

# Visually impaired physiotherapy students' perception of support while studying at a tertiary institution

T. Steyl (MSc)

Department of Physiotherapy

Corresponding Author:  
T. Steyl (MSc Physiotherapy)  
Department of Physiotherapy  
University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag X17  
Bellville  
7535  
e-mail: [tsteyl@uwc.ac.za](mailto:tsteyl@uwc.ac.za)

## ABSTRACT

### Introduction:

Acquiring higher education is a difficult task for most normally sighted individuals. Realizing the importance of the visual system in the learning process, it becomes apparent that visually impaired (VI) students could be challenged in their educational pursuit without the necessary support. Since the inception of the UWC program for VI physiotherapy students in 1996, seven students have successfully completed the course to date.

### Aim:

The aim of the study was to explore VI students' perceptions of support during their studies at the Physiotherapy (PT) Department of UWC, South Africa.

### Methods:

A qualitative study design was mainly used for this study. The study incorporated purposive sampling. Four (4) pre-determined themes and one (1) emerging theme were identified.

### Results:

The responses of the participants to the support given by the PT Department were mainly positive. The role of the mentor for VI students and the Disability Officer proved to be invaluable. VI students in tertiary education might face difficulties unless certain steps are taken to minimise such difficulties.

### Conclusion:

By employing some simple techniques when teaching VI students as well as giving them the necessary support during their educational journey, the learning environment can be greatly enhanced. Adoption of such techniques can mean the difference between success and failure for students with disabilities.

**Keywords:** perception, support, visually impaired students

## Introduction

Education is a basic human right and a precious key to self development. For many years, physically disabled people did not have the same educational opportunities as abled people, especially in higher education. Students with disabilities at African universities represent a tiny minority of 1% of the total enrollment (Eagleton, 2008). The majority of these students enrolling at universities have physical or visual impairments. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 defines visual impairment (VI) as "an impairment in vision that, even with correction,

adversely affects a child's educational performance" (Eagleton, 2008). The term includes both low vision and blindness. Throughout history, students with VI have been referred to as blind, visually handicapped, visually disabled, partially sighted, partially blind, visually limited, or sight impaired (Jackson, 2005).

There are many primary and secondary schools worldwide which were built for blind and visually impaired children specifically. Contrarily, no tertiary institution of education is built purposively for this category of disabled students (Oduntan, 2004). The

lack of appropriate and adequate provision for disabled learners at school level has profoundly affected their access to higher education (Oduntan, 2004). Since the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa, many more disabled students have the opportunity to higher education.

Only some South African universities have written policies regarding disabled students. Although the aim of all universities accommodating disabled students is more or less the same, namely to integrate all students that meet the academic requirements, it differs from each other with regard to the approach to disability and equal opportunities. The "adjusting approach" recognizes the specific needs of disabled students and emphasizes the importance of addressing them, but on the other hand makes restrictions for example 'without restricting or prejudicing the rights of other students'. This approach expects disabled students to adjust or integrate into the mainstream. The "equal opportunities approach" however, emphasizes the need to adjust the environment so that all students have the same opportunities for education. These environmental adjustments include the physical as well as mental environment (attitudes), teaching methods and equipment (UNESCO, 1997).

For many years the South African government has funded the training of visually impaired people in various employment areas overseas (Office of the Deputy President, South Africa, 1997). These endeavours have been very costly. In 1994 after the new democratic dispensation, the Minister of Health, Dr. Dlamini-Zuma, requested each university to assess whether they would be able to train visually impaired students. Since the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has always been responsive to the needs of the community, it accepted the challenge. The Unit for Disabled People was opened on an ad hoc basis in the early 1990's at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The Physiotherapy Department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) admitted visually impaired students since 1996. The Department of Labour (DoL) and the South African National Council for the Blind (SANCB) provided funds for the Physiotherapy Department to employ a mentor for its visually impaired students. Support for the visually impaired students therefore came

from the mentor and the Unit for Disabled People at UWC. The support included assistance with application to study at the university, application for bursaries, assessing need for specific equipment, enlargement of font size of notes and study materials, audio recording of textbooks and assistance in practical classes.

Since the inception of the UWC programme for visually impaired physiotherapy students in 1996, seven visually impaired students have successfully completed the degree programme to date. As with many initiatives and programmes, there have been limitations and obstacles. Research has emphasized the importance of the evaluation of support needed by students with disabilities, for them to prosper in higher education programmes (Holloway, 2001; Stoden et al., 2001). Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore visually impaired students' perceptions of support during their studies at the Physiotherapy Department of UWC, South Africa.

