

Intentional and Unintentional Exclusion: The Roles of Lecturers on Pedagogical Inclusion of Students With Visual Impairments in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study investigated lecturers' perspectives on the pedagogical inclusion of Students with Visual Impairments (SVI) in higher education institutions in Namibia. Access to higher education remains a privilege for individuals with disabilities rather than a human right. Intentional and unintentional exclusion is still prevalent in higher education, with more adversity than a celebration of diversity. Despite the crucial roles played by university lecturers in ensuring education for all, there is limited literature on their perspectives regarding the pedagogical inclusion of SVI. The researcher used a phenomenological research design to explore lecturers' experiences and their roles in SVI inclusion. Twelve lecturers from three participating institutions who taught SVI students were purposefully selected and individually interviewed. Lecturers emphasised the importance of creating a conducive learning environment, developing and adapting content, and motivating students to ensure inclusion. However, they highlighted several challenges, including a rigid curriculum, lack of support and collaboration, inconsistent policy implementation, and inadequate resources and advanced technology. Therefore, the study recommends continuous reviews of inclusive education policies, curriculum reviews, and transformations in higher education towards inclusivity. The study suggests that institutions should adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI), allowing for planning and anticipating all students' needs.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Visual Impairments, Pedagogical Inclusion, Intentional and Unintentional Exclusion

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1. Introduction

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 emphasises the right to education for all individuals and asserts that equitable access to higher education should be ensured (Peterson, 2010). In 1994, the World Conference on Special Needs Education, which took place in Salamanca, Spain, expanded the goals of Education For All (EFA) to encompass a transformative policy shift towards promoting inclusive education (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994). The Salamanca declaration reaffirmed and urged the participating countries to acknowledge inclusive education (Josua, 2013). Consequently, as a signatory to the statement, Namibia embraced the principles of inclusive education (Josua, 2013). According to UNESCO (2008), inclusive education addresses and caters to the diverse needs of students by fostering participation, eliminating exclusion, and strengthening the education system to encompass all individuals (UNESCO, 2008).

Namibia has developed a Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry of Education, 2013) to guide inclusive practices in all educational institutions. The policy mandates that government institutions and government-subsidised institutions responsible for all levels of education adhere to the principles of inclusive education (Ministry of Education, 2013). It also calls for curriculum reviews and transformation to better cater to the diverse learning needs of all students. Additionally, the policy encourages institutional changes and highlights the importance of shifting educational policies and practices to meet the needs and aspirations of all learners in different school settings (Ministry of Education, 2013).

As a result, the call for inclusive education extends to primary, secondary and higher education institutions. At the same time, Namibia aims to achieve Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasises providing inclusive and quality education (Boeren, 2019). According to the intercensal survey report 2016, Namibia is home to 31,968 individuals with visual impairments, accounting for 29.3% of the disabled population (Namibian Statistics Agency, 2017). Researchers have observed an increase in the number of students with visual impairments in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Namibia (Haihambo, 2010; Garaz, 2014; Sheyapo, 2017).

Including students with visual impairments (SVI) in higher education can be accomplished through curriculum, pedagogical policies, and institutional transformation. Despite numerous efforts to address exclusion in Namibia through curriculum changes and evaluations, SVI students continue to be excluded from higher education (Jones & Hodgson, 2004; Alqaryouti, 2010). There have been numerous calls for the inclusion of students with disabilities, particularly SVI students, but they still face various challenges in higher education (Josua, 2013; Haihambo, 2010). While lecturers play a crucial role in facilitating learning, limited literature exists on their perspectives regarding including SVI students in the Namibian context. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the roles of lecturers and institutions in the pedagogical inclusion of SVI students and identify the intentional and unintentional factors contributing to their exclusion from the lecturers' perspectives. Additionally, this paper proposes best practices to enhance inclusion in higher education.

