

## BRIEF REPORTS

---

# Exploring the Experiences of Students with Visual Impairments at the University of Botswana

Reginald Oats<sup>1</sup>, Chawapiwa Disele<sup>2\*</sup>

1. Department of Educational Foundations, University of Botswana

2. Disability Support Services Unit, University of Botswana

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *This paper sought to document the responsiveness of the University of Botswana towards the academic needs of students with visual impairments. The study examined the academic experiences of students with visual impairments enrolled at the University and explored their information-seeking needs. The study was informed by the theory of social justice.*

**Method:** *This was a qualitative study. Data was collected from students with visual impairments and academic staff from different faculties at the University of Botswana, through document analysis, interviews and observation techniques.*

**Results:** *The findings revealed that students with visual impairments experience extra challenges compared to students without disabilities. This is mainly because they do not get full support to enable them to excel academically. Furthermore, lecturers use teaching methodologies that do not accommodate these students, and learning materials are not adapted to formats suitable for them. Access to information is another major concern that hinders the participation of students with visual impairments in tertiary institutions.*

**Conclusion:** *The study recommends that lecturers need to be trained on suitable methods to teach students with visual impairments and how best to deliver academic content to them.*

**Key words:** *visual impairment, access, higher education, disability*

---

\* **Corresponding Author:** Reginald Oats, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Botswana, Email: reginald.oats@mopipi.ub.bw

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, tertiary institutions were an elite structure for students without disabilities, in both developed and developing countries. Access and participation in these institutions did not include students with disabilities, yet access to higher education has empowering potential for these students (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; World Bank, 2011; Wehman, 2013; Moswela, 2016).

Research has shown that students with visual impairments experience attitudinal, structural and resource-related barriers coupled with poor support mechanisms and unfavourable teaching methodologies (Strnadova et al, 2015). In the case of Botswana, educational provision for students with visual impairments came as an initiative of Non-Governmental Organisations in 1969, and it took the government a long time to take far-reaching steps to coordinate education of students with visual impairments (Abosi & Mukunga, 2005). Dart (2006) reported that the Ministry of Education issued a policy statement in 1984 with the aim of mainstreaming or integrating students with visual impairments into normal schools; however, this policy was not comprehensive enough to outline their educational provisions and support mechanisms. In line with this, Ramatsui (2002) argued that the mainstreaming policy did not explicitly state who should be taught in special schools and who should be taught in normal schools (integration/mainstreaming). Against the background of this policy, students with visual impairments remained largely on the periphery. Moswela (2008) added that the mainstreaming policy was not oriented towards transformation, critical empowerment and enlightenment of students with visual impairments. Furthermore, he pointed out that the policy was a quick-fix to resolving issues of education of students without making these issues the nerve centre of government's policy to ensure that students with visual impairments benefit from the general curriculum. It was not until the second National Commission on Education of 1993 that educational provisions for students with visual impairments began to be recognised.

Despite these initiatives, students with visual impairments continue to experience challenges in accessing and participating in tertiary institutions. It is clear that policies and initiatives are not comprehensive, and opportunities for these students are diminished by obstacles such as difficulties in accessing the curriculum, policies not being implemented and disability units limited in the support they can offer.

## **Objective**

In order to understand the level of preparedness of the University of Botswana towards the academic needs of students with visual impairments, the study sought to examine the academic experiences of students with visual impairments enrolled at the University, as well as their information-seeking needs. The study was informed by the theory of social justice. Social justice constitutes the right to fairness and equity. According to Bell (1997), social justice is both a process and a goal; thus the goal for social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. It includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.

## **METHOD**

### **Setting**

The study was conducted at the University of Botswana, which has 7 faculties and more than 10,000 students on its rolls.

### **Sample**

The study population included students with visual impairments, support staff at the Disability Support Services Unit, and academic staff from different Faculties at the University of Botswana. The academic staff consisted of lecturers who were teaching students with visual impairments, while the support staff dealt with students with disabilities through the Disability Support Services Unit. Academic staff and students were identified through the Disability Support Services Unit which had their details. Most of the students with visual impairments were in the departments of Social Sciences, Humanities, Education and Business. None of them were pursuing Engineering, Medicine or Sciences, even though they had scored good grades in high school, outclassing other students with normal sight who were enrolled in those departments.

