

Extra-curricular Encounters and Needs in the Learning Environment: The Case of Students with Disabilities at University of Venda

A. K. Tugli

Department of Public Health, University of Venda, South Africa
E-mail: tugli.augustine@univen.ac.za

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ABSTRACT This paper investigated the encounters and needs of students with disability with regard to their extra-curricular activities at the University of Venda. A descriptive design was employed in which questionnaires were administered to 67 students with disabilities (aged 19 to 44 years) at the University of Venda. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Among the findings, 27(40.5%) of the participants indicated that there was a need for equipment, support and funds for the promotion of disabled sporting activities and recreation. It is, therefore, recommended that the Department of Higher Education and Training must support all educational institutions to promote extra-curricular activities including indoor and outdoor games that will cater for all categories of disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of extra-curricular activities on the life of students with disabilities cannot be overemphasized. Extra-curricular activities are regarded as social and recreational activities that improve muscular strength and mental health beyond the classroom (Marques et al. 2015). It means involvement in university clubs, athletics, sports and games, music, art, culture, religious engagements (Stuart et al. 2008). Net Industries (2013) explains that extra-curricular activities exist to complement the institution's academic curriculum and to augment students' educational experiences. Net Industries (2013) spelt out the benefits of extra-curricular activities as:

- improving educational attainment and academic and intellectual competence
- stress relieving
- identifying with a peer group, that group may influence a student's affective, cognitive and development and character/behavioural control
- impacting positively on students' emotional, intellectual, social and inter-personal development
- by interacting with other individuals, students learn to negotiate, communicate, manage conflict, lead and serve others as well as appreciation for other's differences and similarities
- developing team spirit, critical thinking skills, self-confidence, social maturity

- helping to link academic knowledge with practical experience
- leading to better understanding of one's own abilities, talents and career goals
- developing one's leadership and managerial potentials

These benefits are, in no doubt, very crucial in the total development and well-being of the student especially those with disabilities. According to Jaeger et al. (2015), many rare diagnoses are syndromes or conditions that have complex consequences with a significant impact on the individuals' everyday life and needs. Hence, institutions need to make provisions for the accommodation of students with disabilities like their peers in extra-mural activities. These activities are meant to complement the university's academic programmes and to enrich students' quality of social and educational experiences (McCoy 2015).

Participating in social events was also an issue in higher institutions. In their study to explore the educational and social experiences of students with disabilities in the context of an institution of higher education, Jacklin et al. (2007) found that 22.4 percent reported that they were not happy with their learning experiences whilst 12.5 percent said they were not happy with their social experiences.

Between 2001 and 2003, Tinklin et al. (2004) carried out a research to identify gaps between policy and practice that significantly pose barriers to the full participation of students with disabilities in higher education. Whilst com-

mending the progress made to accommodate students with disabilities in higher institutions, the study found that extra-curricular activities were not promoted. Extra-curricular activities in the learning environment improve social networking and healthy integration among students with disabilities and their peers, especially for those with mental health difficulties and those with high support needs (Tinklin et al. 2004; McCoy 2015). According to Sachs and Schreuer (2011), students with disabilities participated in fewer social and extra-curricular activities. In their observation, they also noted that students with disabilities invested more time to meet the demands of their studies and as a result had less experience in art, music and theatre activities. This amounts to social exclusion. According to Levitas et al. (2007 cited in Sedaghatnia et al. 2015), social exclusion involves inadequate resources and lack of adaptable facilities for all people to participate on equal footing in all spheres of life.

In South Africa, limited attention has been placed on addressing issues of access and participation for students categorized by the government's *National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE)* as 'non-traditional students' (that is, historically disadvantaged including those with disabilities) (Department of Education (DoE) 2001 cited in Howell 2006). Acknowledging this deficiency, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) recognizes the importance of addressing issues of disability with special focus on the integration of students and staff with disabilities in all aspects of campus life, including academic, culture and sports (DHET 2012).

In a project to explore the role and functioning of specialized Disability Units at different tertiary institutions in South Africa, the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM 2011) noted varied participation levels in sport and social activities involving students with disabilities. Some of the encounters reported were that in many instances students with disabilities felt they were not sufficiently aware of social events and were also excluded from other events due to physical access barriers. In terms of barriers such as physical infrastructure and other resources as well as attitudinal barriers (Tugli 2013; Ramakeula and Maluleke 2011), University of Venda faces many challenges. Above all, data on disability are inadequate and often inaccurate (DHET 2012). Against this background, this study was under-

taken to determine the encounters and needs of students with disability with regard to their extra-curricular activities and needs at the University of Venda.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The paper investigated the encounters and needs of students with disabilities in respect of extra-curricular activities. A quantitative approach using a cross-sectional descriptive design was used in this study. According to Creswell (2009), a quantitative approach is a formal, objective, systematic and empirical process in which social phenomenon is investigated via statistical, mathematical or computational techniques. This approach was adopted because it allowed the quantification of the phenomenon in question. In addition, the use of a descriptive cross-sectional design in this paper is justified in that it allowed a once-off administration of the survey instrument on the target population to determine the current status of the phenomenon (Brink 2008; Vanderstoep and Johnston 2009).