2. Literature Reviews

Mushome and Monobe (2013) and Mwakyeja (2013) revealed several challenges lecturers face, such as heavy workloads and teaching in large venues with many students. Lecturers are

the facilitators of learning and must adapt their teaching to inclusive pedagogies to meet the needs of students with visual impairments (Molina, Rodriguez, Aguilar, Fernandez, & Mori~na, 2016). Molina et al. (2016) conducted a biographical narrative to explore lecturers' roles in an inclusive setting and analyse the impact of lecturers' attitudes on the performance of students with disabilities. They found that lecturers made curriculum adaptations in a spirit of goodwill rather than as a university policy regulation. Moreover, Molina et al. (2016) noted more barriers in higher education institutions than bridges, mainly stemming from lecturers' attitudes, lack of information and lack of training on best teaching practices to cater to the diverse needs of SVI. According to Ashraf and Ishaq (2020), the key to SVI success in an inclusive setting is appropriate change and curriculum and classroom activities modification. Hewett, Douglas, McLinden, and Keal (2017) acknowledge adjustments made by HEIs for SVI to access courses but reported that lack of anticipatory adjustments created barriers and led to exclusion.

Similarly, Lamichhane (2017) affirms that educators adjust teaching styles to include SVI. However, she stresses many unresolved questions and concerns about whether the adjustments are sufficient to meet the diverse needs of SVI. According to da Silva and Pimentel (2021), how universities are structured physically and pedagogically deprives students of many opportunities for their study dynamics and creates barriers capable of interfering with their academic endeavours.

Meanwhile, Firat (2021) used semi-structured interviews to explore factors that facilitate and complicate the higher education process for SVI. He indicates that lecturers have limited awareness of the barriers faced by SVI and insufficient academic support. Likewise, Athanasios et al. (2009) found a lack of infrastructure and challenges in practical activities as barriers to learning. Moreover, Ball et al. (2021) indicate that educators purposely excluded students from lessons because they were unaware of effective strategies to meet their needs. Therefore, Athanasios et al. (2009) suggest that educators must be aware of their students' diverse needs. In another study, Simui et al. (2018) explored enablers and disablers of the academic success of SVI in HE. They highlighted positive attitude, self-advocacy and innovativeness as the primary enablers. On the contrary, negative attitudes, a lack of inclusive policy, inaccessible learning environments and instructional materials, exclusive pedagogy and a lack of orientation and mobility were underscored as disablers of the academic excellence of SVI in HE.

Alqaryouti (2010) recommends sufficient learning materials, appropriate learning activities that enhance effective interaction, well-qualified staff that recognise students' needs, and awareness about challenges faced by SVI. In addition, Bishop and Rhind (2011) emphasise staff empowerment on best practices to include SVI as beneficial to every institution. At the same time, Miyauchi (2020) pointed to UDL as a strategy and tool that facilitates inclusive learning. Similarly, Häggblom (2020) affirms that UDL is a concept and a framework aimed to maximise student-centred teaching and learning in higher education and widen participation.

The study was built through a lens of the Humanistic theory of learning, which believes in student-centred education and encourages personalised instructions that cater to individual needs (Karthikeyan, 2013a). The humanistic approach to learning is based on the principles of humanism from the work of Abraham Maslow in 1954 and Carl Rogers in 1959 (Karthikeyan, 2013b). In this theory, the role of lecturers as (facilitators of learning) is to ensure that the learning environment, instructional methods, learning materials, classroom

activities and assessments are student-centred and inclusive (Karthikeyan, 2013b). The theory expected lecturers to be concerned about how each student feels about learning. It supports Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which guides all instructional planning and designing, as well as Differentiate Instructional Strategies (DIS) that enable educators to plan teaching methods that meet the diverse needs of students (Lintangsari & Emaliana, 2020).

Teaching Excellence in Adult Learning [TEAL] (2010) underscored two main benefits of using UDL: a flexible curriculum and various instructional practices, materials and learning activities. They posit that UDL enables lecturers to use multiple strategies in their plans to present content, use various instructional materials, provide cognitive and affective support, and employ varied learning styles and flexible assessment methods. Furthermore, UDL allows lecturers to know and understand their students, adapt to the learning environment and prevent barriers to effective learning for all (TEAL, 2010). While UDL advocates for various teaching methods that develop the full potential for all, it also guides the development of a supportive and responsive curriculum for all students.

