Perceptions of adult learners with visual impairment throughout COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for institutional assistance in Eswatini

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The importance of providing institutional assistance to adult learners with visual impairment throughout the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overemphasised. This paper examined the experiences of adult learners with visual impairment, whose studies were significantly affected by the implementation of lockdown and social distancing that led to their dropping out from one university in Eswatini. Using phenomenological design, three adult learners with visual impairment, who dropped out of the university, were chosen to participate in the study. Adult learners responded to a semi-structured interview guide during the individual conversations. The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Ethical considerations such as informed consent and anonymity were observed. The findings revealed the themes of social isolation, personal challenges, and lack of institutional assistance. Adult learners with visual impairment reported that there was no support received from the institution. Furthermore, adult learners indicated that some lecturers excluded them by not communicating and providing suitable materials for their condition. The participants acknowledged the awareness of using technology during the COVID-19

pandemic; however, they stated the lack of devices, inadequate technology skills, and their reliance on sighted adult learners and peers to read the content for them. This paper suggests that lecturers at this university in Eswatini be trained on how to teach and support adult learners with visual impairment, and the institution should consider developing a comprehensive education policy to cater to all different adult learners. Comprehensiveness has always been a challenge for adult learners with disabilities generally, but the pandemic has escalated it.

Keywords*: institutional assistance, adult learners, visual impairment, COVID-19 pandemic, social capital theory*

Introduction

Research on access to higher education in African countries indicated that higher education institutions face obstacles that violate treaties such as the Salamanca Statement and the framework for action agreement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994) and the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD], 2006). In Article 24, the convention demands the provision of education that is comprehensive and reactive to the needs of persons with disabilities, the visual impairment is included. In most institutions, including in Eswatini, disability policies are lacking, which often fail to accommodate adult learners with a disability, including the ones with visual impairment (UNESCO, 1994; Mosia & Phasha, 2018; Ngozwana et al., 2018). One of the fundamental principles of the comprehensive school is that adult learners should study together, to encourage solidarity between adult learners with disability and their peers (UNESCO, 1994). This agrees with the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which stipulates that somebody with disabilities should not be excluded from the general education system because of disability. Subsequently, inclusive education was detailed in the General Comment No. 4 to Article 24 of the CRPD (GC4) (UNCRPD, 2016), which recognised the ongoing discrimination against individuals with disabilities in various forms. In addition, UNESCO encouraged governments to implement

steps to transfer the education of learners with disabilities to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, ensuring sufficient resources and actionable plans to eliminate segregated provisions and foster a comprehensive, government-wide commitment (UNESCO, 2019). This also covers adult learners with visual impairment who ought to receive the support required, to facilitate their effective learning just like other learners.

Before the advent of COVID-19, adult learners with visual impairment relied on support from their colleagues pertaining to their educational performance in Eswatini. Their colleagues would read the study materials including the assignments written for them so that they understand what is expected and then act accordingly within the institution of higher learning in Eswatini. Likewise, lecturers would ask other adult learners to always volunteer to assist adult learners with visual impairment by printing the notes that are posted on the Learning Management System, reading to them, and explaining the instructions provided in any document. This implies that the possibility for access to education by adult learners with visual impairment heavily relies on the support they get from other learners in Eswatini. Efforts to create an enabling situation for learners with disabilities in this institution of higher learning in Eswatini were long overdue and not without challenges (Ngozwana et al., 2018).

However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic came with an undesirable effect on adult learners with visual impairment. This is because of the social distancing, the country lockdown and the university closure that led adult learners with disabilities to be isolated and unable to access educational support due to COVID-19 preventive measures (WHO, 2020) in Eswatini. Therefore, the colleagues who used to provide support to adult learners with visual impairment stopped their interaction with these adult learners with visual impairment because of being locked down in their homes in Eswatini. Thereafter, the university adopted rapid online teaching and learning without giving adult learners and course facilitators the necessary training before the online learning implementation during the country's lockdowns (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Toquero, 2020). Moreover, many adult learners did not have access to digital gadgets such as smartphones, tablets, and funds to buy internet bundles. The gadgets are needed for connectivity for adult learners to participate in the learning activities on the Learning

Management System that is used by one university in Eswatini. The lack of digital devices to use by adult learners with visual impairment in Eswatini possibly affected their access to education in a negative manner as communication was impacted.

Eswatini is a developing country where most citizens lack a steady power source, including the lack of internet that can allow facilitators and adult learners to fully participate in learning online (Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021). Moreover, the data is expensive and unaffordable for many adult learners. These encounters with inadequate resources would have affected most adult learners including adult learners with visual impairment who may have been disturbed, thus obstructing their learning results.