There were 15 respondents, of whom 10 were key informants and 5 participated in focus group discussions. The 10 key informants were selected from among the academic staff: 7 were lecturers teaching students with visual impairments and 3 were support staff working at the Disability Support Services Unit. The 5 respondents in the focus group discussions were students with visual impairments ranging from moderate to severe vision loss.

## **Study Design and Data Collection**

Qualitative research uses interviews, observation, document analysis and audio-visual materials in data collection, among others (Creswell, 2009). For this qualitative study, two types of data were collected, namely secondary and primary data. For secondary data, books, government legislations, documents and journals were used. Primary data, on the other hand, was collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and focus group discussions.

Since the study was focussed on exploring the experiences of students with visual impairments at the University of Botswana, it was important to observe the teaching methods which the lecturers used during tutorials in lecture theatres and during laboratory sessions with these students. The objective was to witness the response of academic staff to the needs of students with visual impairments.

## **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed in line with research objectives, using a thematic approach. To familiarise themselves with the data, the researchers read and re-read the data before they start coding it through to theme building (Creswell, 2009) and eventually present it according to various themes.

In this study, analysis took place concurrently with data collection in inductive and iterative ways because, in the process of collecting the data, the researchers were already thinking of themes or codes for the data.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The researchers first sought ethical clearance from the University of Botswana's Office of Research and Development. After this, permission for data collection was obtained from the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tertiary Education Skills and Development. Permission was taken to record the interviews and confidentiality was maintained by omitting personal details of respondents in the interview sheets. Pseudonyms were used for academic staff and students.

## **RESULTS**

Based on the analysis of data collected, the experiences of students with visual impairments were discussed under the themes of Inclusion, Inclusion Attitudes of Academic staff, Teaching Strategies, and Policy Support.

## **Inclusion**

Data indicated that the University of Botswana is an inclusive tertiary institution since students with visual impairments are being mainstreamed into normal classes along with students without disabilities. The students viewed this as a good initiative since it removes issues of stigma and discrimination. Academic staff also acknowledged that the institution is inclusive since students with disabilities are admitted to different programmes within the university.

At the same time, even though the University is inclusive, students with visual impairments experience various challenges to access and participation in university programmes due to the strategies they have to employ to access education.

## **Attitudes of Academic Staff**

Results revealed that students with visual impairments face negative attitudes from lecturers. The student respondents claimed that some lecturers felt that they were seeking favours rather than deserving of the right to education, and consequently tended to ignore them during lectures. This resulted in the needs of students with visual impairments not being fully catered for and in their having to deal with more challenges than their sighted colleagues. They indicated that some lecturers felt it was not their responsibility to make reasonable accommodations for them.

*"I experience extra load of work because I do not get the full support to perform to my level best, especially in courses like Mathematics. Lecturers refuse to take the responsibility of having remedial lessons with me and as such I have to work for prolonged hours in order to catch up with the other students without disabilities. It is really difficult for me to cope with the situation since I have to largely depend on other students who sometimes feel that I am a burden to them,"* (Student 1).

Students with visual impairments also lamented that they have to constantly remind lecturers about their presence in class, but ultimately it does not yield any result since no action is taken. Students bemoaned this difficulty since they had to rely on other students, which at times was not easy, and they had to put in extra effort to catch up with work that could have been done during lectures.

*"My lecturers need to be reminded every day about my presence in the class but still does not help because even after doing so, no action is being taken. This is really hurting me and painful since it makes me feel that there is something wrong with me. These days*

*I have stopped reminding them because I feel that I am different from other students,"* (Student 2).

Similarly,

*"I always ask my lecturers to be giving me notes in a large font size 18 and this has never happened. One day I asked one of my lecturers to at least upload the notes for me in either Blackboard or Moodle as this would help me enlarge them on the screen but the response that I got was 'what so special about you? I do not spoil students by giving them notes... why don't you write while I dictate in class?' This offended me a lot and I felt embarrassed. To make matters worse, these lecturers sometimes talk to me as if they are passing jokes but totally it is painful for a lecturer to be doing that to me. I think lecturers should consider students' feelings because I did not choose to have a disability,"* (Student 5).

