Research article

Experiences of Students Living with Physical Disabilities at a University of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

Society's inadequate response to disability impacts people's physical health, social relationships and lives in general which can be perceived in the realms of family, friends, neighbours, psychological state and level of independence. The consequences of a disability can have an impact on multiple levels, the personal, interpersonal, family and social (Catherin & Shanbhang, 2015). These impacts are mirrored – and in some ways exaggerated – in the lives of students living with disabilities. Students living with physical disabilities at universities of technology may experience challenges that negatively affect their studies. The purpose of the study reported in this article was to explore the experiences of students who are living with physical disabilities at a selected university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal. The study adopted a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were employed to collect data from the 10 participants. And participation of students living with physical disabilities was secured through the snowball sampling technique. The findings of the research revealed a variety of challenges that students with physical disabilities encounter at the selected university of technology.

Keywords

higher education, challenges, students, physical disabilities, university of technology

Introduction

Physical disability is the long-term loss or impairment of part of or a person's entire body function, resulting in a limitation of physical functioning, mobility, dexterity or stamina (Smeltzer et al., 2017). Similarly, for Narayanan (2018), disability is part of a human condition that renders a person temporarily or permanently physically impaired. Monroe County Community College (n.d.) defines physical disability as a condition that highly limits a person from physical activities, for example, walking, climbing stairs, reaching, carrying and lifting. Therefore, such limitations can hinder the person from accomplishing tasks of daily living.

Higher education has proven itself critical to (potentially improving) quality of life for especially the systemically marginalized today. However, it is evident that people living

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with disabilities have generally limited access to education in many parts of the world, especially in Africa and Asia (Opoku et al., 2015). Growth in the wider acknowledgement of this deficit and movements for social justice have influenced widespread developments in institutional recognition of social responsibility, leading institutions of higher learning in many countries to increase enrolment numbers of students living with disabilities. But trying to ensure full inclusion for the historically disadvantaged members of our communities, such as people living with physical disabilities, has different implications rooted in the needs of different groups. Thus, Dalton et al. (2019) suggest that universities must consider matters of physical and programmatic access in order to achieve the goal of inclusive education for people living with disabilities. This is in line with Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (Schulze, 2010, p. 75).

Engelbrecht and De Beer (2014) emphasise that higher education institutions still need to do more research on improving accessibility and living conditions for students living with disabilities. Murray et al. (2013) suggest that future studies analyse and amplify the importance of specific sources of support needed for students with disabilities. People with acquired physical disabilities experience many stressful situations in life because of various personal and environmental barriers (Byra & Cwirynkalo, 2018).

According to Opoku et al. (2015), the physical accessibility of school buildings is an important requirement to make education accessible to students with disabilities. Nonetheless, this is often ignored as most educational facilities are constructed without considering the concerns and needs of persons with disabilities. Barriers in academic institutions that obstruct access to education for people who are physically impaired include narrow doors, inappropriate seating arrangements, rugged terrains, inaccessible toilet facilities and lack of ramps.

According to the data produced by the South African Board for People Practice (2017, p. 2), the national disability prevalence rate in South Africa is 7.5%. Disability is more prevalent among females compared to males (8.3% and 6.5% respectively). More than half (53.2%) of persons aged 85 and older reported having a disability. The prevalence of a specific type of disability shows that 11% of persons aged five years and older have visual difficulties, 4.2% have cognitive difficulties (remembering/concentrating), 3.6% have hearing difficulties, and about 2% have communication, self-care and walking difficulties. Moreover, persons with severe disabilities have trouble in accessing education and employment opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

The ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1992) guided this study. According to this theory, human development is influenced by various forms of environmental systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The topic under study necessitated focus on microsystems and exosystems. According to Ettekal and Mahoney (2017), microsystems are the settings in which individuals directly interact with the immediate environment. Friends, classmates, family, neighbours and other people who have direct interaction with one in one's microsystem form part of this environment which

can positively or negatively shape the development a person. Attitudes projected towards a person by the environment may predict how the world is perceived by a person living with physical disabilities.