Therefore, this study details the perceptions of adult learners with visual impairment who dropped out from one university in Eswatini because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives were: 1) to discover the effect of COVID-19 on adult learners with visual impairment in Eswatini and 2) to identify the kind of support they got from their institution.

Literature review

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated the existing inequalities and disparities that some learners face daily. Although the pandemic posed a threat to everyone in Eswatini, it caused significant emotional distress for people with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities encompass anyone with long-term physical, mental, emotional, or visual impairments. These impairments, when interacting with various environmental barriers, hinder them from fully or effectively participating in society on an equal basis with others (UNCRPD, 2006). Many individuals with disabilities were affected by obstacles to applying simple safeguard actions and maintaining social distance because of dependence on physical interaction from others to receive help (WHO, 2020; Samaila, Ayanjoke, Mailafia & Joshua, 2020). Consequently, their contextual background could also facilitate the hardships they experience throughout the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. United Nations indicate that individuals with disabilities have greater health requirement and poorer health outcomes (UN, 2020).

In Hungary, Gombas and Csakvai (2021) conducted an online survey with 132 adults with visual impairment and found that accessibility to

study and shopping was a major challenge during the lockdown. The Kennedy Krieger Institute (2020) reported the challenges institutions face in meeting adult learners with disability and individual needs during online virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could be the same for adult learners with visual impairment, which this study would establish pertains to challenges faced by adult learners. In Bangkok, UNESCO (2020) found that individuals with incapacities, including the visually impaired, face barriers to education through remote practices. In addition, UNESCO noted that the difficulties faced by individuals with incapacities affect their active participation because of the materials, support, and cost accompanied by remote learning (UNESCO, 2020).

In Eswatini most facilities such as health, transport, and educational organisations lack enough services concerning the requirements of individuals with incapacities (Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021). This is due to the drastic implementation of remote learning by most institutions, including one university in Eswatini that may have negatively affected learners with visual impairment, who may not have the necessary devices to support them (Samaila et al, 2020). Furthermore, Samaila et al (2020) found that the epidemic and the preventive measures such as self-isolation, and social distancing have disrupted the educational assistance individuals with incapacities rely on. Thus, these created obstacles to learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting their general performance and appropriate support, and ultimately excluding them from accessing education. The lockdown pronouncement that occurred because of COVID-19 required universities to suddenly utilise online learning to reduce the interruption in education. However, the institutions never considered how many adult learners from ostracised and poor societies lack the digital gadgets and the competencies that are expected for online learning (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). This is common in both advanced and emerging nations such as Eswatini (Demuyakor, 2020; UNESCO, 2020) hence the need for strong adult learners' institutional support.

Institutional support

It is not clear how adult learners with disabilities are receiving educational support because of the prolonged postponement of the universities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been

reports about the lack of political will and underfunding for adult learners with disabilities before the COVID-19 pandemic (Samaila et al., 2020). The other noted issue for adult learners with disabilities is the negative impact of school shut-downs, as it exposes their omission from education, when leaders execute online remote learning platforms that may be unavailable to them, including the lack of essential technological gadgets that could permit their involvement and adaptation based on their learning requirements (UNESCO, 2020). Although some researchers refer to assistive technologies, many existing solutions that use digital technologies do not reflect the needs or circumstances of adult learners with disabilities, or the facilitators who are teaching them (UNESCO, 2020), which may also be true for adult learners with visual impairment in Eswatini.

Moreover, encounters with unpaid readers, distinct documentation, movement, and widespread procedure were reported in Nigeria (Onuigbo, Eseadi, & Ebifa, 2019). Such assistance can help adult learners with visual impairment cope with obstacles connected with incapacity, relational abilities, modest surviving ability, and minimal self-esteem, express their ability within their disability, and improve their well-being (Onuigbo et al, 2019). Adult learners with disabilities require exclusive amenities and support to continue their learning at institutions of higher learning. For instance, visually impaired adult learners need exceptional assistance and tools such as workstations and supportive packages, particularly in public libraries (Hasnah, 2009). For example, Amin et al (2021) assert that adult learners with visual impairment, need Braille comprehension assistance in the Malaysian context. This could be the case with adult learners with visual impairment in Eswatini who may require support from familiar backgrounds to develop their value of living (Rosalinda et al., 2013).

