

## Disability Policy Representation in African Higher Education Research: Implications for Disability

### Policy Framing in African Higher Education

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#### Abstract

This paper sets out to critically explore the way disability policies are framed in African higher education. Presented in this paper is a review of published studies that detail the dominant framing perspectives that have influenced disability policies in African Higher Education (HE). Review of literature was done using the Yair Levy and Timothy J. Ellis (2006) systems approach to conducting an effective literature review. The paper has three sections and these include (a) an introduction (b) dominant policy framing perspectives and (c) a discussion on exploring possibilities for an expansive disability policy framing for Higher Education in Africa. This paper argues for nuanced ways to expand our understanding of the current and emerging issues pertaining to the study of policies on disability in the field of HE in Africa.

*Keywords:* disability, higher education, policy, framing

#### Introduction

Throughout the world, education is valued and expected to be a key driver of development. It has become a basic necessity for most nations but research seems to suggest marginalisation still plagues most education systems (Cooper, 2015; Georgeson et al., 2015; van Jaarsveldt & Ndeya-Ndereya, 2015). Similarly various actors have placed strong hopes on higher education (HE) as a panacea for human development. Nonetheless, the impact of HE on society is multifaceted.

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Research shows that HE reproduces inequality and injustice through various levels of discrimination (Bell et al., 2016; Chitaika, 2010; Matshediso, 2007; Powell, 2013; Mutswangwa, 2014; Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Chief of these, is discrimination based on income, age, gender, race and ability (Morely & Croft 2011; Terzi, 2014; Thaver & Thaver, 2015). Despite of all this, HE is also seen to contribute to eliminating the social problems through its public good values such as promoting access to universities for all regardless of ability (O'Regan & James, 2015; Roper & Hirth, 2005).

Contentiously ability in HE is mostly conceptualized in its negative sense as “disability”. “Disability” in Africa is shrouded in a lot of misconceptions which stem from the rich, diverse and complex historical, religious, cultural and ideological conceptions of ability (Chimedza, 2008; Owusu-Ansah, 2013). It follows then that disability in the past, as well as today, embodies contradictions. Much debate exists in the literature about the complexity of defining disability (Chataika & Owusu-Ansah; Chimedza, 2008; Jeffery & Singal, 2007; Lwanga-Ntale, 2003) highlight linguistic, cultural, legislative and political factors that vary from context to context and at times country contexts. Therefore this paper makes no claims of having a common definition however this paper conceptualised disability following the definition of the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability Health (ICFH), (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). It considers disability and functioning as outcomes of interactions between health conditions (diseases, disorders and injuries ) and contextual factors (WHO, 2002). Among contextual factors are external environment factors(e.g. social attitudes, legal and social structures, natural and built environment, products and technology) and internal personal factors which include gender, age, coping styles, social background, education, profession, past and present experience, motivation and self-esteem, all which influence how much a person participates in society (WHO, 2002).

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Despite the very complex nature of disability and its misconceptions there is growing interest in recent times in HE to improve access for people with disability regardless of how narrow or broad disability is defined. While this momentum is a laudable goal, the enthusiasm for universities to foster access for people with disability has gotten ahead of our understanding of how institutional policies and practices in African countries might be broadly framed to achieve this public good value of HE.

It is also important to note that this paper uses the definition of framing by (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016) which they refer to as a process of sense-making, naming which includes selecting and categorizing and storytelling. There is need to open up the process through which framing is occurring in HE. Importantly focus should be placed on looking into the sense making work entailed in framing disability in HE further also looking into how selections are made how names are given, how categories are created and how stories are told especially about disability. This opens up many dimensions to exploring framing as a process grounded in everyday practices and ordinary beliefs (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016).

This paper will endeavor to answer the following questions: 1) What perspectives influence the framing of disability within current university policies and practices in African HE, among the various perspectives in literature? 2) What can be done to explore a more nuanced tone that can accommodate the understanding of the complex nature of studying policies and practices on disability in the field of HE in the African context?

### **A Systematic and Analytical Review of Literature**

This literature review employed the (Levy & Ellis, 2006) systems approach to conducting an effective literature review. The proposed framework follows a systematic data processing approach comprised of three major stages. Firstly, focus was given to gathering and screening the literature from different search engines. Secondly, attention was given to ranking the literature that had been screened by biographical details, research aim, theoretical and conceptual framing perspectives and methods used. Thirdly, organising the literature into themes for discussion.