Population and Sampling Procedure

Population or the target population is the entire group of people or objects that are of interest to the researcher and hence meet the criteria the researcher is interested in (Katzenellenbogen and Karim 2007). The population for this study comprised all students with disabilities who were registered for undergraduate and post-graduate programmes at the University Disability Unit (UDU) of the University of Venda during the 2011 academic year.

However, for the purpose of this paper, all the registered learners with disabilities were considered for recruitment because of their small population in the institution.

Instrument and Procedure

A self-administered semi-structured questionnaire was used. The instrument focused mainly on soliciting information pertaining to participation in extra-curricular activities. Open-ended questions were also used to solicit responses regarding the unmet needs of the par-

ticipants in this regard. Trained research assistants were used during the administration of the questionnaire.

Validity and Reliability

The instrument was adapted from the World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS 2011). It was also shaped and enriched by consulting a wide range of literature on the subject to ensure its validity. A pre-test of the instrument was also carried out using three volunteer students with disabilities. These students were excluded from the main study. A test-retest reliability of the instrument during the second round of administering the instrument yielded Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.81 which indicated a high internal consistency and reliability.

Ethical Consideration

Before carrying out the study, ethical approval (Project No. 0765-705-6) was first granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Health Studies at the University of South Africa. At the study setting, the researcher obtained an internal ethical clearance (Project No. SHS/11/PH/06/E0811) from the Research and Innovation Directorate of the University of Venda. Since the study involved vulnerable students, access to the participants was negotiated with the offices of the Council for Higher Education, Teaching and Learning (CHETL) and the Disability Unit of the institution.

Above all, the researcher ensured that ethical issues of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were addressed and ensured before and after the administration of the questionnaires. Time and place for the administration of the instrument negotiated with the students and the Disability Unit staff. Efforts were also made to assist, protect and respect the privacy of participants with severe disabilities (for example the blind).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics. Responses to closed and open-ended questions were summarised and presented using frequency distribution tables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 and

the Microsoft Excel were used to perform the analyses of the data.

RESULTS

Demographic Profiles of the Participants

A total of 67 out of 132 questionnaires distributed were returned, of this figure 34 (50.7%) were males and 34 (49.3%) were females. The minimum age was 19 years and the oldest participant was 44 years. The mean age was 26.6 years with a standard deviation of 4.7. Among the different disability categories (visually impaired, mobility impaired, albinism etc.) that emerged from the study, the most common was the mobility impaired (41.8%; n=28).

Social Encounters

The encounters experienced in social lives of the participants are presented in Table 1. Thirteen (19.5%) of the participants expressed that they encountered discrimination in having relationships with non-disabled counterparts, 6 (9.0%) mentioned unfriendly attitude from non-disabled students while 19 (28.5%) indicated that there was lack of support for disabled sporting activities in the institution.

Table 1: Encounters pertaining to extra-curricular activities

Items	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Non-disabled "bodies" and students discriminate against disabled "bodies" in terms of having relationships, etc.	13	19.5
People lack awareness and understanding of disability issues	2	3
Lack of entertainment for learners with disabilities, for example, social clubs, discussion groups	2	3
Unfriendly attitude from non-disabled learners	6	9
No information or advice on social life	1	1.5
There is no support for disabled sporting activities, clubs etc.	19	28.5
Disabled sport is too restricted	5	7.5
Lack of sporting equipment	5	7.5

Some personal comments of the participants are:

- ♦ “People must be more supportive”
- ♦ “There is nothing the university can do”
- ♦ “The extracurricular activities are usually restricted to abled bodies”
- ♦ “I can’t compete with abled bodies”

Needs Regarding Extra-curricular Activities

In response to the open-ended question in respect of extra-curricular needs, majority (n=21; 31.5%) expressed the need for awareness campaign on disability issues (Table 2). In addition, most (n=27; 40.5%) of the participants said sporting and recreational activities needed equipment, support and funds. Also among the participants, 9 (13.5%) expressed the need for an all-inclusive extra-curricular activities whilst 5 (7.5%) said there was a need for equal opportunities in sporting colts.