In microsystems, students who are living with physical disabilities should feel connected and thus should be able to forge healthy relationships with others. Students living with physical disabilities should not in any way feel left out of the system because of their conditions. The university plays a critical role in ensuring that the needs of the students living with physical disabilities are met accordingly. Sincero (2012) defines the exosystem as the setting in which there is a link between the context where the person does not have an active role and the context in which the person is actively participating. Assistance must be offered to families so that they are motivated in their exosystem relations. Some students who are living with physical disabilities have no active roles within the university. They do not participate in any decision-making or student leadership.

Literature Review

Challenges experienced by students living with physical disabilities

Soltani et al. (2011) state that it has been accepted that people living with disabilities have fewer opportunities and have a lower quality of life than the non-disabled. However, not giving people with disabilities opportunities to achieve and having low to no expectations of them is a form of discrimination (University of Canberra, 2014). Thus, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities Article 8 (a) explicitly states that awareness should be raised throughout society including at the family level, regarding persons with disabilities, and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.

People with physical disabilities encounter numerous other problems with their families and society. They often are unable to utilize their talents due to structural barriers in our wider society and the families of some tend to fail in caring for them in the absence of special rehabilitation and care centres, thus being deprived access to basic human rights such as the rights to health and education. People living with disabilities should be encouraged to live independently and participate in all aspects of life.

Their capacity to realise this independence is often further hindered by the difficulties physically disabled face when it comes to accessing various facilities, despite the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) containing the Bill of Rights which seek to ensure that no person is discriminated against. Chapter 2, Section 9(3) prohibits discrimination of all sorts including discrimination based on disability. This also includes access to the physical environment, transportation and information and communications technology systems (United Nations, n.d.). Lack of access to the aforementioned resources may therefore be regarded as an infringement of peoples' right to have their dignity respected and protected.

Yet the free movement of people living with disabilities continues to be restricted due to most buildings usually not being built in a manner that is accommodative of their bodies. Furthermore, even where some of the buildings have provisions for wheelchairs, depending on ability, some wheelchair users may need additional assistance to manoeuvre

in these spaces (Masarira, 2017). Yarfi et al. (2017) stress that public places and spaces should be accessible to everyone, whatever bodily ability. This calls for the integration of the wheelchair user into society, thereby granting them the capacity of participating in activities of daily living and ensuring equality in daily life.

Bascom (2017) reminds us, moreover, that transportation accessibility is very important for finding employment, education, healthcare and social interaction. People who face challenges in obtaining access to transportation are considered "transportation disadvantaged", which include those of lower socio-economic status, aging individuals and persons with disabilities. Accessing public transportation is a key drawback for people with disabilities, both young and old (Asia-Pacific, 2013). Additionally, they are likely to face more challenges and difficulties while they are traveling in and using public transport, as the needs of the disabled are rarely catered for.

Such deficiencies in access to buildings, public space and transportation in South Africa are arguably reflective of lacking regulation, and thus inadequate governmental enforcement. Therefore, the government must take all necessary measures in ensuring that rights of people with disabilities are protected, and thus allowing them access, on an equal basis with others, to facilities and services open or provided to the public, in both urban and rural areas. This includes institutions of higher learning. As a means of addressing some of these systemic inadequacies in the context of higher education, a framework for disability inclusion was recognized and established in 2018 (Dalton et al., 2019, p. 2).

Currently, there are gaps in universities' meeting the needs of students living with physical disabilities. This might be ascribed to the lack of awareness of how some of the experiences affect these students. Students living with physical disabilities face many challenges that can often, and quickly, progress beyond the physical if not addressed. The physical environments of universities, including the availability of sensor doors, ramps, fully functional elevators, to name a few, impact on the experiences of students with physical disabilities (Healey et al., 2011). Healey et al. (2011) contend that the lack of appropriate and adequate provisions of spaces and resources for students living with disabilities at the institutions of higher learning in South Africa adversely affect their education.