To incorporate the above factors, the compilation of these studies has been ongoing since 2017 and it was a result of broad database searches and tracking of references encountered in the reading process. Literature was scanned from Scopus, google scholar, academic search using a combination of the search terms “disability”, “students with disabilities”, “policy”, “higher education” and “inclusion”. Studies concerning policy with disabilities stem from three main sources: commissioned reports, scholarly articles, and masters and doctoral studies theses. In accordance with the scoping approach suggested by (Levy & Ellis, 2006), the following data was initially extracted from each article in order to facilitate analysis: author(s) name; year of publication; country within which the study took place; journal name; research aim; theoretical and conceptual frameworks, study design and methods used.

The bulk of these studies are qualitative in nature, focusing mostly on a single case study higher education institution and targeted at a particular type of impairment. While very informative, this approach to literature review has its own limitation which we take into account. A potential limitation of this review is that we narrowed the search particularly to very specific field of higher

education studies. While this offers an in-depth analysis of the available literature on the topic, we are cognizant that this leaves out some important categories and perspectives.

Similarly, we narrowed down the search to a specific time frame to make the work practically manageable. Hence this also possessed a potential limitation of historical omission. This work is ongoing and will take several stages. It is for this reason that having established this, further research will continue and take a bibliometric analysis that will be able to deal with some of these issues like establishing the network of actors doing the framing and its ability to quantify research based on geographical locations.

The following section will give a short summary of findings from the systematic review and then an analysis of the three dominant policy and practice framing approaches engaged in African research literature. The first takes a medical approach, the second is framed in form of international classification of functioning and the third a social model of disability and these will be examined in the next section

### **Policy and Research Framing Perspectives in Literature**

Firstly a total of 44 articles are being used in the literature review, predominantly 34 articles were written on South Africa and the other 10 articles focused on countries like Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ghana, Malawi, Botswana, Tanzania, Lesotho, Mauritius, Morocco and Egypt. The research landscape in Africa regarding disability in Higher Education started in 1981 (Phiri, 1981) and the analysis is exploring literature till 2019 (Clouder et al., 2019). Research has focused on topics relating to specific experiences of students with different disabilities, teaching and learning, disability staff and disability units in universities (Bell & Swart, 2018; Chitaika, 2010). Research also focuses access, curriculum assistive technologies (Clouder et al., 2019; Holloway, 2006; Kajee, 2010; Matshediso, 2007) and limited research on policy themes in universities (Ramaahlo et al., 2018). Literature currently being reviewed shows that 42 articles are grounded by theory focused on inclusion, social justice and empowerment with strong focus on access participation. The Social Model dominates disability studies in Higher Education primarily because of its focus on social, structural and

environmental barriers rather than on an individual's impairment (Medical model). One article explored the Capabilities approach (Matanga, 2017) and 1 social ecological approach (Chataika, 2010). However, although dominant in Higher Education research in Africa, the Social Model has its critics (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001) who emphasise the need to interrogate cultural constructions and move beyond the dualism position. Methodologically 38 studies are qualitative, 2 are quantitative and 4 are mixed methods. There is very little venturing out to research using different methodological approaches like quantitative, mixed methods and comparative designs (Bishau, 2009). Lastly a key conclusion in Research literature on disability in African Higher Education seems to suggest that a gap exists between policy and practice (Chitaika, 2010; Mutanga, 2017; Mutswangwa, 2014; Ramaahlo et al., 2019). Research highlights that the gap remains ill-defined and under researched, particularly the inter relational dynamics that exist among factors contributing to the policy and practice gap.

It is with the above backdrop that the three globally recognized policy and practice framing approaches that are frequently engaged and critiqued for their influence on disability policy in African HE will be discussed. The first is the medical approach, the second is framed in form of international classification of functioning and the third a social model of disability.

*The medical model* has influenced policy that takes the medical frame (Kasser & Lytle, 2005; Thomas & Woods, 2003). A distinguishing characteristic of policies and practices of this conceptualization of disability is the assumption that disability is located within an individual who has impairment. Thus, under this model, disability is conceptualized as an individual limitation that can be counteracted by individual rehabilitation.

In relation to more formal structures of policy and legislation, the medical model translates to discourses around help, assistance and welfare. In HE this policy framework outlines the support of students by identifying and classifying special education needs (Riddell et al. 2000) and the provision of resourcing and funding to support these needs. Research from this approach has influenced the provision of various individualized responses to address issues of disability. This has

been done by providing teaching and learning services (pedagogy), technology and medical services in institutions of HE. Additionally, some studies and policy analysis have advocated for new infrastructural design in to make campuses accessible for individuals with disability. Although, the focus on the individual is paramount, the weakness with such policy and practice and framing is that it sees society as a whole playing an insignificant role. The application of the medical model results in wider contextual and political responses being dismissed or ignored in favour of functionalist approaches through amelioration (Oliver, 1986; Rioux, 1997; Skrtic, 2005).