Table 2: Extra-curricular needs

Items	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Non-disabled learners need to be made aware of disability issues	21	31.5
Need more social clubs and entertainment	3	4.5
Need equal opportunities without discrimination	2	3
Need for equipment, support and funds for disabled sporting activities and recreation	27	40.5
Need for all inclusive extra-curricular activities for all learners with or without disabilities	9	13.5
Equal opportunities in sporting colts	5	7.5

Some personal comments regarding needs of the participants are:

- ♦ “People must be more supportive”
- ♦ “There is nothing the university can do”
- ♦ “... activities in which abled and disabled bodies can compete equally”
- ♦ “Sport equipment and also school trips for disabled students”

DISCUSSION

In spite of curricular encounters and challenges, the participants were also faced with extra-curricular challenges. Success of an individ-

ual can not only be measured through academic excellence alone but through other areas of human endeavours such as sports and music. According to McCoy (2015), when students work together towards a common goal, they build a spirit of camaraderie and responsibility that are difficult to experience elsewhere, more especially by students with disabilities who are often on the fringes of society. The study assessed the encounters and needs of students with disability with regard to their extra-curricular activities and needs at the University of Venda. The findings show that 28.5 percent of the participants indicated that there was lack of support for disabled sporting activities in the institution, 19.5 percent expressed that they encountered discrimination in having relationships with non-disabled counterparts whilst 9.0 percent mentioned unfriendly attitude from non-disabled students. This clearly suggests that a number of factors in the institutional environments contribute to the low participation of learners with disabilities in extra-curricular activities. Tinklin et al. (2004) reported similar findings in their study among students with mental health difficulties and those with high support needs. Hence, by providing a supportive and high quality learning environment, a large number of students will be attracted and this will boost retention of all categories of students (Sedaghatnia et al. 2015).

In the study, one of the participants commented: “The extra-curricular activities are usually restricted to abled bodies”. This is a clear indication that discrimination, lack of resources and lack of promotion of extramural activities are a common feature in the institution. In their observation, Sachs and Schreuer (2011) point out that students with disabilities participated in fewer social and extra-curricular activities in order to make more time to meet the demands of their studies; this cannot be a substitute for extra-curricular activities. They further reported that students with disabilities had less experience in art, music and theatre activities. By investing more in their studies could imply that they had no other choice than to keep themselves busy because the institutional climate was not conducive for their participation in extra-curricular activities.

In this paper, about 1 in 3 (31.5%) participant expressed the need for awareness campaign on disability issues among their non-disabled counterparts. In support of these findings, Ramakeu-

la and Maluleke (2011) propose the need to design and create awareness programmes for the entire university community concerning the needs of students with disabilities in order to facilitate their acceptance. This is very important in disabusing people's minds in terms of prejudice, stigmatization and stereotyping of students with disabilities in the learning environment.

About 2 in 5 (40.5%) participants in this study said sporting and recreational activities needed equipment, support and funds for the promotion of these activities and functions. In addition, 13.5 percent expressed the need for all-inclusive extra-curricular activities with equal opportunities, and on the question of suggesting ways of promoting extra-curricular activities in the institution, one participant states: "... *There is nothing the university can do*". These findings clearly indicate a total despair and disgust about the management of extra-curricular activities in the institution. It also depicts loss of hope and disillusionment. By virtue of their condition and vulnerability, students with disabilities need more sporting and recreational activities and support.

What needs to be understood is that, learning can take place in and outside the lecture halls. As indicated earlier by Net Industries (2013) and McCoy (2015), extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, cultural activities, excursions can be very exhilarating, refreshing, stress relieving especially for learners with disabilities. Hence, failure to support and promote these activities in the institution for all students to equally participate is tantamount to discrimination and social injustice. Since there is no denial of the fact that many people with disabilities have earned national and international accolades and recognition in the field of sports and recreation, extra-curricular issues must be given urgent attention in this learning environment.

CONCLUSION

In this study, extra-curricular issues were found to be grossly relegated and considered a secondary matter for students with disabilities. The importance of extra-curricular activities in institutions of higher education cannot be underestimated, especially in the lives of students with disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recreational and sporting activities including "disabled sport" have now gained international prominence and go a long way to enhance social integration of all people with disabilities. Hence, the study recommends that the Department of Higher Education and Training must support all educational institutions materially and financially in order to promote extra-curricular activities including indoor games for all categories of disabilities.

LIMITATIONS

This study was carried out in only one higher educational institution in the Limpopo Province, and as such, caution be taken into account when one wants to generalize the results to other settings.

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