised for not participating in this study. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time without any penalties.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You can benefit from this study by having a safe and supportive space to speak about your disability and how higher education has influenced the things you can do or the person you can become. This can give you new insights and perspectives on how you understand your disability and whether it is a factor on what you aspire to do or become. An indirect and long-term benefit will be the potential the study has in contributing to the improvement of students with learning disabilities' experiences by providing helpful insights towards their full inclusion in higher education.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

No serious inconveniences are expected from participating in this study. By volunteering to take part in my study, I assume it as an indication that you are willing to talk about your disability to me. In case that you feel distressed from talking about your disability, and feel that you need psychological support, I have made arrangements with the UFS Students Counselling and Development Office for psychological help (free of charge). The Director for Students Counselling and Development Dr. Melissa Barnaschone agreed to organise psychological support for any UFS registered student who participate in my study. The contact details are: Telephone: 051 401 2853, Email: scd@ufs.ac.za. Please let me know of any discomforts that you might feel throughout the course of the study.

I intend to plan interviews in advance so that we both guard against loss of valuable time. We will agree on a day and time that is convenient to you. In as much as I would like to avoid inconveniences and mitigate possible risks resulting from participating in this study, I cannot not control how others might react towards students with learning disabilities – that is if they, by the slimmest chance, get to know that you participated in a study involving learning disabilities. The chance to be identified is slim because I will protect your identity as explained in the next section. I have, thought of the possibility of stigmatisation and resolved to include only students who have come out and reported their learning disabilities. By disclosing your disability to CUADS, there is an expectation that you are less anxious about negativity towards your disability. Please do not be alarmed by the involvement of CUADS in contacting you. The decision to involve CUADS in the recruitment of study participants was taken to avoid ethical challenges and access to prospective participants – but CUADS will not know who exactly participated since you will respond to me directly. CUADS is also aware of the purpose of this research and is looking forward to benefit in its management of learning disabilities from hearing the students' voices.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Anonymity is highly regarded in this research. I will protect your identity in all ways possible. Your real name and those of others you mention in the interviews will not appear anywhere in the report or other publications that might come out of the data you would have provided. Therefore, no one will be able to connect you to the responses you give. I will use a pseudonym/false name and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. I will also not disclose any other information that directly links you to the information in the study (such as your hometown or department).

I intend to personally transcribe the interviews and analyse the data myself. Therefore, there are no other external people who will have access to your information. However, your responses may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that the research is done properly, including the members of the Research Ethics Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to me, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. Even my supervisors will be given anonymised transcripts. Your anonymous data and the research findings will be used primarily to produce a thesis for a PhD study. However, there is a possibility of having other publications based on the data you would have provided, such as journal articles, conference presentations, book, policy briefs or other academic publications. In each of these cases, you will not be identifiable.

While I will make every effort to ensure that you are not connected to the information that you share during the workshop (a group discussion on inclusion and exclusion), I cannot guarantee that other participants in the workshop will treat information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to respect each other and keep the workshop proceedings confidential. For this reason, you are advised not to disclose very sensitive information in the workshop. As a measure to mitigate this risk, every workshop participant will sign a confidentiality agreement as a promise to maintain confidentiality.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for as long as they are needed in a locked cabinet at my office (to allow for future publications based on this project). For future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer and documents containing such information will be password-protected too. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. When nothing else has to be done with the data, hard copies will be torn and incinerated so that no trace of it will be left.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

You will be offered a R200 shopping voucher as a token of appreciation for your time and contribution to the study, not as payment. There are no other costs to be incurred by you as a participant.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

*If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact **Ndakaitei Manase** on 0767969196 or email **chikonzo.ndakaitei@gmail.com**. I intend to liaise with CUADS about holding a feedback session towards the end of the project on the research findings (you are welcome to attend). The thesis will also be accessible on the University of the Free State library repository which is available on the university website (<https://www.ufs.ac.za>). Should you require any further information or want to contact me about any aspect of this study, please do not hesitate to do so. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact my study supervisor **Dr. Pablo Del Monte**, email **delmontep@ufs.ac.za** or call at **0712243722** or the UFS Ethics office at **051 401 9451** or <https://rims.ufs.ac.za>.*

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *interviews and workshop proceedings*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher: **Ndakaitei Manase** _____

Signature of Researcher:  Date: _____

Appendix 5: Commitment from the student counselling office

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA



UFS·UV

STUDENT COUNSELLING &
DEVELOPMENT (SCD)
STUDENTE VOORLIGTING &
ONTWIKKELING (SVO)

28TH November 2018

Dear Ndakaitei Manase

Research Project: 'Exploring graduate outcomes formation for students with learning disabilities at a South African university'

Student Counselling & Development agrees to accept the referral of any registered UFS student participating in the above mentioned study.