### **Teaching Strategies**

Students with visual impairments indicated that lecturers use teaching strategies that are unfavourable to them. The use of tools such as PowerPoint, projectors and other visual amenities when teaching, created problems for them since they were not able to see what was really happening on the board. To make matters worse, they specified that during the process of teaching and learning, the frequent use of phrases "*like this*" or "*like that*" made them lose track and lag behind the rest.

During the process of observation, the researchers also noticed that lecturers teach at a fast pace, use projectors and PowerPoint, and do not take into account the presence of students with visual impairments.

Lecturers indicated that it is difficult to teach students with visual impairments since they do not know how best to convey information to them, and consequently continue to use the aforementioned tools during their lessons. The students also lamented the lack of awareness among lecturers regarding how to teach them.

*"Some lecturers might have taught for a period of 40 years and during that period they might have not taught students with visual impairments. This might be one of the reasons why lecturers are finding it difficult to switch from their old ways of teaching in order to cater for students with visual impairments,"* (A student).

### **Accessible Teaching and Learning Materials**

Findings demonstrated that some lecturers do not provide students with visual impairments with teaching and learning materials that are adapted to their



learning needs, such as Braille, audio, large font size, and soft copied materials. Students with visual impairments were aggrieved that on the other hand lecturers tended to equate them with other students with disabilities whom they had taught, and used that as an excuse not to provide them with learning materials.

*“Teaching and learning materials are never made accessible unless you keep on reminding the lecturer, which does not help at all because they will do that just for some days and ignore you. I once asked my lecturer to be bringing notes for me in class so that I can read for myself. He told me that he is never going to do that because it is not the first time he is teaching a student with visual impairment, and the one he taught never asked for such special dispensation like I am doing. The lecturer even went to an extent of telling that he does not care about me, whether I fail or not that’s none of his business. I was so ashamed, embarrassed and even regretted why I was made disabled,”* (Student 4).

*“When I ask my lecturers to give me learning materials that I can be able to read, the response that I get is that why do I want to be favoured over other students? One lecturer once told me that he has a son who is disabled but the boy does not need special dispensation like do,”* (Student 2).

Some lecturers admitted that they were not aware of what ought to be done in order to provide these students with accessible learning materials. They acknowledged that in most cases they bring handouts to class which are neither Brailled nor enlarged. On this topic, they lamented that the Disability Unit was not doing enough to raise awareness about the needs of these students.

On another note, students with visual impairments indicated that the Library was critical to their academic life within the institution since this is where there are books, journals and other materials that can be used for study. However, the library did not solve their problems since materials are not suitably adapted to their learning needs. They lamented their difficulty in accessing information in the library because it is not inclusive of those with vision impairment.

*“The library is a total turn off for me... whenever I think of going there, I get frustrated because I do suffer a lot to access books in the library. First and foremost there are no people who are hired specifically for us with visual impairment to assist us when we want to use the library. Books are not adapted into formats that we can be able to access information, instead we have to rely on other people to help us. To me, I feel the library is worthless because it promotes dependency syndrome as opposed to being independent,”* (Student 3).

## Lack of Policies

Data indicated that there are no policies which support access to information for students with visual impairments. As such, students with visual impairments lamented that lack of such policies impacted negatively on their studies because there is nothing that can be used by the educators or the institution in general to guide them on their needs.

*“I am aware that there was a proposal that was made to come up with a policy that will enhance academic needs of students with disabilities; at the moment there is no policy that is implemented to enhance our academic excellence,”* (Student 3).

On their part, lecturers also lamented that there are no policies to guide them on how to meet the needs of students with visual impairments.

*“I am not aware of any policy that specifically deals with the needs of students with visual impairments and I would say I am just teaching in the dark. I do not know what exactly I am supposed to do since there is nothing that is guiding me. I am only aware of government policies but these policies are elusive since they do not specifically speak to the needs of students with visual impairments,”* (Lecturer A1).

## DISCUSSION

Inclusion is very important since students with disabilities get to interact with their peers and receive education under the same roof. It also encourages fair access to academic and social opportunities, thus improving overall livelihood for persons with disabilities (Barnar-Brak et al, 2010). Gibson (2015) also argues that ensuring access of students with disabilities to mainstream education and their progress throughout education levels increases their chances of accessing higher education. Likewise, UNESCO (2015) highlighted that commitment to the idea of inclusion is increasing and the implementation of inclusion has become a priority for most developing countries and is a part of their educational policy.

