Disability and Campus Life: Voicing Experiences of Students with Disability at Makerere University

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is a process of imparting knowledge and skills to individuals and empowers them to participate in development, decision making and democratic process. Effective education takes place when students are able to participate fully and benefit from that education. Higher education in some parts of the world is perceived as a privilege of the few intellectuals or the rich and able persons, leaving persons with disability at the peripheries. Persons with disabilities are unable to access higher education due to barriers outside the institutions and those within. Such barriers include negative attitude and inaccessible environments. This article examines students with disability’s access to study in higher education institutions, exemplifying Makerere University, Uganda. Using a qualitative approach through interviews, researchers accessed eleven participants’ voices on how students with disabilities cope and persist to complete their studies. Despite some improvement on treatment of students with disabilities, the study finds many institutional, individual,
and ideological barriers that disenfranchise their full participation in study environment. The study recommends infrastructural provision, capacity and self-esteem building, and law and policy formulation as necessary for better appreciation of students with disability.

Keywords: Disability; accessibility; policy; higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities are individuals who are disadvantaged by reason of any verifiable and persistent physical, learning, cognitive, sensory, psychological, neurological, or temporary impairment that may affect their progress [1]. Nevertheless, the British Columbia Ministry of Education (BCED) [2] classified disabilities from Level 1 to Level 3. Level 1 includes Dependent Handicapped, Deaf and Blind; Level 2 includes Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disabled, Physically Disabled, Chronic Health Impaired, Visually Impaired, Deaf/Hearing Impaired, and Autism Spectrum Disorder; and Level 3 includes Intensive Behaviour Interventions, and Serious Mental Illness.

Uganda, like many other countries, is committed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) [3] set to be achieved for better livelihood by 2015. The main goals are: Eradicating poverty and providing education for all. These goals cater for both children and adults, with or without disabilities. In the context of this study, observing the rights of people with disabilities is mandatory which implies easing their access to education at all academic levels. And in response to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action [4] Article 3 which challenges governments to embrace inclusive education, Uganda opened every school doors to all learners of various abilities and disabilities. However, little was done in these schools to achieve proper inclusion of people with physical, sensory, and mental impairments. Lack of governmental enforcement of law and policy concerning people with disability or failure to provide appropriate services to persons with disability is an attitudinal discrimination by government or a particular institution [5].

Makerere University is the oldest public higher education institution in Uganda. It is referred to as the Ivory Tower of Excellence and implicatively the main standard on which other higher institutions measure. Despite hints on disability in various policy provisions, rules and regulations, the Institution lacks a particular policy entirely dedicated to persons with disabilities. This article therefore, focuses on campus life experiences of students with disabilities. The participants’ voices on how students with disabilities cope and persist to complete their studies raise the need to properly implement genuine inclusive environment in the Uganda school systems. This raises awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities; it challenges students and staff without disabilities to avoid attitudinal tendencies toward members of society who have disabilities; and it carries strong policy implications to government and the institutions of learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The World Health Organization (WHO) explains disability in terms of any restriction that results from impairment and hinders a person from performing an activity expected for a typical person WHO, [6]; Hill County Disabled Group HCDG, [7]. According to United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities [8], Article 1, persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, sensory, emotional, intellectual, learning, health or other disabilities that may be visible or invisible, stable or progressive, occurring at birth or during childhood. In interaction with various barriers these impairments may hinder their full effective participation in society on equal basis with others. Several researchers (e.g. Marshall, [9]; Hadjikakou and Hartas, [10]) define disability as a physical, mental, sensory, dyslexic, or medical impairment which makes a permanent or long-term negative effect on one’s ability to involve in daily life activities. However, the conceptualisations by Peters make stronger appeal. He states that, “impairment is the loss or limitation of physical, mental or sensory function on a long term or permanent basis” (Peters, 2008: 153) [5]. However, he distinguishes disablement from impairment as “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on the equal level with others due to physical or social barriers” [5]. While the former focuses on the person as in need of medical attention, the latter pins milieu as the composer of disablement factors imbued in physical and/or attitudinal barriers that limit the
impaired person’s opportunities. Therefore, disability is a social construction through the impaired person’s interaction with the environment. The focal point is the elimination of barriers created by society that prevent persons with differences from enjoying their human rights and achieving their potential on equal basis with others in relation to education [11].