#### **Method**

The study was conducted at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) situated in the Northern Suburbs of the Cape Metropolitan area, in the Republic of South Africa. Among academic institutions UWC has been in the frontline of South Africa's historic change, playing a unique academic role in helping to build a dynamic nation.

A qualitative study design was used for this study. The study incorporated purposive sampling. Therefore all visually impaired students that graduated since the inception of the program in 1996 as well as all visually impaired students currently enrolled for the physiotherapy program at UWC during the time of data collection were invited to participate in the study. All visually impaired students (past and present), except for one person that passed away, agreed to participate in the study. The final sampling frame thus consisted of 7 (seven) participants, namely 6 (six) qualified physiotherapists as well as 1 (one) final year physiotherapy student.

Ethical considerations were taken into account before embarking on this study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the UWC Research Grants and Study Leave Committee as

well as the Registrar from UWC. All participants were ensured of their anonymity and that all collected information will be kept confidential. The participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Data was collected by means of a semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions regarding barriers and facilitators that the visually impaired students have encountered while completing the physiotherapy programme. Participants were contacted telephonically, the study was explained to each of them and verbal consent to telephonic interviews was granted by each participant. Appointments were made for telephonic interviews to obtain necessary information from the six qualified visually impaired physiotherapists. Their responses were directly noted. The one visually impaired physiotherapy student was interviewed on the UWC campus. To assure trustworthiness of the results, the following steps were taken. Audio-taped data from the student interviewed on campus were transcribed verbatim by an independent person with experience in transcription. A comparison was then made with the notes taken during the interview, to verify accuracy. Member checking were used for the data obtained telephonically.

### **Results**

The study sample consisted of seven (7) participants, namely six (6) males and one (1) female.

Four (4) pre-determined themes were identified, namely departmental support, study materials, departmental mentor for visually impaired students and the Office for Students with Disabilities. One (1) emerging theme was identified, namely recommendations regarding support. The findings will be presented in the five categories as mentioned above.

Pseudonyms will be used for names.

### **Departmental support**

All the participants, except one, agreed that there were sufficient departmental support in the following areas, namely enlargement of font size of test papers, adding extra time to tests and examinations (10 minutes per hour) as well as providing extra support during practical classes.

The excerpt below illustrates this:

"They were so good. They helped wherever they could and always went out of their way to be of assistance. Without the department I would've have been lost." (Male, 27)

"During practical classes the lecturer placed my hands on the specific structures that I should feel." (Female, 34)

Although the majority of the participants was satisfied with the support during practical classes, one participant expressed his dislike.

"Visually impaired students should not have to be models all the time, but should sit in front in practical classes to better grasp the techniques." (Male, 25)

However, lack of support from the department with regards to 1st year registration and with the practical component of the Electrotherapy module was reported. The participants also complained of some lectures' inadequate teaching methods. The lecturers that wrote on the blackboard did not take into account that it is very difficult for the visually impaired students to read from it.

"I received no support from the department during first year registration." (Male, 24)

"My fellow classmates helped me a lot with things like registration and during practical classes. Without them I think I would have been lost." (Male, 24)

"Liesl help me with first year registration, the department was too busy with the other students." (Male, 41)

"..... and writing on the blackboard while lecturing made it difficult for me to keep up with the pace." (Male, 25)

"The department never approached me. I had to tell them when I needed help with anything. Could they not think that registration would be difficult to do?" (Female, 34)

### **Study material**

Study material was considered a major challenge for most of the participants. Most of the participants agreed that the department provided enlarged (font

size) notes on time, although not always of good quality. The following quotation illustrates this:

"The department was very good in the sense that notes were most of the time enlarged on time. To receive it electronically was so much better as I could enlarge it on my own computer." (Male, 32)

One participant stated that he received printed notes well in advance. This assisted in making the learning experience a positive one.

"I've received my enlarged notes well in advance, as well as an electronic copy." (Male, 25)

However, one participant stressed that notes from the department was always late, therefore causing problems with his preparation for lectures and tests. "I had a big problem with late notes. This complicated my preparation for lectures and tests." (Male, 27)

The students that enrolled for the physiotherapy programme at first, had to type their own notes from transparencies provided by the lecturers of the service department. Some of the service departments also provided notes of poor quality (incorrect font size, faded ink, poor clarity of pictures) and it was never on time.

"..... but the outside module notes were always late and of poor quality." (Female, 34)

"I can still recall the poor quality of some modules that was not taught in the department. I sometimes received it only in the 2nd or 3rd week of lectures." (Male, 25)

#### **Departmental mentor for visually impaired students**

Practical classes, tutorials and clinical work were a daunting experience for the participants. All the participants agreed that they would never have been able to complete the programme without the assistance from the lecturers and the visually impaired departmental mentor (since 1996).