Adult learners with visual impairment appeared to be reliant on assistive apparatus and on the help of their fellow sighted adult learners or other skilful individuals (Kisanga & Kisanga, 2020). The implication is that the lack of support affects access to equitable educational performance for all learners, especially in Eswatini where there is slight legislation to protect people with disabilities (Ngozwana et al., 2018). The next section discusses the social capital theory that was adopted as a guide to this study.

Social capital theory

Coleman (1988) and Savage and Kanazawa (2004) posit that social capital features the social relationships that produce benefits for individuals, or any collective action linked to families, communities, and society for positive outcomes. The social capital theory is deemed fit as it relies on the available networks for social support for adult learners with visual impairment during their learning journey following the COVID-19 outbreak. Bourdieu (1986) relates social capital theory to the context of communal problems of communities and societies in general and for the powerless people such as adult learners with visual impairment in this study. However, in this study, the networks are discussed pertaining to resources that assisted individuals, in this case, adult learners with visual impairment.

The three common forms of the social capital theory: bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and linking social capital are briefly discussed to show how the networks serve as a resource to an individual, which is a student with visual impairment in this case.

According to Thakaso (2016) and Ferlander (2007), the first layer of bonding social capital inclines to be thin as it permits the creation of relations between persons with similar features within the same social group where people know each other well. This could be family members and relatives as they share values and the elements of trust and norms of reciprocity together (Putman, 2000; Hawkins & Maurer, 2010) as this is associated with strong ties. It is hoped that this study will reveal whether adult learners with visual impairment had developed the local reciprocity and trust, that provided social support and helped them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second form is bridging social capital, which is an outside layer that extends beyond the individual's immediate social boundaries. In this form relations with other external groups with similar characteristics are explored such as neighbours, casual friends, and colleagues (Ferlander, 2007). This means that the network is for people who are unidentical in their demographics but may have similar culture, race, or social aspects where people involved may share a thin trust. The study would establish how adult learners with visual impairment benefitted from accessing network resources outside their families but within their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third, linking social capital, is the last form that helps individuals to spread into peripheral organisations and other individuals who have influence (Thakaso, 2016; Hawkins & Maurer, 2010). This refers to interactions among the persons and the groupings in several collective sections wherever issues of capacity and collective position are retrieved differently. In this case, the university support for adult learners with visual impairment will be determined in this study. Coleman explains shared investment (social capital) as an immediate or unplanned means because of shared links combined with care along with family, friends, and neighbourhood members. It is a source for interaction, along with confidence construction, which is crucial for people and could impact their condition of life expectancy (Coleman, 1988) particularly for the group members who engage and share information in unity and collectively.

Methodology

The study used phenomenological design by Collaizzi (1978) to analyse the perceptions of adult learners with visual impairment, who used to attend one university before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was implemented in Eswatini. The phenomenological study is about individuals' lived experiences and the essence of those experiences; therefore, the researcher's aim was to understand the perspective of adult learners with visual impairment and their genuine real-life experiences. Moreover, Rakotsoane (2019) indicated that phenomenology is also an interpretative process. It connects the diverse connotations of existing involvements and viewpoints by adult learners with visual impairment (Van Manen, 2016).

Purposive sampling was utilised (Rozmi, 2015) to get the participants for the study. The participants were the only three adult learners with visual impairment, who were selected based on being affected by an institutional closure and the country's lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They volunteered to respond to the questions by giving informed consent and sharing their perspectives.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the data, with the help of a secretary from the department where the three adult learners were housed in one university in Eswatini. The secretary approached the adult learners telephonically and booked the appointments for

data collection, each for the time that was convenient for them. The participants were interviewed from their homes, with one interview lasting between forty to sixty minutes. The English language was used by all three participants. Some of the questions asked are included in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Individual interview guide

Questions
• What are your experiences in terms of your access to education at the university?
• How has the COVID-19 situation affected you in terms of accessing your education?
• What means have you used in furthering your studies during this COVID-19 crisis?
• What support have you received from your institution during this advent of COVID-19 that enabled you to continue with your studies?
• What measures have you taken to advocate for your support from your university?
• How have you been supported because of your self-advocacy?

The data were analysed thematically following a guide by Braun and Clarke (2006). Nuremberg Code of 1949 and the Declaration of Helsinki by the World Medical Association (1964) were observed when dealing with human beings and realising the ethics of informed consent from the participants. Pseudonyms were used as part of protecting and maintaining confidentiality for the participants alongside other ethics that were considered after the issuing of ethical clearance by the institutional review ethics committee in Eswatini. Issues of trustworthiness were observed, such as member checks for credibility, transferability, and confirmability (McMillan &Schumacher, 2010).