3. Methodology

The study utilised a qualitative phenomenological design to gather insights from lecturers regarding the pedagogical inclusion of students with visual impairments (SVI) in three Higher Education institutions in Namibia. A purposive sampling approach was employed to select twelve lecturers, with four lecturers chosen from each institution, who had experience teaching SVI. These participants were individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview format. Additionally, lecturers' classroom lectures were observed to ascertain their roles in facilitating the pedagogical inclusion of SVI in Higher Education in Namibia. Prior permission and informed consent were obtained from both the participating institutions and the lecturers. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was employed to explore the individual and subjective narratives surrounding both intentional and unintentional exclusion of SVI in Higher Education in Namibia.

4. Results and Discussions

The study found that many factors contribute to SVI's intentional and unintentional exclusion in higher education. As revealed from the study, deliberate exclusion of SVI emanates from lecturers' negative attitudes, where they label, differentiate, reject, deny and discriminate against students because of their disabilities. In addition, the study concludes that lecturers' lack of interest, willingness, and effort leads to the intentional exclusion of SVI. Consequently, lecturers do not anticipate the needs of SVI, resulting from a lack of anticipatory adjustments to meet the needs of SVI, as noted by (Hewett et al. 2017). Moreover, lecturers' lack of skills and knowledge on inclusive strategies and a lack of an inclusive framework to guide inclusive practices in higher education made them reluctant and feel not responsible for catering to their needs (Ball et al., 2021).

Based on the observations, it was evident that no provisions were made to accommodate the needs of Students with Visually Impaired (SVI). There were no adjustments or descriptions to the images displayed on the PowerPoint presentations, and no provision of notes to SVI in Braille or notes with adjusted font prior to the lessons was lacking. Furthermore, most lectures were conducted in large venues with large student populations, resulting in lecturers showing little attention or anticipation towards catering to the needs of SVI students. These findings contradict the recommendations made by Lamichhane (2017), who emphasised the

importance of educators adapting their teaching styles, methods, and materials to accommodate SVI students. Consequently, the study identified a lack of a guiding framework for lecturers to prepare inclusive lectures, adjust teaching methods and adopt learning materials for all students.

Moreover, the study discovered that unintentional exclusion stems from a lack of institutional preparedness in terms of facilities, resources, and institutional and professional support to cater to the needs of SVI. Moreover, adjustments to include SVI were based on lecturers' free will and attitudes and were not guided by inclusive institutional policies. Participant "L2" stated, "Before registering such students, try to ensure everything is in place." The narrative echoes feelings of unpreparedness, shifting responsibilities, and differentiating and rejecting the SVI. Similar findings were echoed by da Silva and Pimentel (2021), who said that ensuring access to higher education by SVI is not enough if the environment is not ready and facilities and materials are unsuitable to support students throughout their study in HE.

The study also found that HEIs call for inclusive practices but remain silent on "how" lecturers could maximise the pedagogical inclusion of SVI in their lectures. Another participant, "L4", indicated, "I can try as much as possible, but I know I would not be doing enough for this person." This narrative echoes feelings of incompetence on the "how" to meet the needs of SVI, a lack of willingness, some sorts of rejections, discrimination, denials, and a sense of fear. These made lecturers reluctant and made them feel unaccountable for catering to SVI.

"At this stage, the curriculum development does not make provision for students with special needs"(Participant L8). Despite the many curriculum transformations, lecturers still felt limited in adapting the curriculum as they perceived it as inflexible and not responsive to inclusive practices. The study found that, on the one hand, lecturers lack the knowledge and skills to modify and adjust the curriculum, but on the other hand, they lack the willingness to accept and include SVI (Hewett et al., 2017). Similar findings were echoed by (Simui et al., 2018).

Furthermore, based on the interviews, the study observed that not all lecturers possess a background in education accompanied by training in teaching pedagogies. Consequently, individuals with a background in education exhibited confidence in implementing inclusive education. Conversely, those with non-education backgrounds displayed a limited comprehension of the responsibilities assumed by educators in an inclusive environment. Therefore, findings suggest a need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to allocate resources and avail training programs that enhance the capacity of lecturers in inclusive education and diverse pedagogical approaches.

