

“Voices of Students with Disabilities Unfairly Decentered”: Management of Reasonable Accommodations Processes at South African Universities

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Abstract

South Africa has made considerable achievements in terms of developing disability rights policies which endorse inclusive education approach by requiring higher education institutions (HEIs) to create enabling environments in which all students with disabilities (SWDs) can have equal opportunities to access and succeed academically within these institutions. At the center of these disability policies is enjoining HEIs to achieve inclusive education through providing appropriate reasonable accommodations as these enhance opportunities for SWDs to participate in the learning process on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers. Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as well as national and institutional disability policies impose an obligation on South African HEIs to provide to SWDs appropriate reasonable accommodations upon request. However, research indicates that most HEIs are lagging in honouring this obligation and this continues to disproportionately affect the academic success of SWDs. Despite this, there is still a dearth studies investigating the management of reasonable accommodations and relevant parties involved in these processes at South African HEIs. The purpose of this study was to explore the current status, issues and practices which underpin the management of reasonable accommodations and their impact on the academic inclusion of SWDs in HEIs. The study utilised a scoping review of national and institutional disability policies and scholarly literature on disability inclusion in higher education (HE) and data were analysed using thematic analysis approach. The study found that lecturers, Disability Unit Staff Members (DUSMs) and the university management personnel are key stakeholders dominating the reasonable accommodations provisions management and decision-making processes at the cost of SWDs whose voices and learning needs are often relegated to the margins of these processes. These key stakeholders are routinely resorting to their power and taking it upon themselves to deny reasonable accommodations to certain SWDs whose request for accommodations are deemed by the former to be too costly, unnecessary, ‘watering down’ the standards of academic courses and time consuming to execute. The study concludes by critiquing key stakeholders’ actions as inconsistent with the

human rights approach to inclusive education espoused in the country's disability policy framework. This is because these key stakeholders are basing their views on erroneous assumptions of ableism which reinforce the exclusion of SWDs' voices and agency, thus discriminating against this group on the grounds of disability. The study recommends the need for dismantling the current unequal power dynamics and ensure that SWDs' voices are also adequately centered in reasonable accommodations management decision-making processes if HEIs are to achieve enabling spaces conducive to the academic success of SWDs. This is because SWDs have firsthand experience of how their disability impact on their learning experience, and this makes them key experts on advising relevant stakeholders accordingly on the utilisation of appropriate reasonable accommodations tailored to maximise these students' individual learning needs.

Keywords: disability inclusion, transformation in higher education, students with disabilities, alienation, ableism