Some of the MDG are: eradicating poverty and making all effectively access education. Poverty and illiteracy are twin social evils. Unless the impaired members of society are enabled to access education, they will remain limited in “social contacts, poor health, and low self-esteem” (Peters, 2008: 149) [5]. Then it is lack of education not impairment that limits them. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action [4] Article 3 states that government should adopt as a matter of law and policy the principle of inclusive education. Recognising this articulation, the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda [12] not only emphasised in Article 30 that, “All persons have a right to education” but also in Section 35 that, people with disabilities should be treated with dignity. Every human being is entitled to human rights. Human rights are inherent to human beings without any discrimination based on sex, origin, or any other status. Human rights are universal, interdependent, indivisible and interrelated and seek to protect human dignity. Human rights originate “from the needs and aspirations of ordinary people, express universal ethical and moral values and empower each human being, their communities and peoples with entitlements and enforceable claims vis-à-vis their own governments as well as other governments” (Surez, 2013: 240) [13]).

Uganda adopted the inclusive approach whereby all children regardless of their physical, mental, or sensory ability were encouraged to access education in the school nearest to their home. This was more realised in 1997 when the education for all formally started in all primary schools, leading to sky rocketing school enrolments. However, proper inclusion would imply school rooms integrated with assistive devices for the visual and hearing impairments, classrooms with partial inclusion for mental disability, sign language interpreters, special teachers for visual and hearing impairments, and providing in-service teacher training on dyslexia, making adaptations to buildings and Information and Communications systems, and providing disability-related scholarships for those who experience social and economic disadvantage [14,10,15]. According to Chimedza [14], inclusion should imply inclusive schooling where the environment accommodates needs of all students, inclusive education where policy should be actualised by making the impaired equally participate in regular system with non-impaired children, and inclusive society where there is positive change in attitudes and stigma against disability.

In this effort, higher education institutions have adopted means of ensuring equitable treatment of the persons with disability. Foremost, the National Council for Higher Education has a representative for persons with disability who helps in ensuring that the students with disability receive fair treatment at institutions of higher learning. In its document, the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act [16], the Council provides for affirmative action to students with disabilities in the admission procedures of higher education institutions.

Mention is made on disability in the Makerere University Gender Equality Policy [17] that the institution condones no form of discrimination on grounds such as race, colour, sex, religion, status, disability or ethnic origin. The policy further states that any form of discrimination constitutes misconduct and sufficient grounds for disciplinary action against the offender. Every student has to recognize and respect the rights of persons with disabilities [18]. Therefore, no one is to make fun of, tease or otherwise behave in a manner that renders a person with disability uncomfortable. The overall objective of these policy hints is to define a common value system of equality and equity as well as empowerment within the core functions of the University, namely, teaching and learning, research and innovation, knowledge transfer and networking [19]. Despite mention of disability in various Makerere University policies and regulations, the institution has no specific policy dedicated to persons with disability.

Accessibility to higher education is a complex issue which goes beyond entry to retention. Higher education institutional policy provisions cover the activities from application, admission, registration, and academic and administrative support. The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act [16] states that, the Admission Committee of a Public University shall take into consideration affirmative action in favour of marginalized groups on the basis of gender,
disability and disadvantaged people. Therefore, among the entry activities, students with disabilities are encouraged to indicate on entry form whether they have any disability and its nature in order to compose necessary University statistics that make administration aware of the enrolled number and nature of persons with disability. Providing specificity of the nature of disability is assumed to enable the university cater for students with disability. However, as Hadjikakou and Hartas [10] note, many institutions depend on what students write on the application form. There are no further checks done to measure the extent of the disability, and no screens done on other students to determine non-physical disabilities. While some students are not aware how their disability may affect their learning [20], others join higher education hoping to begin a new life, and do not wish to register or disclose their disability.