Challenges faced by students with disabilities are further compounded by the fact that they often isolate themselves from others because of rejection, fear of rejection and misunderstanding of their conditions and abilities. Their experiences of simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility leave them feeling misunderstood by their non-disabled peers and lecturers (Nel et al., 2015). According to Maotoana (2014), students living with disabilities are often discriminated against in their personal and social lives, experiences which tend to be mirrored in their academic involvements. Non-disabled students are found to be stigmatising and discriminating towards the students with disabilities. Negative attitudes of peers have a tremendous impact on the life of an individual with a handicap. The person's self-concept, cognitive and social development, academic performance and general psychological health may be largely affected (Idrees & Ilyas, 2012). This calls for universities to play a vital role in making sure that students who are living with physical disabilities are treated equitably and are by no means discriminated against.

Discrimination can be limited if the non-disabled recognize how they respond to students who are living with disabilities. Not allowing a student to go to campus because of a disability is considered as discriminatory and restricts the student's learning opportunities. This can be as limiting as the disability itself. In the context of education, it is unlawful for an education provider to discriminate directly or even indirectly against students because of their disability. Moreover, an education provider is expected to take positive steps in ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to education and the provision of services (Child Law Advice, 2018).

Tough et al. (2017) indicate that people with disabilities or body impairments often are disadvantaged due to limited opportunities to participate in social life. Hence, there is evidence that favourable exchanges with ones' proximate social environment, for example, family, friends and work life, exert beneficial effects on health and well-being. Furthermore, the ability to share one's life and connect emotionally through friendship is habitually reported as a critical factor in the development and maintenance of life satisfaction.

The role of environmental barriers and discrimination in contributing to poverty and exclusion of people with physical disabilities is now well understood. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities *(*Article 3) outlines the measures needed to remove barriers and promote participation. Moreover, there is a need to develop appropriate opportunities for people with disabilities throughout their life course (Business & Disability Organization, 2018). The work of scholars like Tough et al. (2017) reflect the observations of the World Health Organization (2011), that response to disabilities has undergone a radical change in recent decades.

In line with these changes and scholarship reflective thereof, the study on which this article is based sought to explore the experiences of students living with physical disabilities at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal. This included exploring the challenges that the students experience relating to the infrastructural setting and the effects that the structural hindrances have on students' academic development. By centralising the experiences of students living with physical disabilities, the research study hopes to contribute to the discovery and improved understanding of the factors that impact this student community and offer recommendations on how these factors may be addressed. The authors also hope to have helped the participant students feel empowered by the process of voicing their main concerns regarding their lived experiences.

Research Methodology

An exploratory, qualitative design was employed to conduct the study. According to Elkatawneh (2016), qualitative research aims to explore the meanings people attribute to their experiences, their culture and how they view a particular issue or case. Swedberg (2018) indicates that exploratory research is used to investigate a problem that is not clearly defined. Exploration can produce results that are valid and insightful if conducted in a manner that is transparent and self-reflexive (Reiter, 2017). This approach was appropriate for this study as it was used to better understand the experiences of students living with physical disabilities.

Park et al. (2020) identify a paradigm as a guide to scientific discoveries through their assumptions and principles, which helps illuminate the quality of findings that support scientific studies and identify gaps in generating sound evidence. Polit and Beck (2012) suggest that the constructivist paradigm is mostly aligned to qualitative research and assumes that reality is not a fixed entity but rather a construction of the individual participating in the research, and that many constructions are possible. For this study, a constructivist paradigm was adopted as participants shared their experiences and their realities were interpreted to discover the underlying meaning of events and activities. The study was conducted at a university of technology (UoT).