Findings

Three themes emerged from the data: social isolation, personal challenges, and lack of institutional assistance. All three participants were males aged between twenty-five (25) and thirty-five (35) years and were at the undergraduate level. The themes are presented, and direct quotations are provided to support the findings.

Social isolation

The participants expressed their loneliness and isolation due to social distancing and the lockdown that was implemented by the country and followed by one university closure in Eswatini. The adult learners with

visual impairment further reported that their situation was also made worse by the pandemic as one stated that he got sick. When responding to the question of how COVID-19 impacted their learning, Zonke said:

> *This was my hardest time as I felt useless with no one checking on me, no one giving me information about anything… we discovered late about online learning… (sneezing as he speaks).*

This was reiterated by Lihle who stated:

> *I am feeling overwhelmed, I have been locked up for the entire time and could not go to school. I have no one to share information with or to talk to. I was sick during the past two months, and I still feel weak …I couldn't continue with my studies anymore (Lihle).*

The above two adult learners shared that they felt isolated and lonely because of the lockdown. It can be noted that the learner engagement was a concern to Zonke who stipulated that lecturers did not communicate the transition to online learning. Their situation escalated with sickness, which led to them dropping off from their studies, which may have affected their personal goals as that was another challenge.

Personal challenges

Regarding the means that they tried to use in furthering their studies, all the participants reported to have encountered personal challenges. The following is what transpired from the interviews:

> *I personally do not have any mobile device…I was limited, could not get help from my colleagues due to lockdown (Tom).*

Furthermore, Zonke said:

> *I could not meet my friend who usually assist me financially and help me to reach at school.*

> *I do not have technology gadget to use for my studies here at home. Electricity is another challenge; it is not stable here in this area and most families use solar or other alternatives (Lihle).*

It can be noted that restrictions on assistive technologies and internet

connection were causes for the lack of access to education for adult learners with visual impairment (World Bank, 2020) in this university in Eswatini. Moreover, these adult learners reported their challenge of movement on their part as indicated below:

> *When we have to move from home to school or to any other place, it becomes a challenge because we need to be helped... now it is lockdown, our friends cannot come over, remember they also need to observe the social distancing... otherwise they would want to be paid ... my mother is no longer working and that has affected me badly as I no longer have reliable means of financial support. Now this lockdown, and social distancing makes it difficult for us to be helped. That is why I stopped learning. (Tom)*

Additionally,

> *It is even worse these days because of social distancing and lockdown, we can't move and go to the university... in fact we heard that other adult learners are learning online. (Lihle)*

Adult learners like Tom and Lihle expressed their challenges in getting support from significant others such as peers and colleagues due to social distancing and lockdown brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused their university to close.

Lack of institutional assistance

The adult learners with visual impairment reported that they never got support from the institution like other abled adult learners who continued to study online. Seemingly, the lack of support for these adult learners has been ongoing even before the advent of COVID-19, which shows the lack of regulation to cover all learners in terms of accessing education. This is what they said:

> *Some Lecturers used to point at a screen and ask questions and meanwhile you do not have sight to see...now during covid they never informed us about online learning or even involve us, that's why I left. (Tom)*

Lihle has almost a similar view when saying:

> *Lecturers did not communicate with us...we needed to make*
> *them aware that we struggle to use Moodle, but we heard that*
> *all the PowerPoint slides [content] and videos were posted on*
> *Moodle.*

The unsociable character of certain lecturers, whom they described
as strict with the way they teach, affected adult learners with visual
impairment in this institution in Eswatini. This has an implication on
how learners with disabilities access their education at this university.

> *They should have provided the electronic version of content*
> *materials to allow us to learn better... even the library does not*
> *recognise that we learn and read differently from other adult*
> *learners. (Zonke)*

The library is an entity that adult learners with visual impairment
recognise to be crucial in assisting them to accomplish their educational
pursuits. However, the challenge to access up-to-date resources hampers
the capabilities of learners with disabilities to further develop and excel
like other learners. Tom said:

> *We had enrolled because we wanted to be taught and if stuffs*
> *like, Braille Embosser, Audio Browser, Braille Tap are not in the*
> *library, we are behind.*

It is noted that the library does not have electronic versions of the books
for adult learners with visual impairment, thus making it problematic
for the learners. The three adult learners believed that it was a waste
of time for them to be registered at their university because of the
hardships that they were facing.

It is evident from the findings of this study that adult learners with
visual impairment were not satisfied with the assistance from their
university. Adult learners with visual impairment reported not getting
their needs met. They felt that providing support for them was not
a priority for this university in Eswatini, hence their reason to stop
learning.