Full access at retention, as outlined by Hanafin, et al. [15] implies full engagement with programmes in terms of taking notes, reading, writing essays, doing experiments, and getting involved in assessment. This suggests reasonable and inclusive adjustments on, for example: course content, teaching approaches, materials and information given in alternative formats [9,21]. Access to Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) is a way for people with disability to be involved in society [22]. However, Higher Education in Uganda has been perceived as a privilege of a few intellectuals, the abled or the rich and therefore those with disabilities are denied accessibility. As Ture and Wiman [23] note, in many institutions enrolment rates and educational attainment of persons with disability remain far lower than those of their peers without disability. Persons with disabilities are unable to access higher education due to barriers outside and within the institutions. Such barriers include narrowly-defined set of legibility criteria, negative attitude, and unfavourable environments and infrastructures.

Many persons with disability fail to assert themselves in various situations because they lack confidence. As Brown [24] avers, confidence may be a result of feelings of isolation and self-doubt which some people at times receive as minority members of academic communities. Higher education institutions are major sites of cultural practice, and identity formation. As Odhiambo [25] reflects, universities which benefit from diversity and profess to value diversity (of thought, belongingness, and persona) and should be sites of inclusion have unfortunately persisted in being sites of exclusion. Despite government and institutional emphasis on inclusion of people with disability into society, there is no effort in making the academic environment accommodating. Academic environments remain by and large disabling spaces with expectations of tasks, flexibility and behaviour, based on able-bodied norms for example, inaccessible transport systems and streets-scape prevent many students with disability from accessing study places [26]. In addition, the people with disability remain marginalised in academic society. Students with disability feel more esteemed when they see members with disability amongst teaching staff at higher education. Despite many qualifying for academic and administrative positions in higher education, there are quite few recruited [27]. If a higher education institution claims to be ‘an equal opportunities employer’ how serious and effective is this regarded by the recruiting board? Disregarding such claim could be due to personal prejudice which, as Michailakis [28] articulates, is an unfavourable attitude toward certain individuals or persons by virtue of being members of a particular group. Prejudice not only affects the self-esteem of the persons with disability but also fails their effort for identity management. Personal identity negotiation related to minority status is a struggle in academic environment. Students of minority groups struggle with how to frame their identity in academic arena. Hughes et al. [29] underline that individuals with minority identities must manage the additional stress of identity management and real or assumed institutionalised discrimination.

Odhiambo [26] argues that discrimination can either be by default rather than by design. And by default, the people with disability are not always targeted for discrimination, but sometimes overlooked or not encouraged, mentored, or supported. This fits with the earlier view by Michailakis (2000: 34) [29] that discrimination is not necessarily an attitude or prejudice, but “practice, processes, which have differential and negative impact on individuals”. For example, asking higher education applicants to indicate on the form whether they have a disability or not and if so, to indicate the type or nature of disability is discrimination in process; the person with disability is then treated different from the abled. Troubles of seeing to the special treatment indirectly may negatively impact on the treatment provider, who many gradually develop a negative or discriminative attitude towards the people with
disability. If it is a functional impairment, the one who receives the information put on application form is made to know what the applicant will or will not manage doing. It becomes discrimination proper if the person with disability is denied equal opportunities and rights enjoyed by the other members of the group. Opportunities and rights, refer to specific, exclusive, non-universal entitlements that persons, legal or natural, can have with respect to different matters, for example accessing common spaces like lecture rooms, libraries, halls of residence, theatres, etc. [13]. Discriminating against persons with disability occurs when “there is the imposition of a condition or requirement that the person with disability cannot comply with but a substantially higher proportion of people without that disability can comply with” (Marshall, 2005: 306) [9]. The main barrier to integrating persons with disability in higher education institutions is the attitude that some people hold towards people with disabilities. The attitude could be cultural whereby one looks at the person with disability as an abnormal person, it could be economic whereby the person with disability is perceived as a liability straining the limited social resources, or it could be personal whereby the person with disability is minimised as a social disgrace [30].