Even though inclusion removes stigma and discrimination, barriers to accessing education still exist. This hampers students with visual impairments from accessing a barrier-free education system. Provisions for the educational needs of these students, such as adapted learning materials especially notes, audio, large font and Braille, are lacking. Students with visual impairments experience pressure and heavier workloads in the process of catching up with lessons done during the teaching periods. On this basis, Sakiz and Saricat (2017) indicated



that students with visual impairments are not adequately provided with their academic needs such as Brailled, audio, large font and electronic materials, hence the need to compromise their social life as university students because they have to work hard compared to their peers. Similarly, Salisbury (2007) deliberated on this matter and noted that most tertiary institutions lack facilities to support students with visual impairments, and other students with special educational needs, that can enable lecturers to provide students with course materials in a format either preferred or suitable for them. In this sense, UNESCO (1990) views inclusion as a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners in identifying the barriers that many encounter in accessing educational opportunities and identifying the resources needed to overcome those barriers. Students with disabilities (including those with visual impairments) are mainstreamed into normal classes, yet strategies that can enhance a barrier-free learning environment have not been put in place. Inclusion has not yet been strengthened.

Students with visual impairments find it difficult to use libraries in tertiary institutions because library materials are inaccessible. A study by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011) revealed that materials in the University of Botswana library are not adapted to accessible formats suitable for students with visual impairments. For example, law cases are written in font size 8 and this makes it difficult for students with visual impairments to keep up with the pace that is required of them to finish those cases. On the same note, Emong and Eran (2016) pointed out that the main libraries in tertiary institutions do not have accessible publications such as Brailled books, periodicals, and audio- recorded publications on tapes and/ or CDs to enable access to information by students with visual impairments. This drawback hinders students with visual impairments from studying independently.

Additionally, methods of teaching that are used in the University of Botswana keep students with visual impairments on the periphery since they are not inclusive. Lecturers use projectors and PowerPoint while teaching and this puts students with visual impairments at a disadvantage. Since lecturers do less talking when visuals are projected, these students struggle to take down notes and fall behind in their work. Holloway (2001) also stated that lecturers persistently use tools such as projectors and PowerPoint in their teaching and simply go from one slide to the next, reading verbatim, without giving any added explanations or clarifications. Not only do students with visual impairments find it impossible

to retain all the information they are given, but also the information tends to be insufficient.

Students with visual impairments face a series of challenges in accessing education within the University of Botswana. This has been attributed to the fact that there are no policies which support access to information for these students, and educators are not guided by any policies/documents on how they can meet the needs of these students. Accordingly, Emong and Eran (2016) indicated that tertiary institutions have not adopted policies that can be used in institutions of higher learning in order to protect the right to education of students with disabilities, which would also guide educators on how to respond to the diverse needs of these students. In order to deal with difficulties and challenges facing students with visual impairments, there is a need for a curriculum that directly speaks to the needs of each individual and that is accessible to all learners. Habulezi and Phasha (2012) noted that for individuals with disabilities, there should be adaptations in terms of teaching approaches as well as modification of the physical arrangement of the classroom. In addition, access should involve using a medium of communication that is appropriate and accessible for all learners, to facilitate independent interaction with the content.

## CONCLUSION

Even though there has been an increase in the number of students with visual impairments enrolled in the University of Botswana, the findings indicate that the level of responsiveness of the University of Botswana towards their academic needs is fraught with challenges. Major barriers were revealed, such as inaccessible teaching and learning materials, negative attitudes of lecturers, and traditional methods of teaching. As a result, students with visual impairments are compromised and marginalised when it comes to academic access to University programmes, leading to negative experiences. The absence of transitional programmes had implications for students with visual impairments since they lacked the skills and knowledge to access the general curriculum. In consequence, this promoted dependency as opposed to being independent, because students with visual impairments had to largely depend on their sighted colleagues to access information. Furthermore, lack of policies that could support the needs of students with visual impairments impact on the students negatively, because there is no document to guide educators on how to meet the students' diverse needs. As a result students with visual impairments are not adequately catered

for. Another area that requires attention is the lecturers' limited knowledge about inclusion of students with visual impairments in higher education classrooms. This compromised the level of academic provision for these students, resulting in greater pressure on them.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study may have important implications for theory development, policy-makers, as well as future researchers.