Discussion

The study examines the effects of COVID-19 on the educational

experiences of three visually impaired adult learners in Eswatini. The findings reveal that these learners faced social isolation and discomfort due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, which led to their institution's abrupt transition to online learning. The shift caused these learners to abandon their studies as they felt excluded from online educational activities. Additionally, concerns about their health may have disrupted their focus on online learning. This finding is in accord with Samaila et al. (2020) and WHO (2020) regarding the COVID-19 pandemic that created an extra obstacle for adult learners in higher education, with many abandoning their studies. The situation got worse for the adult learners with visual impairment who felt excluded from their right to education, which went against what UNESCO (1994) and UNCRP (2006) regarded the provision of education that is comprehensive and relevant to the needs of individuals with disability. This finding refutes what is stated about the bonding social capital resource (Bourdieu, 1986), as peers and classmates could not help adult learners with visual impairment (Kisanga & Kisanga, 2020), which led to their exclusion from online learning and made them drop out of the university.

The findings showed that those adult learners faced personal challenges with online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of social interaction and getting assistance from other people reiterate assertions by Kisanga and Kisanga (2020), which made adult learners with visual impairment to be excluded from participating in their learning activities. The findings revealed that the three adult learners experienced difficulties with assistive technologies as they indicated the lack of devices, expensive data, and unstable internet connectivity. This finding is in agreement with several authors (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; World Bank, 2020) regarding the challenges faced by adult learners with disabilities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Poverty and financial challenges of not being able to afford digital devices and internet access, unstable internet connection, high cost of data, lack of knowledge on navigating online resources are some of the rife challenges (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020) experienced by university adult learners in developing countries such as Eswatini.

The findings revealed the lack of institutional assistance for adult learners with visual impairment in Eswatini and highlighted adult learners' dissatisfaction with their institution's failure to meet their

educational needs. These adult learners also felt they encountered difficulties both at home and in school, echoing Samaila et al. (2020), who noted that many institutions, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, lacked the political and institutional commitment to support students, particularly underfunded adult learners with disabilities. One of their complaints was the lack of library services. They experienced that the library did not have electronic books available for download, making their education more difficult. This finding supports research by Amin et al. (2021) who established that adult learners who are visually impaired, need Braille reading assistance, which was not available for the adult learners with visual impairment in Eswatini. In this instance, the support provided by the institution to adult learners with visual impairments was inadequate, contradicting the principles of linking social capital as described by Coleman (1988) and Thakaso (2016).

The findings indicated that these adult learners also experienced communication challenges with their lecturers, as they felt excluded from online learning, and as a result, they could not adjust but dropped out of the university. Again, the findings implied that adult learners hardly received support and care from their families, peers, lecturers, and significant others throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Kisanga & Kisanga, 2020). Thus, showing the weak social capital networks for them in Eswatini. This had a serious implication for the adult learners who cannot afford some assistive devices (UNESCO, 2020) and therefore could not access education as were their human rights. This calls for training for educators on how to handle and teach adult learners with disabilities. Additionally, this suggests that current policies should be revised to incorporate self-advocacy by individuals with disabilities prior to decisions being made by higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on some adult learners with visual impairments in Eswatini, leading to their withdrawal from their institution. The learners cited significant challenges, such as a lack of assistive technologies, health issues, and exclusion from online learning opportunities. Their dependence on sighted individuals, who were unavailable, highlighted the weak support networks from family, peers, and lecturers. Furthermore, insufficient institutional support and inaccessible online

content, including library materials, contributed to their decision to drop out. Consequently, these learners faced social, emotional, and financial hardships, and their right to education was compromised.

Implications

Despite the limited sample size, the results of this study have policy implications for both adult learners and lecturers at this institution in Eswatini. It is recommended that the university in Eswatini should develop robust comprehensive institutional policies for adult learners and lecturers; train lecturers to teach adult learners with visual impairment and empower lecturers with proper skills in using various teaching methods that can accommodate all learners including adult learners with visual impairment. Additionally, the policy review might consider the importance of self-advocacy and representation for adult learners with disabilities in educational decision-making. Comprehensiveness has always challenged people with disability generally and the situation has escalated for adult learners with visual impairment.

Limitations

The findings from this study cannot be generalised to other areas because of the small qualitative sample size used. Second, the nature of the participants used is unique, therefore, their perceptions cannot be universally applicable to the views and opinions of all people generally. However, the views and opinions of the participants in this study may apply to a similar minority group in other areas.

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