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

This study is based on the theoretical framework of Farmer, Riddick and Sterling [31] which states that the participation of students with disabilities in tertiary education is located at three levels: Individual, institutional and ideological. The individual level refers to the personal experiences of the students and their inclusion within the university. It involves how the students with disability take personal effort to fit in society without harbouring a bias that they are discriminated against. The institutional level is linked to the organization of the universities and colleges to facilitate provision of services to support the academic journey of students with disabilities. Services could be in form of physical infrastructural arrangements and provision of disability aids. The ideological level focuses on rights, policies, and equal opportunities in supporting access and entitlement to education. It includes mechanisms provided to raise other students’ awareness of the need to accept persons with disability as normal people, equal to everyone and members of society that can ably accomplish tasks.

The National Union of Persons with disability in Uganda (NUDIPU) [32] is an organization which brings together other organizations dealing with people with disabilities. NUDIPU informs that 7.2% of the population has a disability and only 2.2% of People with Disabilities have attained post-secondary education.

At the time of research, we established that the prevalent student disabilities at Makerere campus are 32 physical impairments, 56 blind (visually impaired), 3 hearing impaired, 3 Albinos, and 2 with sickle cells, totalling to 96 students. Our interest was on how the students with disability perceive enrolment process, how university as an institution facilitates their stay, and how abled persons at campus perceive the persons with disability. The overall study assumption was on perceptions in accessing campus life by students with disabilities.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Drawing on exploratory case study design we sought to understand the context that provides access to students with disabilities at Makerere University. The University is a public institution, the oldest, and model of all other higher education institutions in the country.

As indicated in the Table 1 below, five leaders of students with disability in five colleges were purposively sampled as participants. The rationale was that these leaders are part of university management as well as having regular interaction with students with disabilities and therefore would be able to shed light on some of the access challenges faced by these students at Makerere University. To triangulate the leaders’ information we interacted with six students with disability who were randomly selected.

Age section indicates brackets where each participant fitted. Since university employees and students are of a mature age, we did not assume age to carry much significance on the type of response one would give. Various university requirements in recruiting and appointing holders of office for persons with disability were outside our study consideration. Therefore, office bearers were purposively selected regardless of their other factors. However, students were randomly selected with keen interest on gender, nature of disability and course. Perceptions of males could differ from those of females on issues of accessibility. Nature of disability included the dependent handicapped as those whose parts of the body e.g. legs, feet, and hands have impairments that hinder easy movement and operation. Those with hearing and
Table 1. Showing the nature of study participants with disability

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<th>Leaders (Purposely selected)</th>
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<td>Academic level</td>
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Key: DH= Dependent Handicapped, D&B= Hearing & Visual impairment, A=Albino
visual impairment could hardly easily hear and see respectively. At Makerere University, Albinism is categorised as impairment and Albinos are listed in the office in-charge of people with disability. These categories were approached with an assumption that they would reflect the individual, institutional, and ideological perceptions. Their levels of academic training would also influence the way one perceives the accessibility of persons with disability at Makerere campus.

Data was generated by semi-structured interviews with the five leaders of students with disability and with students with disability. The interviewers prepared a guide to use which was in two main sections: accessibility at entry and accessibility at retention. Every interviewee was approached once. Since the same questions for a category of participants were asked every participant, collecting data yielded by the same questions from different people was enough to validate the study. For the holders of offices dealing with students with disability the interview guide was designed as follows:

1. Accessibility at entry: What is the role of the office for people with disability at Makerere Campus? How are students with disability enabled to access study at Makerere University? How are they facilitated to join the university? How are they assisted to choose programmes suitable for their career choices and ambitions? What are the enrolment procedures for students with disability? How are they orientated to cope with the campus environment?

2. Accessibility at retention: How is the state of persons with disability perceived by Makerere University? Are there any policies dedicated to persons with disability? If yes, how do they state them? Based on your experience, explain whether or not these policies are implemented. Explain whether there is appropriate facilitation for persons with disability at campus. How do students and staff without disability perceive and treat you?