### **International Classification Framing**

In stark contrast to the medical model, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICFH) was introduced in 2001 by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002). Explicitly in this model, disability policy framing and practices are seen as being on a continuum with health and are the result of the interaction of health conditions with environmental and personal factors. Research that takes this approach like the medical model tend to fall in the functionalist paradigm in that they tend to examine the functions of various actors surrounding a policy on the issues of disability in HE. These studies aim at understanding how universities can institutionalize their organizational services and interact with communities to promote capacity-building on disability. Functionalist studies of policy and practices are characterized by similar assumptions: economic rationalism, efficiency, and effectiveness are critical to achieve ideal functioning of individuals with disability and in return institutions processes and outcomes. Studies by (Imrie, 2004; Mitra, 2006; Saleeby, 2007) tend to take this approach.

### **Social-Cultural Framing of Disability**

The social framing of policy and practice of disability in HE challenges and expands the functionalist assumptions of the medical and international classification framing. Research and policy from this perspective shows that disability is constructed through social, structural and environmental barriers rather than an individual's impairment alone. The proponents of the social framing of policies in HE argues that, there is no causal link between impairment – the body's

biology and disability (Anastasiou & Kauffman 2013). Disabled people may experience life difficulties because of the state of their body, but that is something entirely different compared with the difficulties caused by a society that creates experiences in HE that are constructed without regard to the variety of people (Oliver, 1990).

Studies, policies and practices that take a social framing of disability tend to exhibit a constructivist and criticalist paradigm in that they tend to focus on discourse and language and how these create reality that has both positive and negative consequences. Such policy framing looks at how the language of policy and practices can be used to change the oppressive structures that have been historically used to discriminate people considered to have different levels of disability. It is widely acknowledged that language surrounding disability to-date (including the term disability itself) reflects dominant knowledge and discourse. This language has occupied a substantial role in the shaping of disability identity (Kraus, 2008). Concepts such as mainstreaming, integration and now inclusion that originate from developed countries may not mean the same across different cultures (Chimedza, 2008; Owusu-Ansah, 2013). As the socio-cultural perspective to disability aptly remarks, disability is a social construct and not an objective condition (Armstrong & Barton, 1999; Edgerton, 1993; Trent, 1994). The social context of disability is instrumental in defining disability itself and its related concepts. Research by (Ferguson & Nussbaum, 2012; Ingstad & White, 1995; Owusu-Ansah, 2013) observed that attempts to universalize the category disability runs into conceptual problems because such definitions do not take into consideration the social and cultural contexts. With regards to HE Mutanga (2018) concludes that the concepts of disability, inclusion and exclusion thus require closer and thorough analysis in order to fully comprehend who is included or excluded. Powell (2013), Fordyce et al (2013), Pliner and Johnstone (2004), and Spratt and Florian (2015) also concur that policies and practices in education must be revised to ensure that education is inclusive thus guaranteeing that all the students can participate fully and that all can benefit from a process of quality teaching and learning



A major weakness of most of framing approaches is that they are produced in deferent HE context which makes it hard to fully understand their generalizability and transferability to the African HE context (Matshedisho, 2007). Moreover, few take a multi-policy actor (students, staff, community, etc.), comparative, qualitative, multi-country and institution approach in their units of analysis. This is critical justification for an in depth understanding of the conceptualization of HE policy on disability in the African context.

## **Discussion**

### **Exploring Possibility for an Expansive Disability Policy Framing for HE in Africa**

The literature available has shown a dominance of the Qualitative research approach and Social Model research direction in African Higher Education. This overemphasis has led to the lack of robust statistical data regarding disability in higher education (Matanga, 2017; Van de Merwe, 2017). There is little or no statistical knowledge about the experiences and participation rates of students with disability (Morley & Croft, 2011). Resultantly, there tends to be a leaning to lived experiences without any statistical data to describe the disability landscape in Higher Education.

In view of the above findings we now discuss two important points in relation to research and policy framing pertaining to disability issues in African higher education. We also do this to position potential areas of research and position our future research. The first is that policy and research in this area of study comes from other disciplines other than higher education and how part of the problem has been that our understanding of the critical issues in the field of higher education is lacking theoretical contextual and conceptual rigor (Strom, 2018; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018; Wang, 2015) and second is that very few studies on policy are conducted within the African higher education context.