Kumar (2014) suggests that a study population can be a group of individuals from whom the information is required or can be obtained to find answers to the research questions. The researcher must decide who constitutes the study population to select the appropriate participants. The study was open to all students from first-year level to the fourth-year level of study, registered in all faculties. The total number of registered students living with physical disability was 17. For this study, the targeted number of prospective participants was 15 students (male and female). Only 10 gave consent to participate in the study.

Kumar (2014) states that a sample can be selected based on being easily accessible or based on the researcher's judgement that the person has extensive knowledge about an occurrence. This helps the researcher to obtain knowledge about their situation and experiences. The sampling strategy is the plan that the researcher sets forth to ensure that the sample used in a research study represents the population from which the sample is drawn (Landreneau, n.d.). The first participant was approached through the university's Disability Unit. Thereafter, the study employed a snowball sampling technique. According to Naderifar et al. (2017), snowball sample is defined as a non-probability sampling technique in which the samples have traits that are rare to find. Moreover, Naderifar et al. (2017) suggest that snowball sampling is used when the samples relevant to characteristics of the research are not easily accessible. Furthermore, De Vos et al. (2011) highlight that the chain can easily be broken, therefore the researcher should preferably ask each participant to identify other members instead of only one.

The researchers collected data to the point where no new information was coming forth, thus sample size was determined by data saturation. From the 15 possible participants, only 10 participants consented to participate in the research study. Participants were informed through the letter of information that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation should they feel the need to do so.

Demographic data

Nesterova and Jackson (2018) state that the gender gap in universities has tilted in favour of women because of increased access and inclusion of women in higher education, contrary to this study. Invitations to participate in the study were open to all students living with disabilities at the university of technology. However, overwhelmningly more male students took up the opportunity. Students who participated in this research study were aged

between 19 and 39 years. While this represents a good age spread, the aim of the study was not to gauge the maturity of participants and the effect it has on how they deal with challenging experiences.

Furthermore, of the participants, two were registered for information accounting, three for financial accounting one was registered for interior design, one was registered for taxation, one was registered for human resources, one was registered for business administration and one was registered for civil engineering. Three participants were in their first year, while five participants were in their third year and two participants were in their second year. The availability and willingness of the students to participate in the study is commendable as participation was purely voluntary. It is noted, however, that the programmes above are not a true representation of all the programmes offered at the UoT. The table below outlines the demographic information of participants.

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Participant no.	Gender	Age	Course registered for	Year of study
Participant 1	Male	19	Information Technology	1st
Participant 2	Male	29	Financial Accounting	3rd
Participant 3	Male	23	Interior Design	3rd
Participant 4	Male	20	Taxation	2nd
Participant 5	Male	19	Accounting	1st
Participant 6	Male	22	Human Resources	3rd
Participant 7	Female	22	Information Technology	3rd
Participant 8	Male	23	Financial Accounting	3rd
Participant 9	Male	39	Business Admin	1st
Participant 10	Male	26	Civil Engineering	2nd

Participation was voluntary and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Ethical clearance from the UoT was obtained. A limitation is that the study was conducted among students with physical disabilities at one UoT and therefore the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of students with disabilities in KZN.

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed. The areas of focus within the interview schedule were (a) challenges facing students living with physical disability; (b) how conducive the infrastructure is to the students' conditions; (c) the effects of the infrastructural hindrances on students' academic development; (d) determining if they can build social relations with other people and whether they feel a sense of belonging within the university environment; and (e) assess what positive interventions may be offered by the university to students with physical disabilities. Data were collected using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before data analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The themes that emerged from the data are presented next.

Findings

Challenges faced by students living with physical disabilities

The interview data looked into challenges experienced by students in terms of the formation and maintenance of relationships in four spheres. These spheres were relationships with fellow students; relationships with lecturers; relationships with other stakeholders and the infrastructural setting for students living with physical disabilities.