- The Government needs to enact laws and policies that promote access to tertiary institutions for students with visual impairments.
- Policy-makers should consider introducing a bridge course for students with visual impairments to empower them with requisite skills to function independently.
- The tertiary institutions should develop clear disability-inclusive policies that are tied to institutional priorities. These policies should have a wider focus to include teaching students with disabilities, provision of reasonable accommodations, assessment of students with disabilities, lecturer empowerment of students with disabilities, and social and structural access issues.
- Tertiary institutions should establish the Disability Support Structure within the Division of Student Affairs and its conceptualisation should be along the human rights model.

The Disability Support Services Unit should collaborate with the Centre of Academic Development and the Faculties to develop short courses on teaching and/or inclusion of students with visual impairments, and also raise awareness about these students' academic needs among Faculties so as to empower students with visual impairments to succeed in their studies.

## REFERENCES

- Abosi O, Makunga J (2005). *Special education*. Gaborone: Longman
- Babbie ER (2005). *The basics of social research*. Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Barnar-Brak L, Lectenberger D, Lan WY (2010). Accommodation strategies of college students with disabilities. *The Qualitative Report*; 15(2): 411-429. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss2/10>

- Bell LA (1997). Theoretical foundations for social justice. (M. Adam, Ed.) Columbia University : Routledge. [Accessed on 15 Jun 2017]
- Botswana GO (2008). National Report on the development of Education: Inclusive Education: The way of the Future. Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Creswell JW (2009). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. London: Sage Publications.
- Dart G (2006). 'My eyes went wide open'- An evaluation of the special needs education awareness course at Molepolole College of Education, Botswana. *British Journal of Special Education*; 33(3): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2006.00428.x>
- Emong P, Eran L (2014). Disability inclusion in higher education in Uganda: Status and strategies. *African Journal of Disability*; 5(1): 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v5i1.193>. PMID:28730044 PMCID:PMC5433449
- Gibson S (2012 ). Narrative accounts of university education: sociocultural perspectives of students with disabilities. *Disability & Society*; 27(3): 353-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.654987>
- Habulezi J, Phasha TN (2012). Provision of learning support to learners with visual impairment in Botswana: A case study. *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences*; 69: 1555-1561. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.12.098>
- Hopkins L (2011). The path of least resistance: A voice-relational analysis of disabled students' experiences of discrimination in English Universities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*; 15(7): 711-727. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903317684>
- Maxwell JA (2005). Qualitative research design: An interactive approach. London: Sage Publications
- Moswela E (2008). A critical analysis of pedagogical styles and access to the general curriculum for deaf students. Unpublished: Masters Disertation.
- Moswela E (2016). Book review: Inclusive education in low-income countries: A resource for teachers educators, parents tand community development workers. *Pula Botswana Journal of African Studies*; 30(1): 179-182.
- Moswela E, Mukhopadhyay S (2011). Asking for too much? The voices of students with disabilities in Botswana. *Disability & Society*; 26(3): 307-319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.560414>
- Ramatsui P (2002). Official opening specch. Ministry of education Report, Botswana. A report on the proceedings of the recommendations 122 seminar DGaborone: Department of Curriculum Development and Evaluation.
- Sakiz H, Sarical M (2017). Including educational process of students with visual impairments in Spain: An analysis from the perspective of organisations. *Journal of visual Impairment and Blindness*; 104(9): 565 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X1010400909>
- Salisbury O (2007). Disabled students in higher education. *International journal of education Research*; 5(6): 38-46

Strnadova I, Hajikova V, Kvetonova L (2015). Voices of university students with disabilities: Inclusive education on the tertiary level- a reality or a distant dream. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*; 1080-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1037868>

Tichapondwa MS (2013). Preparing your disertation at a distance: A reseach guide. Retrieved from a Dissertation.

UNESCO (1990). *World Declaration on Education for All: Framework for action to meet basic learning needs*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

UNESCO (2015). *Monitoring of the Implementation of the Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education 8th Consultation: The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Wehman P (2013). Transition from school to work: Where are we and where do we need to go?. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*; 36(1): 58-66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143413482137>

World Bank (2011). *World development report 2011: Conflict, security, and development*. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/4389>. [Accessed on 20 Mar 2018]