Please feel free to contact me, should you have any further queries.

Yours truly

Dr Melissa Barnaschone

Director: Student Counselling & Development



Appendix 6: Experiences of learning disabilities (in students' own words)

Research Participant	Difficulties encountered and how students understand themselves
Liz (ADHD)	I get distracted easily. I struggle to maintain attention in class. I have 1 or 2 days where I get very depressed. I sometimes go through a mental shutdown. I get bored easily. I go on my phone in class if I am bored. Sometimes I just hear sounds, not actual words during a lecture. My mind goes everywhere in class. I am a wild person. I am just a hyper person. Everything at the university is just fast, fast and it is very difficult to cope with my condition.
Tamara (ADD – Misophonia)	It is too hard for me to write tests in class around so many people. When I am around people, I can't stay sane. I can't be near sound, especially when I am learning or when I am writing a test. When I got to the university, it was hard being in a classroom. I couldn't concentrate in a lecture, my mind was just on everything around me. I couldn't concentrate, so, I skipped a few classes. The sound of people walking irritates me. I want to be aggressive with the person making any sound. It's not something that I can control. You get irritated, you want to get aggressive, you have negative thoughts and you feel the urge to stomp out of a lecture. I always have earplugs on to shut out noise even if it means not hearing the lecturer's voice.
Frank (Dyslexia, ADHD, Dyscalculia)	I was struggling to pass at a public school and it got worse when I got to university. I have a heavy attention deficit disorder and mild dyscalculia. When I am reading something quickly, I swap numbers around. My attention is very bad to the point where I can't listen and write at the same time. If someone next to me just clicks a pen, then my attention goes there and I stop listening to the lecturer. If it happens three or four times, then I lose concentration forever and the lecture is wasted. First year was very tough, we were 800 in a class and I couldn't learn anything from the lecture. I skipped a few classes because of that. When the lecturer is walking and talking while people are writing tests, they don't understand that is disturbing to me. If I am doing a Maths problem and someone says

	<p>something or someone drops something, I have to start all over again then I start running out of time. My marks didn't reflect the effort I put into a test. I struggled to fit in because everyone else just seems to be doing just fine. I didn't have enough time to finish my tests because I had no extra time. I can't do both social life and studies. A small sound can break my attention and there is nothing I can do about it. When I lose my attention I take long to get back. I procrastinate a lot.</p>
Sammy (ADHD, Panic attacks)	<p>My body just reacts negatively to stressful environments and my stressors are writing tests. I feel very anxious. I start to get fidgety in class, and I cannot sit still, and then I lose concentration. I am a massive procrastinator. I can completely blow a small situation out of proportion just because my anxiety affects my sense of judgement. It can make me pretty irrational about some things, like sometimes, I kind of expect the worst out of a situation. I have a phobia of social anxiety. I don't like strangers. I struggle with adapting and adaptation starts a great amount of anxiety in me. New places, new surroundings freak me a lot, but the worst source of anxiety is tests.</p>
Ziyanda (ADHD, hearing impairment)	<p>I can't cut out sounds. I can't concentrate in a lecture. You won't have my attention if I am not on medication. I also struggle with time management. I also am an anxious person. Around an hour or thirty minutes, I do start losing the lecturer. I can't function in an environment where there are 500+ students.</p>
Molly (ADHD)	<p>I get extremely anxious for tests and exams. I don't do well with people. Often people are happy with me but I am not happy with them. I feel overwhelmed being around so many people, it unsettles me. Being around many students makes me so uncomfortable and nervous. It's important to me that people don't speak to me before I write an exam because I will forget everything, even the things that I know.</p>
Duncan (Autism, ADHD, ADD)	<p>I struggle to learn. I can't actually go on with academics because I struggle to learn. I get very depressed. I am happy on one day, the next I am sad. When I am low, I am not myself. I sometimes feel like I want to do bad things to people. My body is like a car, you stop at a robot, then you stop at another, then you accelerate, then you stop again. Then your body, is like a</p>