Relationships with fellow students

In response to the question about their relationships with fellow students, Participant 5 pointed out "some students think that they are better than us and also think that we are a burden to them". These sentiments were echoed by Participant 7 who added, "other female students look down at me because of my condition. I think it is because they think I will depend on them and use my disability as an excuse". Participant 1 felt that it was not easy for him to fit in as he said "it was hard uh ... it was not easy to fit in because I am disabled, the environment, it was difficult because I am used to being surrounded by people who are disabled". However, most participants felt that they coped because they are assertive and can freely express themselves when feeling left out or excluded and that they naturally connect with other people.

Relationships with lecturers

Participants felt that their relationships with the lecturers could be improved. Participant 6 felt that sometimes lecturers are not accommodative and added "let's say I have a problem with my wheelchair on my way to lectures, I must fix it, and when I get into the class it becomes a big issue, the lecturer thinks that I am undermining him/her. This causes a poor relationship between me and the lecturer". Participant 1 felt that he always has to make lecturers aware of the hindrances that he encounters concerning the "accessibility of lecture venues". He confirmed that it can be frustrating when he "negotiates for the change of venues "as it makes him the "centre of attention".

Relationship with other stakeholders

Many students felt the relationship with other stakeholders needed improvement. Participant 3 felt strongly about the dean of students not being considerate of students with disabilities as he contended, "at some point, we went to see the dean of students to table some of our concerns. The dean of students didn't even want to listen to us and just said – out you go! - out you go! - you don't have to come here; I only deal with your representatives". The same goes for the Student Representative Council – "when running for elections they canvas and only remembers that there is the disabled community at the end of their canvassing" (Participant 1).

The infrastructural setting for students living with physical disabilities

Wheelchair-bound students found that getting to campus and their lecture venues take a long time. Participant 1 confirms by stating "I attend lectures at Campus A - other students can easily cross the road - but for me, I have to go around the entire campus because I can't use the gate across the street because of the staircases. I have to go around and use the main gate (where there are no cars), that is used by the cars every day, which is time-consuming … and also dangerous since the road is busy with inconsiderate taxi drivers every day." Participant 5 concurs, saying "it takes a long way to have access to lecture rooms. Yah, it is a long way, like if I am attending at Campus C, I step outside of campus and 'walk' down the street". Participant 7 echoed the same sentiments: "there is no other route therefore I find myself on the road avoiding cars".

All participants felt that getting to the lecture venue itself is a big challenge for students living with disabilities. That operational lifts and a better system to ensure that they are serviced well and promptly are needed is clear from the experience recounted by Participant 1:

> uh – lecture venues – were a problem to me to the point where I ended up not attending and I missed out, like in the first semester there was a class that I did not go to – that was for the first-year experience and again, this semester also there was a class which is supposed to be in Campus C, D Block. The problem is that sometimes elevators are non-functional so I couldn't go.

Participant 6 was even more explicit in this regard: "we have a problem with lifts, they are always out of order. Especially at Campus C, the student lift always has a problem. If it wasn't for the staff lift, I would not attend some of the classes". Participant 8 gave voice to the problem of access: "I also wish that the school can have transport for students with the disability because the students on wheelchair – when it rains it becomes a problem for them to move from the residences to attend lectures. I am saying this on behalf of those who are using motorized wheelchairs who operate on batteries. If those batteries get exposed to water can be damaged". Participant 9 added "the lifts are the major problem, we once asked [university maintenance staff] to fix tiles as it is dangerous – tiles are slippery but we have not seen any difference".

Improvement of living conditions for students living with physical disabilities

According to Participant 8, "[university management] told us that they care about people who are living with disabilities, but they are doing things that do not match their words. I would need the university to take our needs/challenges seriously. It shouldn't get to the point where students throw in the towel and give up because her needs are not attended to. As we exhaust all the avenues where we are supposed to [get] help but to no avail – that becomes a problem".