Participant L1 stated, "I had a late notification that there was an SVI in my class; he did not identify himself either" Another participant, L3, concurred, "You might be told that there is a student of this nature in your class. Sadly, there is no support on how to handle them." Participants shared their feelings of helplessness, concern, and frustration regarding a lack of communication and support. Their narratives also highlighted the support needs that lecturers anticipated but were not provided. These findings support Firat's (2021) claim that some lecturers in higher education institutions have limited awareness of the challenges faced by individuals with sensory and visual impairments (SVI). Findings uncovered a deficiency in academic support for the lecturers. Bishop and Rhind (2011) stressed the significance of

empowering staff to adopt best practices. They pointed out the need for ongoing support to enable lecturers to meet the needs of all students, particularly those with SVI.

Furthermore, the findings reveal shortcomings in institutions' and lecturers' preparedness and readiness to include SVI. Lecturers and institutions were found to be more reactive than proactive to students' needs with visual impairments. The study found that besides a lack of support and preparedness from the institutions, it also noted some reluctance among some lecturers in taking the lead to self-empowerment in areas of inclusive education, in seeking support and advocating for inclusion in higher education institutions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in preventing unintentional exclusion should be to prepare the institutional environment by providing facilities, resources, technology, and policies. This point was also emphasised by Lourens and Swartz (2021), who stressed the importance of monitoring policy implementation. In addition, HEIs should establish an inclusive framework for designing and developing a curriculum that guides lecturers in their inclusive practices. Furthermore, HEIs must support students and lecturers and raise awareness about inclusive practices, as highlighted by (Molina et al., 2016). To prevent the intentional exclusion of students with visual impairments (SVI) in higher education, it is the institution's responsibility to develop an inclusive education framework and for lecturers to adopt the frameworks and strategies in their preparation and teaching. These frameworks and strategies should enable them to adjust, modify, and utilise various instructional methods, materials, learning activities, and flexible assessment opportunities that reduce exclusion. The humanistic approach to learning emphasises learner-centred education; therefore, lecturers should create an inclusive learning environment (less restrictive) where individual students can thrive and maximise their potential. The study affirms that some participating institutions significantly advocate for inclusivity despite the challenges and obstacles.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the lack of inclusive frameworks in higher education in Namibia exacerbates intentional and unintentional exclusion. It also finds that a lack of awareness, communication, coordination, and collaboration among lecturers, administrators, and students can contribute to intentionally excluding students with visual impairments.

Furthermore, based on the findings, the study recommends continuous reviews of inclusive education policies and improved communication and collaboration among stakeholders within and beyond higher education institutions (HEIs).

Due to the lack of an inclusive education frame to guide lecturers on the pedagogical inclusion of SVI, the study suggests that HEIs in Namibia should adopt inclusive frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI) during curriculum reviews and transformation. Griful-Freixenet et al. (2017) argue that the UDL framework holds excellent potential for meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities and improving inclusive practices in higher education. Additionally, the study recommends the implementation of flexible, adaptable, and responsive curricula to meet the needs of all students. Drawing on a humanistic approach to learning, the study proposes embedding UDL and DI training in orientation programs for newly appointed lecturers in various professional development programs for lecturers. Furthermore, the study emphasises the need to redefine inclusive education as a pedagogical approach rather than solely a field

of study. Finally, the study proposes the need for additional research on stakeholders' viewpoints in higher education institutions (HEIs), specifically, management, administrative staff, and the ministry regarding the inclusion of SVI impairments into higher education.

This present study had some limitations. The study mainly focused on the viewpoints of lecturers as its primary sample. Although this approach was considered appropriate for addressing the research questions, incorporating input from diverse stakeholders, such as administrative staff, management, and students, could enhance triangulation and provide more comprehensive insights into this phenomenon. The participants were individually interviewed, and future research endeavours should consider supplementing structured interviews with focus group discussions.

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