For students with disability, interview guide was designed as follows:

1. Accessibility at entry: Do you consider yourself as a person with disability? If so, how has it influenced your choice to pursue studies at Makerere campus? Are you aware of any government policies on people with disability? If yes, how have they influenced your academic aspirations to join Makerere? How has the affirmative action influenced your aspirations? Was there any guidance in choosing a programme for your preferred career and ambitions? If yes, explain. What were the procedures you followed to enrol at Makerere? Did you receive any orientation on how to cope with campus life? If yes, what did it include?

4. FINDINGS

Since interviews were administered in English, there was no need for translation. The data was transcribed and categorised according to the interview items for easy reporting. Being a face-to-face interaction, with interview benefit of probes and prompts, all questions were responded to with relevant information. In this section, data is reported not as raw but refined and summarised.

4.1 Campus Enrolment

On how they enrol for the programmes they offer, students with disability apply like any other. In
the section of health, there are spaces provided for indication whether one has a disability and the nature of disability. Proof has to be presented at the appropriate time to verify whether the student qualifies for affirmative action or not. Affirmative action refers to extra marks given to students with disability in addition to Advanced level scores to facilitate their access to Higher Education study. They applauded university for this special treatment. However, although they freely select programmes for study, most of them who have toured the campus prior to application claimed selecting programmes where there are physical provisions for their mobility and assistive devices. This implies that students with disability who have limited Advanced level marks to allow selecting alternative programmes with good physical infrastructures either unwillingly stay or decide not to join campus.

4.2 Campus Accommodation and Services

With regard to how university provides physical spaces for students with disabilities, one participant said that “most Schools are inaccessible for us; particularly, School of Education, Psychology, Engineering, which does not enable us compete favourably with other students.” In addition, many study spaces lack facilities that ease person with disability’s equal access to study. This implies the students with disability are still marginalized to access education. One of them commented; “we could do better if we were subjected to the same facilities, for example the blind cannot easily access computers, which is a necessity in this era of Information Technology.”

Most of these participants acknowledged as one stated that,

…the conditions have improved to access services in the university. As a graduate student I recall when I was an undergraduate from 2003 to 2006 I could not access the library facilities, not even the lecture rooms. Fellow students used to lift and carry me on their backs to lecture rooms upstairs. Now ramps have been constructed at the entrance of some buildings, and lifts installed in recently constructed buildings. Unfortunately, most buildings in the University are old and lack lifts.

In the same vein, another participant affirmed that,

…there is now provision in the library for us people with disability. Although the facilities have been fairly improved, still a lot more needs to be done because the study rooms are not so spacious particularly for us who are on the wheels. Many wash rooms, including those that have been recently constructed are not user friendly for the persons with disability. We use toilets used by the rest of students and are not easy to use by many of us.

Another student complained of the treatment in the halls of residence “it is really hard for us to climb steps. I got injuries twice at campus as I tried to move to my room. My scratcher slipped on the floor.” In this relation, many persons with disability raised concern about their movements from places of residence to places of study. Movement gets difficult especially on rainy days. Those who stay in hostels may not easily use available means to get to study locations. Worse still, it gets harder for students who brave commuting from home to school to attend lectures due to the nature of road traffic in areas surrounding campus. Road users in and outside campus do not mind the safety of persons with disability. Even roads within campus are badly constructed, there are narrow or no road shoulders.

In our interactions with the persons with visual impairment on how they access study spaces, one lamented

…it is not easy but these are now normal things for us. There is no perfect place. We lack walking sticks with alerting sensors on where to or not to step.

Their plight worsens with regard to getting notes during lecturers. They intimated that after lectures, they are helped by students who care to read out loudly as they brail. One said, “… at first I was disturbed but now I am getting used to the situation.”