"I would not have been able to do ET (electrotherapy) without the help of the mentor. She really helped with the orientation of the machines." (Male, 25)

"NMS would have been a nightmare without the assistance of the mentor." (Male, 27) (NMS is techniques in neuromusculoskeletal conditions)

"The mentor was very good with providing assistance during Anatomy tuts. She was my eyes. She explained things like x-rays and lots of little things that I've missed during class" (Male, 24)

"It would have been impossible to do clinical work without the help of the mentor. She assisted with the patient file and also helped with the documentation of treatment given." (Male, 32)

#### **The Office for Students with Disabilities**

All the participants reiterated the importance of constant communication between the Office for Students with Disabilities and the Physiotherapy Department as well as the moral support from the office's staff. The staff assisted the students with registration, application for bursaries, obtaining the correct assistive equipment, liaising between visually impaired students and service departments, enlargement of examination papers and invigilating the students during their theory examination.

"I could go to Liesl for any help. She was always willing to go the extra mile." (Male, 25)

"Liesl assisted me with first year registration, the department was too busy with the other students." (Male, 41)

#### **Recommendations regarding support**

Two participants recommended that the Office for Students with Disabilities should educate all campus staff members that are involved with teaching of visually impaired students, to use methods that suite visually impaired students the best.

"They (lecturers) should not write on the blackboard, they should rather use the data projector." (Female, 34)

"Lecturers should have knowledge of the assistive devices available that would make learning for a VI student easier." (Male, 25)

## **Discussion**

Acquiring higher education is a difficult task for most normally sighted individuals. Realizing the importance of the visual system in the learning process, it becomes apparent that visually impaired students could be challenged in their educational pursuit (Oduntan, 2004). The results from the current study support findings from Oduntan (2004) who argued that visually impaired students in tertiary education might face difficulties unless certain steps are taken to guard against such difficulties. Hall and Tinklin (1998) identified the curriculum, especially the amount of work, as one of the difficulties experienced by visually impaired students at tertiary institutions. Many people expressed doubts that visually impaired students would be able to 'cope' and most believed that it would be impossible for them to survive in mainstream education (Krugler & Andrews, 1996; Atkinson & Hutchinson, 2005). Findings from the current study also showed that without the support from the department, the mentor for visually impaired students and the Office for Students with Disabilities, the students would have been challenged even more in their educational pursuit. However, the graduates from the current study indicate that with support visually impaired students can survive in mainstream education.

The responses of the participants to the support given by the Physiotherapy Department during the completion of the 4-year BSc Physiotherapy programme were mainly positive. Of great importance is the recognition of resource implications if students with disabilities are going to have both the level of support and the equipment that they might need to facilitate their full participation in education (Harrison & Chia, 2003). This is confirmed by all the participants, as they stated that they would not have been able to complete the course without the help of the visually impaired mentor's assistance with enlargements of notes and help with practical classes and tutorials specifically. The results furthermore coincide with recommendations from research by Hall and Tinklin (1998), namely that the VI mentor should assist with any problems arising from departmental as well as non-departmental (service departments) course work.

The minority of the participants reported receiving good quality study material. The notes were also seldom received on time. The availability and quality of study material also contributed to the participants' learning experience being positive. Oduntan (2004) and a study done at the Phillips-University Marburg in 2006 also support the view that study material should be of high quality and that visually impaired students should receive their notes electronically and on time.

Support during the transition from secondary to tertiary education has been proven to be invaluable to people with disabilities (Hall and Tinklin, 1998). Transitional activities should place a much greater emphasis on providing effective self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities who are interested in tertiary education (Hall & Tinklin, 1998). The researchers furthermore recommended that prospective students with disabilities should be invited to visit the institution before enrolling, so that their specific needs as well as available support systems could be discussed with them and their parents.

## **Conclusion**

Visually impaired students in tertiary education might face difficulties unless certain steps are taken to guard them against such difficulties. The problems experienced by disabled students in higher education are often ascribed to a lack of necessary assistive devices or equipment. While such facilities may form an important part in supporting the student, limited attention is paid to the teaching and learning process itself.

## **Recommendations**

By employing some simple techniques when teaching visually impaired students as well as giving them the necessary support during their educational journey, the learning environment can be greatly enhanced. Adoption of such techniques can mean the difference between success and failure for students with disabilities. Findings from the study furthermore confirmed that the Office for Students with Disabilities should continuously educate staff involved with disabled students on how to improve their support given to VI students. The Disability Officer should also identify the appropriate technology available and provide training to staff regarding these technologies. This

is of great importance as Oduntan (2004) and Holloway (2001) reiterated that staff should be continually trained in order to be better equipped to work with students with disabilities.

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