

The Attitude of Lecturers Towards Visually Impaired Students: A Case Study of One of the Universities in the Limpopo Province in South Africa

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This article presents the attitude of lecturers towards the visually impaired students in one of the universities in the Limpopo Province. First, it is argued that the experience of a visual impairment by a student has a greater effect on the strategies and methodologies used for instruction than on the curricular content to which the student is exposed. Specialized instructional strategies facilitate the visually impaired students' successful participation within regular education classrooms. The degree of specialized intervention needed depends upon the intensity of the students' impairments. Despite the fact that the university has each year been registering students who are visually impaired, there is no indication that staff members are being trained to handle these students. Both qualitative and quantitative findings from interviews with visually impaired students, HODs (heads of departments), and deans/directors of centers suggest that lecturers found teaching visually impaired students is a problem, because they were never trained to teach visually impaired students and that the institution should employ a permanent specialist in teaching visually impaired students and create a resource centre for them. This paper examines some of the concerns that the visually impaired students encounter and raises questions about how they learn and how they are being taught.

Keywords: visually impaired, technological and special aids, infrastructures, specialized intervention

Introduction

The term visual impairment covers deficiencies ranging from partial sight to blindness. An individual who is virtually handicapped, her/his ability to see is affected, hindered, or completely lacking. This shortcoming has a serious implication for the learning event, personally development, and progress towards self-actualization. The partially sighted are those who can read bodies of large print and who need magnifying devices. A partial sighted person has sufficient functional visual efficiency in such measure that vision rather than touch or hearing can be utilized as a chief avenue of learning. These visually impaired students, more often than not need a lot of support in academic institutions. According to Taylor, Sternberg, and Richards (1995, p. 1), the cost of educating a student in South Africa is very high. Teaching exceptional students is a challenging, rewarding, and sometimes frustrating endeavor. Through research and continued teaching, we are constantly discovering more and more about the characteristics, capabilities, and educational needs of exceptional students (Taylor, Sternberg, & Richards, 1995, p. 1). In this case, although

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students who are visually impaired are enrolled, it is the responsibility of these students determined by their specific disability to make sure that they learn under conditions of normal students. The problem is that when this university was established, no great thought was given to the teaching of visually impaired students. The followings are some of the problems which are seen as impediments in the teaching of the visually impaired students in tertiary institutions.

Educational Consideration

Kirk, Gallagher, and Anastasiow (1993, p. 364) noted that vision is a continuous source of information. People without sight have to rely on their other senses for information and all the other tasks the vision performs for us. Hallahan and Kauffman (1991, p. 315) agreed that we should educate visually impaired students in the same general way as sighted children. The main difference is that visually impaired students will have to rely on other sensory modalities to acquire information. They go on to say that students with little or no sight would possibly require special modifications in four major areas: Braille, use of remaining sight, listening skills, and mobility training. The first three pertain directly to academic education, particularly reading and the last refers to skills needed for everyday living (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991, p. 315). It is important to have lecturers who have acquired higher qualification on special education in order to help visually impaired students in general education classroom. Without experts in education modifications, the learning for visual students could be difficult.

Resources

A number of institutions in developed countries have flexible regulation systems. They allow their lecturers to provide notes to their students on computer disk for the blind and the partially sighted students and those whose lecturers are not word-processed may agree to make their notes available (Students Support Service, 2002, p. 1). The provision of resources has to do with the ever-changing world of technology. This obviously makes it very difficult for the disadvantaged institutions.

Technological and Special Aids

In recent years, a technological explosion has resulted in new electronic devices for the use of visually impaired individuals: (1) Optacon; (2) Kurzweil reading machine; (3) VersaBraille; (4) Cranmer abacus; (5) Chisanbop; and (6) Synthetic (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991, p. 328).

For this reason, lecturers who are trained in the use of these devices are needed.

Infrastructures

A number of institutions in developed countries, especially Scotland, have dedicated resource centers for visually impaired students where all or most of the equipment are housed (Students Support Services, 2002, p. 18). Unfortunately, this is not the case in disadvantaged institutions. These institutions cannot even afford some of the basic necessities for teaching the normal students. Consequently, in view of the problem faced by the visually impaired students at one of the historically black universities in the Limpopo Province, it was the aim of the this study to gain an understanding of how the visually impaired students are being educated and how staff members are coping to handle these students.

The Role of the University

A university function is mostly efficient, when the necessary human and material resources are available.

There is no point in setting up a university and then starving it of the necessary means of support (Matiru, Mwangi, & Schlette, 1995, p. 22). But, there is a lack of awareness in the student population. Students have a right to know and understand how they can help visually impaired students if necessary. They should be campaigns, which would be able to highlight the needs of visually disabilities (Kirk, Gallagher, & Anastasiow, 1993, p. 376). Researches indicate that blind and partially sighted students reported that they could be tape lectures, but the lack of awareness by the lecturing staff of the need to make sure that all written material used during the lectures were clearly referred to by lecturers verbally. Many visually impaired students stressed the need to have access to the same equipment both on campus and at home in order to work effectively (Student Support Services, 2002, p. 3).

The Role of Lecturers, Students, and Other Professionals

The first year at any university is very difficult for everybody and particularly for the visually impaired students. According to Chauke (2002, p. 4), the college initially believes that special attention should be given to visually impaired students, due to their disability, however, the visually impaired students do not think they are treated differently. Visually impaired students proved their concerns wrong through their performance and contribution in class during lectures and discussions. They, however, need:

- (1) Qualified lecturers to teach them;
 - (2) Meetings with lecturers and the department to ease their problems;
 - (3) Lecturers to stimulate their interest and to awaken their motivation;
 - (4) Sponsors to fund their instructional media;
 - (5) Lecturers who are prepared for them and who will select the correct teaching strategies and instructional materials.
- (Gravestock, 2001, p. 1)

The Constitution of South Africa has abolished any form of discriminations. As result of this, anybody who qualifies to be admitted at a university should be admitted regardless of his/her physical condition, religion, gender or even background. Having said that, it means that the university should prepare itself fully to accommodate any students with special educational needs. Preparations must be both physical (buildings and materials) and human (staff must be trained to deal with these students). The study from which this paper emerged was therefore designed to find out:

- (1) The problems facing the visually impaired students at one of the universities in the Limpopo Province;
- (2) To investigate the strategies that can be used to solve some of these problems.