4.3 Campus Policy Articulations

Many participants were positive about mentioning state of disability in various university policies. They said this brings awareness to the rest of the community that people with disability are human beings like the rest and are entitled to fair treatment in society. However, some students with disability perceived these policy interventions as lullaby. While there are
government laws and campus considerations for persons with disability, many noted that they are still discriminated against. One Albino noted that, some students feel shy associating with persons with disability; some even decide to abandon the desk where a person with disability is seated. A few persons with disability noted that even some lecturers not only minimise but also underrate them. During lectures, some lecturers do not expect sensible contributions from them.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Despite the assertion by Suarez [13] that every human being has human rights to which they are entitled, the voices of the students with disability at Makerere campus raise issues of deprivation of their rights to a certain extent. The empirical research revealed several factors that render education at this institution hardly accessible as we discuss in this section. The findings in an earlier study by Howell [33] were reiterated by this study that students with disability struggle to access academic information, resources, and facilities in some university campuses, a situation that exacerbates barriers to learning and development experienced by these students.

5.1 Individual Level

Students with disability have to make personal effort to fit in society without harbouring a bias that they are discriminated against [31]. The findings revealed students with disability being isolated or discriminated against when fellow students without disability refusing sharing desks with them or when lecturers do not assign questions to them thinking they may not manage. This in a way affects the self-confidence of students with disability. Many students with disability fail to access higher education or to access opportunities during their stay at campus because they lack confidence. As Brown [24] avers, lack of confidence may be a result of feelings of isolation. We have to appreciate that the persons with disability are the minority and thus managing their identity becomes a major conflict at times. Hughes, et al. [29] underline that individuals with minority identities must manage the additional stress of identity management and real or assumed institutionalised discrimination. While some fear to disclose their disability when they join higher education institutions, some of those who disclose the disability lack self-confidence to fully integrate in campus life [20]. Therefore, social and institutional support is instrumental to building confidence in them. Skelton [27] has identified recruiting those who qualify for academic and administrative positions in higher education as one means to building esteem in those students with disabilities undertaking study at campus.

5.2 Institutional Level

Institutionally, as by Farmer, Riddick and Sterling’s [31] framework, Makerere is expected to be an enabler to persons with disabilities to participate in society. The focus is mainly on policy provisions, human and physical resources and facilities to accommodate the persons with disability. Generally, many institutions endeavour to put in place policies to cater for proper accommodation of the persons with disability; unfortunately most of these are mere rhetoric to make the persons with disability feel good but in practice not realised. Despite government and institutional efforts, such as The Constitution of The Republic of Uganda [12] and Makerere University Rules and Regulations [18] respectively, geared towards respecting the rights of persons with disability, research proves that there is a lot still desired. Despite anti-discrimination legislations and pro-inclusion university tendencies, attitudinal barriers still strongly persist. These are reflected in lack of a particular policy for persons with disability. There are no physical accessibility provisions in many places at campus, and no assistive devices in study spaces. As argued by Marshall [9], when an institution imposes conditions or requirements which cannot be managed by the persons with disabilities but by the abled persons, it practices attitudinal discrimination. On a general note, government is still slow in providing favourable transport means and routes for people with disabilities. Not all students can afford boarding in hostel and worse still many persons with disability need constant and closer attention by their families. Therefore, many would prefer commuting from home to campus. Unfortunately, many students with disability indicated hardships in commuting to campus for study. Available road systems are favourable for able bodied persons. As several researchers (e.g. Hall and Wilton, [26]; Hanafin, et al. [15]) note, the built and physical environment: such as inaccessible transport systems and streetscape, prevent many persons with disability from accessing study places.

At Makerere, even with various hints in some policy provisions and availability of offices
concerned with disability issues at campus, accommodations that cater for various disabilities are inadequate. The situation reiterates Ntombela’s [34] statement that when it is minority groupings that are disadvantaged in any way, there is an absence of urgency in addressing issues pertaining groups such as the persons with disability. It is an economic conservative discriminative attitude to think that students with disabilities are expensive to accommodate and thus threaten and strain the limited resources which would suffice if allocated to more able persons [30]. What one fails to recognize is that members of minority persons hold as equal rights as the rest of the members. When the obvious needs of the minorities are not prioritized, it can be interpreted as if they are insignificant, and it can easily compromise the process of transformation.