The three main models discussed above have historically influenced practices in HE education (Allan, 1996; Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Interestingly, the framing perspectives influence a wide spectrum of research that sits at the foundations of paradigms at epistemic odds. The theoretical clashes in the education space have created a scenario where tensions and

contradictions in theory have produced heated debate in the literature for example (Brantlinger, 1997; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006). African researchers like (Chataika, 2010; Chimedza, 2008; Matshedisho, 2007; Owusu-Ansah, 2013) highlight that the different range of interpretations of meanings of disability can become a source of dissonance which has the potential to complicate and therefore impede the delivery of meaningful educational responses for students with disabilities as HE practitioners navigate a divided professional knowledge base. It is such dissonance and the complexities that arise that research needs to explore to get new information that might guide us to new approaches and meanings that are relevant and relatable to higher education. It is important for higher education in Africa to contextualise and conceptualise the meaning and understanding issues of disability.

Matshedisho (2007) notes higher education systems in general, may consciously or unconsciously prefer one mode of disability representation over the other. These choices may have implications for students with disability in higher education. The dichotomies that exist for students with disabilities that revolve around language and actions of institutions, society, denial of human rights, economic opportunities, compromises of government systems in different African contexts point to the need for critical higher education research to make sense of such concepts so as to bridge the gap of the lack of theoretical and conceptual rigor on critical issues in higher education (Chataika, 2010; Owusu-Ansah, 2013). This therefore points to the need to go beyond the existing models that are influencing the representation of disability in Higher Education.

Secondly, Given the odds and tensions predominant in the perspectives in literature presented in this article it is evident there is more to be done to understand how we can frame disability policies in the African HE. Mutanga (2017), Chitaika (2010), Mutswangwa (2014) and Ramaahlo et al. (2018) observed that students with disability pose particular challenges to higher education especially with regards to policy. Therefore, there is a need to explore more into how Africa's diverse historical backgrounds and context specificities have significant bearing on the

higher education system. Thus, it is important to bring context complexity into the research agenda and explore how they influence representation of disability in higher education.

Fawcett (2000) and Johnstone (2001) reinforce the above points by describing disability as a contested area where definitions vary according to historical, cultural and social locations and the nature of the environment in which it is observed. Stone (1990) and Chataika (2010) in a similar vein points out how the minimised or ignorance of local cultures by researchers, academics, activists and practitioner's has brought risks and complications into their work around ideology, definitions, cultural or religious values should be paid attention to, whose social systems or ways of working have to be followed.

Zeroing in on the African context a major characteristic of the current HE research and policy context is that there is so much policy lending and borrowing (Chimedza, 2008; Matshediso, 2007; Ramaahlo et al., 2018). While there is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach there is a concerning need to contextualise the debate and keep exploring more and nuanced ways to expand our understanding of the challenges facing African HE. Literature suggests that higher education is positioned as a key driver of development thus it has the capacity to challenge what we have been socialized to understand about disability.

This article advocates for robust theoretical, conceptual and contextualised research that should examine the policy space that frames disability in higher education. Research should also go further into exploring disability as a socio-political category, strategies used by universities to frame disability and dig deeper into the institutional responsibility of a universities as actors in the African space. Research is needed to provide more depth in how the conversation about disability can be better addressed, through constructive and critical theory.

Thus there is need in the HE space in Africa to delve more into the historic, political, social and cultural forces through which educational policy has and is still being formulated to create barriers to equitable access to education and this can be done by intentionally prioritising the examining of HE policies regarding student disability on the African continent. Consequently, this

might help tease out the risk of replicating systems of education that marginalise and this therefore requires ongoing review and critique from approaches that engage multiple stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

Researching the experiences of disabled students provides important insights especially using qualitative methodologies. However, having understanding of the experience without the relevant statistical description of the disability landscape will only contribute to unfairly representing disability in African Higher Education. With this in mind this literature review was set out to answer the following questions: 1) What perspectives influence the framing of disability within current university policies and practices in African HE? 2) What can be done to explore a more nuanced tone that can accommodate the understanding of the complex nature of studying policies and practices on disability in the field of HE in the African context? Three main policy and practice framing approaches were identified in the research literature on disability in HE. The medical approach, the second is framed in form of international classification of functioning and the third a social model of disability. Several concerns were noted firstly that policy and research in this area of study comes from other disciplines other than higher education and second is that very few studies are conducted within the African higher education context. Thus the framing perspectives compete and even conflict around their conceptions of disability and reveal a need for an analysis of how these tensions manifest themselves especially in higher education in African contexts.

Importantly the paper advocates for new lens of looking into defining conceptions of disability that may arise from different complex African cultural histories by exposing the need to possibly explore alternative ways of understanding how policy processes create, or contribute to exclusions in higher education. Ultimately the paper argues for nuanced ways to expand our understanding of the current and emerging issues pertaining to the study of policies on disability in the field of HE in Africa.

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