Chapter 104
Challenges Confronting Students With Disabilities in Research Engagement in South Africa

Sibonokuhle Ndlovu
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents physical barriers, lack of adequate funding, poor supervision, delay in feedback, communication difficulties, negative attitudes, and impairment-related disadvantages as the unique challenges confronted by students with disabilities when doing research in higher education in South Africa. Data were collected through scanning South African and international literature available on Google scholar, ProQuest, in books, journal articles, and online resources. Informed by decolonial theory, the invisible underlying causes of the challenges are discussed. Suitable assistive devices, listening to students with disabilities' voices, and more time allocation are suggested as strategies that could improve research engagement for students with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Both the academic staff and students have to engage in research because it is one of the ways through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Students with disabilities are not exceptional in engaging in research as a component of the programmes of their study. When they graduate from institutions of higher education, graduates with disabilities who enter into academia as faculty members, have an obligatory requirement to engage in research and publish their work. However, limitations such as physical barriers, lack of adequate funding, poor supervision and impairment-related disadvantages are confronted by students with disabilities, in the South African context of higher education. This chapter uses decolonial theory to analyse the challenges confronted by students with disabilities in research engagement. The argument for the chapter is that while students with disabilities are required to engage in

research as all other students, they confront unique obstacles, which limit their effectiveness in research engagement. The chapter suggests relevant assistive devices, listening to students with disabilities' voice and more time allocation, as strategies that could improve students with disabilities' engagement in research in the South African higher education. The chapter seeks to contribute to the contemporary debates on engagement in research, by all diverse students in higher education globally, and in South African context specifically.

Research has been conducted on challenges confronted by students in contexts of higher education in Africa. Among other many studies, Atibuni, et. al (2017) explored challenges and strategies in conducting research by Master of Education students in Uganda. This chapter comes from a unique perspective of focusing on challenges for students with disabilities specifically, which are different from those confronted by other students without disabilities. Accurate statistics of graduate students with disabilities in South Africa is difficult ascertain because some of them do not disclose their disabilities in institutions of higher education. Literature however reveals that they take longer than other students without disabilities, to complete their programmes of study, which research is part of (Ndlovu, 2017).

Given the focus of this chapter, it is important to start by providing the context in which research in higher education in South Africa takes place. This will provide the picture of students with disabilities' engagement in research in the particular context. The chapter goes on to discuss the decolonial theory which is important for understanding the invisible causes of challenges confronted by students with disabilities. The challenges as illuminated by the theory are presented and intersectionality is discussed, to make an understanding that challenges confronted by students with disabilities in doing research cannot be over-generalised to all of them, as they are not homogeneous. Lastly, suggested strategies to improve research for students with disabilities are provided.

Research in South African Higher Education

South Africa is one country where a lot of research needs to take place in its higher education because it is seeking transformation from the previous regime and as a result, a lot of change has to happen. Research is the basis and foundation upon which the change can be implemented. Furthermore, research is the way through which developmental milestones and progress made from the Apartheid period, to the present democratic government, in different areas and in education specifically, can be determined. The importance and inevitability of research in such a context need not be over-emphasised. At present, everyone who enters higher education, is initiated and groomed into the practice of constructing knowledge in different disciplines, argues Ballim (2015). World Bank is supporting research through centres of excellence in Southern Africa, broadly and South Africa specifically (MacGregor, 2016) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) is investing a lot of funding in research in higher education, to fund academics and post-graduate students in various research endeavours. However, despite the efforts, there is much that still needs to be done, in terms of research in South African higher education, states Bitzer (2009). It implies that there is a lot of untapped knowledge that still needs researching on, and disseminated hence the justification of the need of extensive research, even by students with disabilities.

Research in higher education broadly, borders around specific themes. In the South African context specifically, Tight (2003) categorised research themes as including among others, teaching and learning, curriculum design, quality, student experiences, policy, institutional management and higher education transformation. Though the categories are not exhaustive, those are some of research areas and categories, from which research topics are formulated. Students with disabilities also need to be engaged in research

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