Participants suggested that lifts to the lecture venues are needed, as using stairs is very difficult. Participant 2 shared the view that "the UoT should have ramps for wheelchair-

bound students and have sensor doors for the students that are on wheelchairs to move freely as they enter the doors". Participant 3 felt that leadership should engage and listen to their concerns, urging that "the UoT management must put themselves in the shoes of the disabled in order for them to know exactly what the disabled are going through." Participant 10 added "how I wish there could be a disabled person in a leadership position to influence decision-making."

In light of the apparent lack of accommodation shown to students living with disabilities, awareness campaigns to educate people about disabilities were viewed as important by all participants. Participant 5 took the view that "awareness campaigns should be facilitated to sensitize people and educate them about disabilities that can help to reduce the stigma that is attached to disability". Participant 6 concurred by stating "most importantly, may the university work more on doing campaigns and awareness programmes around campus for us students who are living with disability so that students will know about us."

Discussion

The framework of the following discussion is based on the two lenses provided by the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner, namely the microsystem and exosystem.

Microsystem

While some of the participants expressed having no challenges building and maintaining relationships with peers, perhaps due to the advantageous effects of high self-esteem and a good sense of humour; others feel rejected, discriminated against, and at times treated as if they do not exist. This is noted in the literature which confirms that non-disabled members of the faculty and student body often lack knowledge about and experience with students with disabilities, an ignorance that can directly impact the success and campus engagement of students (Evans et al., 2017). One may expect lecturers to be understanding and accommodative and when that is proven otherwise, students suffer a double blow. This statement resonates with the idea that there is a lack of either awareness on the side of educators or inadequate support available within the university (Melero et al., 2018; Mol et al., 2019). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities Article 4(i) emphasises the training of professionals and staff working with persons with disabilities to better provide the assistance and services required.

Exosystem

There are numerous challenges associated with the way buildings are designed which affect the accessibility of lecture venues and other service buildings. Further, due to the lack of structural accommodations, moving from the place of residence to campus poses a threat to wheelchair-using students, as they have to contend with taxis and their often-inconsiderate drivers. Thus, there should be a way to assist students to move safely from residences to campus.

The scarcity of lifts and preponderance of non-operational lifts pose further hurdles for students living with physical disabilities, forcing them to forego lectures when the challenge of getting to class on time proves insurmountable. When the lifts are not working, stairs are not an option for a wheelchair-bound person. While ramps can make for better alternatives to lifts, as noted, there are none. And although sensor doors may appear luxurious accessories to the ignorant eye, their function is a critical need to wheelchair-user and people reliant on crutches, as opening doors requires them to assume positions impossible or uncomfortable for them, which may otherwise be effortless for non-disabled persons. These findings align with the view of Evans et al. (2017). The UoT should monitor and service lifts regularly to ensure that they are in working order. Another option can be that lectures take place only on ground floor venues. In lecture venues, desks and chairs are bolted to the floor, making movement a challenge for a student with artificial legs, as flexible movement is limited. This then forces the student to sit rigidly and uncomfortably throughout the lecture period. There should be designated spaces reserved for students with special needs.

The challenges mentioned above are apparent even at the residences where resources allocated do not meet the needs of students living with physical disabilities. The kitchen is situated on the first floor and this creates an access challenge for students living with physical disabilities. Students using crutches find it a great strain, as they have to carry pots and other necessities up and down the stairs, which they do nonetheless because they have to eat. The university has provided platforms for students to table their grievances. While the existence of this forum is a net positive, the expectations of students are not always met. Ntombela (2013, p. 493) contends "even getting to those platforms such as student counselling, Disability unit or the clinic is met with challenges as they are inappropriately located thus are not accessible using a wheelchair".

Limitations of the Study

While the study realised its goal of exploring the experiences of students living with physical disabilities at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, it came up short in terms of generalizability of its findings due to issues of representation. There were more male than female students who participated in the research study. The courses to which participants of this study are registered do not provide an accurate representation of all the courses offered by the university of technology. In terms of racial demographics, the study consisted of only black students, as students from other racial groups did not consent to participate. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be extended to any other institution of higher learning and cannot be generalized as the main focus of this study was only on this university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal.