Research Design

This study used the quantitative and qualitative approach. Quantitative approach was also employed, because it gave a positive form of enquiry of research and search for facts (Mouton & Marais, 1994, p. 155). Qualitative approaches were used, because the procedures are not strictly formalized (Mouton & Marais, 1994, p. 156). Qualitative research was also employed, because it carries out the interpretive frame of the research and it gives us the production of meanings. The questionnaires were distributed amongst 20 lecturers at university and the interviews were conducted with 20 visually impaired students and also six HODs (heads of departments), deans, and directors of centers at the university were the respondents in this study.

Research Strategy

The case study was used as a strategy of collecting data, because we are concerned with investigating and interpreting certain attributes, characteristics, and behavior patterns of visually impaired students at a university. A certain university in the Limpopo Province has been investigated and few visually impaired respondents were also investigated (Behr, 1988, p. 110).

Research Instruments

An interview schedule was designed to qualitative data and this was done on a face-to-face situation (Behr, 1988, p. 150). Most case study interviews are of an open-ended nature, in which you can ask key respondents for the facts of a matter as well as for the respondent's opinions about events (Yin, 1994, p. 84). Semi-structured interview questionnaires for visually impaired students and HODs, deans, or director of centers, in order to get the in-depth of the information and the problems within them. The quantitative approach was also followed, because the close-ended questionnaire was also used to collect data from lecturers.

Findings

Findings indicate that the teaching of visually impaired students at one of the universities in the Limpopo Province is beset with a number of hurdles which have particular implications for the learning of the visually impaired students in tertiary education. Findings pertaining to this study are as follows.

Findings Pertaining to Lecturers

The following are findings pertaining to lecturers:

- (1) Lecturers indicated that to teach visually impaired students is a problem, because they were never trained on how to teach the visually impaired students and that the visually impaired students should be provided with counseling and that their problems should be solved as quickly as possible;
- (2) Lecturers were bound by the constitution, which does not allow them to chase the visually impaired students away, because they have the rights to learn and the university registers them;
- (3) There is no special administrator who deals with the problems of the visually impaired students in respect of resources used by the visually impaired students, for the arrangement of tests and examinations and providing links with the library for the blind and counseling the visually impaired students academically;
- (4) There is no special room for Braille for the visually impaired students;
- (5) Lecturers have not been trained to teach the visually impaired students;
- (6) Provision must be made to facilitate proper education before students are accepted into the university and that students should be under rigorous orientation before commencement of lectures and that lecturers should exercise patience when working with visually impaired students.

Findings Pertaining to Visually Impaired

The visually impaired students provided the data that brought the following findings:

- (1) Most visually impaired students indicate that the university should employ the permanent lecturers who can deal with visually impaired students;
- (2) Lecturers needed to be informed that they have visually impaired students;
- (3) They also indicated that lecturers should visit other institutions, which deals with disabled students,

such as special schools, other historically white universities which have enough experience in dealing with visually impaired students;

- (4) They complained about the non-availability of learning equipment in the university;
- (5) There were no workshops for lecturers and students.

Findings Pertaining to HOD's, Deans, or Director of Centers

The findings pertaining to HODs, deans/directors of centers are indicated as follows:

- (1) Research on this aspect is not enough and a lot still needs to be done;
- (2) Specialists in the teaching of the visually impaired students have not been employed;
- (3) Equipment for the visually impaired students is not enough;
- (4) There is no budget specifically set aside for the visually impaired students;
- (5) No study material in Braille is available in the library.

Conclusions

On the basis of this study, it was indicated that:

(1) Lecturers were never trained to teach the visually impaired students which they perceive as a burden in terms of teaching and others feel that it is not their responsibility as they were never trained to teach the visually impaired students in their training at the university;

(2) There are no specialist lecturers who can teach the visually impaired students and due to the lack of experience, most lecturers do not consider where the visually impaired students sit during lectures and very few consider the circumstances of the visually impaired students;

(3) The HODs, deans, or directors of centers do not have special budget for the visually impaired students and they do not think about the visually impaired students when they employ academic staff who will take into consideration the improvement of resources for both sides.

In view of the findings indicated above, the following recommendations are stemming from the research:

(1) Lecturers need to be trained in the teaching of the visually impaired students. This could be done by formal training in the teaching of the visually impaired students and also by in-service education;

(2) Specialist in the training of the visually impaired students needs to be employed, so that they can champion the teaching of the visually impaired students at the university;

(3) HODs, deans, and directors of centers need to be trained to create a special budget for the visually impaired students. This budget will ease the problems facing the visually impaired students. Equipment for the visually impaired students, lecturers/specialists in Braille, workshops and counseling for the visually impaired students can be provided for in this budget.

When lecturers see teaching the visually impaired students as a problem, the visually impaired students are in danger of hating education, and therefore, destroy their future. The fact that there is a shortage of equipment for the visually impaired students shows how the university has silently rejected the visually impaired students. It is not fair for the visually impaired students to negotiate everything, whilst other students are provided with what they need without negotiation. It is the wish of researcher that the concerns raised in this study will in future provide for better and effective methods of teaching the visually impaired students at the university.

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