	<p>broken car starting to fall apart, up to a point where you can't go any further. I can't read, I can't write, I can't speak, I can't do anything. I want to be in that zone of "I want to learn today", If I don't want to learn, you don't get anything from me. My brain and body don't work together. I can think of a correct answer but that is not what I write down. My thinking and my talking don't correspond. The medication makes me very slow. I am very, very hyper active, I can't sit still in class. I can't remember the work as a normal person. I didn't adjust, I struggled when I joined the university. I don't talk a lot. I don't have confidence a lot to talk to strange people in a big group. I don't want to do community work because I am afraid that people are going to judge me because of my disability.</p>
Kristen (ADHD, Dyslexia)	<p>I can't read well and my spelling is not right. Without extra time, I struggle to get the marks that I want. I never used to connect with people easily. I read slowly to understand things.</p>
Anna (Dyslexia, ADD)	<p>My reading is very bad and my writing is very slow. I was always shy to read in front of people. I switch a b and a d. I don't know how to spell. If someone passes by, I want to see who it is, even in a test. I kept failing my subjects.</p>
Brian (Dyslexia, ADHD)	<p>I switched my b's and d's and reading from right to left. Reading and writing are my real problems. I struggle to sit still and if there is movement around people, then I don't focus that much. Somebody reads the questions for me in the tests because I just can't read correctly. I failed my first year and I couldn't go on studying. Any test was incredibly stressful for me. I thought I wasn't meant for university at that time. Anything that I needed to read or write was VERY, VERY stressful. No matter how much I was trying to put in, I would get nothing right. Before that (CUADS support), I was sub-human because I could not interface with the education system. I thought I was a total failure, When I don't have Retalin, it is very difficult to sit still in class. I can't sit in one position for long. When it get to 30 minutes, 40 minutes, then my brain just shuts off. Then I can't hear what they are (lecturers) saying anymore, I struggle to concentrate. I really struggle to make friends.</p>

Brenda (Dyslexia, ADHD)	I can say that I am a bit slow when it comes to learning and also doing things in the practical setting. I am struggling to pace up with things at the university. I forget things easily and people have to repeat it to me. I also struggle with understanding things. I panic a lot and I just can't finish tests without extra time, and I lose a lot of marks. I ended up failing. My brain is functioning normally but the information that has to be transferred to my hand is a bit slower no matter how fast I would try to write. I have noticed that when I start to panic, everything just shuts down. There are moments whereby I just sit, I just hold my pen and I can't move. It becomes very difficult when I am taught something, I take time to get it. I am very easily distracted. I struggle with spelling and writing. I write slowly and I also struggle with reading and the pronunciation of words. I stutter a bit but I say it in my head first before I can say it to people. I forget things easily. Most of the time I will be lost in a lecture. I will be in the class trying to focus and listening to the lecture but sometimes I can't hear anything. Sometimes I would have negative thoughts about myself. If we are in a conversation, and then I say something and I just go labbllaall. I just lose it. Like I just don't know what happens to my tongue.
Cici (Dyslexia)	If I write something I tend to switch words around and sometimes even numbers confuse me. I am not sure which one is left or right. So it's the things that other people just click, but I struggle with them. Or, if you ask me to spell a word I am gonna spend the whole day trying to get that thing correct. I get distracted easily. My mind dwindles off and focuses on what I am not supposed to. I don't have friends now.
Tony (Dyslexia)	I struggle with reading, I don't read with much grasp. I have somebody who reads for me. It's frustrating because I love reading. It takes me long to read and understand questions. I could not spell my name in primary school. I make tricks to pretend that I don't have a reading problem. There is an emotional downside to having a learning disability. It is rather embarrassing for people to know that you can't read.
Tess (Dyslexia)	Reading and writing is not my thing. It is very difficult to understand the slides. I used to switch numbers and words very badly, and I still struggle

	to read properly. I struggled to finish my tests and I failed some before I started writing at CUADS. I could not just keep up with the stress of university work. I don't have much interest going to the library because I can't read well. Big classes scare me to death.
Lerato (ADHD)	I grew up being a very naughty child. I am just hyper because of my ADHD. I never struggled with school. I am one of the best students in the department. I participate in discussions and I am always the one with ideas. I can still write at the usual exam venue and pass very well, but CUADS just help me not to rush with my work because of the 15 minutes extra time I get.