Recommendations for Practitioners

According to Ferguson et al. (2019), institutions of higher education across the world have recognized that they have a role to play in achieving full societal inclusion for people with differing needs and/or disabilities. Critical to the realization of this effort is the preparedness of institutions in ensuring that students with special needs and disabilities are

not made to feel overlooked or have their conditions unaccommodated. The following are recommendations to practitioners that can be used to address challenges facing students living with physical disabilities.

Primarily, meaningful acceptance of this role entails that such institutions accept accountability for their successes and failures at providing a welcoming environment and appropriate services for students with physical disabilities. Key to this is knowledge, thus, non-disabled practitioners need to develop their skills through education on issues related to disability. Having to deal with professionals underdeveloped in dealing with students living with physical disabilities creates unnecessary problems and hinders expected care and service for students. Professional development has a positive impact and could have far-reaching long-term benefits for students with disabilities (Park et al., 2012).

Students living with physical disabilities are a vulnerable group and therefore may need extra support to voice their concerns and ensure they are heard. Wessel et al. (2015) recommended that practitioners dealing with servicing students living with disabilities should teach students how to advocate for themselves, yet without abdicating practitioner responsibility in advocating for such students. Moreover, practitioners should work with other officials responsible for maintenance-related issues, for example, monitoring and servicing lifts regularly to ensure that they are in working order; and/or proposing that lectures take place only in ground floor venues.

Lastly, there is a need for the development and implementation of disability-awareness programmes. Educating members of the wider student body and staff about disability could foster a more welcoming environment and sense of belonging for students with disabilities.

Further Research

This research study focused on the experiences of majority male students living with physical disabilities at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal. The researchers learned that there are many challenges affecting students with physical disabilities, including the attitudes of their peers towards them. Thus, further research is needed to investigate the knowledge and attitudes of non-disabled students about issues related to disability. This will give an indication to practitioners working with students living with physical disabilities on what role to play and what policies should be implemented to close the knowledge and experiential gap between students living with disabilities and the non-disabled. Moreover, researcher focus on the experiences of students living with physical disabilities in other institutions of higher learning may reveal general issues experienced across this sector. Furthermore, studies exploring female experiences may reveal issues and experiences unique to female students.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore experiences of students living with physical disabilities at a university of technology. The study revealed that these students are faced with many challenges. They are also concerned about the stigma attached to their conditions, which sometimes leads to their marginalization. Moreover, the attitude of both students and staff

members towards students living with physical disabilities is a major problem due to lack of understanding and thus failure to empathize. This leaves participant students alienated, as the experiences of lack of understanding and constant fear of rejection due to their physical condition disables them from creating effective and healthy relationships with others.

Students living with disabilities feel excluded during group work because fellow group members see them as incapable. Furthermore, not having access to operational elevators, ramps, installed handrails, sensor doors (or adjustment of the force needed to open the doors), accessible lecture venues and auditoriums, non-slippery bathroom-floor tiles, easily accessible kitchens in-residence and transport are major problems with which students living with physical disabilities have to contend.

It must be noted, however, that there were participants who indicated that they had not experienced any challenges as they have been able to build effective relationships with their peers, and this they attribute to their high self-esteem and good sense of humour. That said, there remains a need for creating a safe space for students living with physical disabilities which will enable them to develop effective relationships and their needs be identified and addressed appropriately while during their time in higher learning.

The study revealed that even though systems and platforms may be put in place to afford students living with disabilities opportunities to table their grievances, it is not enough as training and monitoring of stakeholders should consistently take place. This would ensure that stakeholder attitudes and behaviours towards students living with disabilities align with the policy of the university and the universal design - which entails environmental design conducive to access for all, including students living with disabilities. Discrimination of any sort towards people living with disability should be dealt with seriously. This is the major contribution of this paper.

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