The study underscored a shortage of human and physical resources in the institution and this has greatly impacted on the access of the students with disability to study. Although bold steps have been taken to enrol students with disabilities, affirmative action put in place, and slots on application forms provided to enable the persons with disability indicate the nature of disability, a lot still needs to be done. The students with disability have no access to relevant and meaningful support in the form of human resources as well as prescribed and auxiliary materials that are available on time and in the right format to enable a levelled competitive field. Many students with disability indicated hardships in accessing some study spaces, in utilising facilities equally with other students without disability, and in participating actively in academic interactions. However, provision of facilities that can be accessed by every student is expected of an institution that subscribes to inclusive education [10,14]. This does not mean that transformation has not taken place yet but that inclusion is a journey, in slow process, and never ending [35].

5.3 Ideological Level

Ideologically, [31] there should be mechanisms provided by the institution to raise other students’ awareness of the need to accept persons with disability as normal, equal and able members of society. Discrimination could be a practice, process, or an attitude or prejudice. Prejudice is an unfavourable attitude toward certain individuals or persons by virtue of being members of a particular group [28]. It has been gazetted in the Makerere University Rules and Regulations [18] that every student has to recognize and respect the rights of persons with disabilities. However, students with disabilities still feel discriminated against in various situations. Some noted that other students fear to share study spaces with the persons with disability. This weighs in on the institution’s ability and effort to enforce the existing regulations. Discrimination can be by default rather than by design [25]. As by default, the persons with disability may not be targeted for direct discrimination, but indirectly if overlooked or not encouraged or supported by the abled persons to participate together with other members. Personal discomfort towards persons with disability arises when one develops an attitude and stigma regarding them. One distances oneself from them psychologically, physically, and politically by endorsing policies that limit the likelihood of getting in contact with them [30].

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Physical access into he does not necessarily lead to academic access. It is thus important for institutions of learning to strive to provide relevant and meaningful support to all students, particularly students with disabilities, and that this support should be linked to teaching and learning programs. As suggested by Eckes and Ochoa [21], it is important for institutions to provide necessary and basic facilities to enable persons with disability succeed. Personnel, who have expert knowledge and skills of dealing with students with disability, need to be recruited. These should help in streamlining processes and systems that advocate for a better accommodative environment for the students with disability. We agree with Marshall [9] that there is need for lecturers to undertake some diversity training in order to interact effectively with students with disability. Teachers are key persons in interacting with students with disability. The quality of students’ experiences of teaching and learning depends largely on how aware, able and willing staff is to support all students. This raises the need for HE institutions to provide on-going staff development and support programs across the board. Research has proved that teachers make a profound influence on students [30]. They not only share knowledge and skills with them but values as well. If a teacher holds a positive attitude towards students with disability, this will directly or indirectly be passed on to students with disability in the way they feel accommodated by the
particular teacher and also those without disability will develop acceptance of the persons with disability. Teacher's attitude can be reflected in the way they use language, derogatory or encouraging, consideration for persons with disability reflected in the form of examinations and assessment, and patience during classroom interaction [10].

If a student discloses a disability form, it should be communicated to concerned college or school so that staff is aware of how to handle them. The student with disability should be assisted to know how their disability can affect their learning. They should be made aware of the available support and how to access it [20]. They should be encouraged to explore their capacity and strengthen their self-esteem. As they are helped to cope at campus, other students should also be assisted to cope with the students with disability [10]. Students with disability also need to undertake training in how to use technical devices used in academic situations.

Universities require adequate financial support from government through the Ministry of Higher Education and other partnering organizations concerned with disability issues in order to provide intense levels of support that many students with disabilities require in order to participate in the teaching and learning process. In addition, several higher education institutions have promulgated policies in reference to the students with disability and other marginalized groups which spell initiatives and directives intended at inclusive access to higher education, however this still leaves a lot to be desired. Institutions should not only promulgate these policies on paper, but also take an extra mile to see to it that they are implemented effectively and efficiently if students with disability’s access to study in higher education institution is to be improved [14,5]. Makerere should formulate a specific policy detailing issues of persons with disability. Other campus members have to be sensitized more into accepting to live with people with disability. Changing to positive attitude may be slow but a desirable and encouraged alternative.

7. CONCLUSION

Although it is evident that access for students with disabilities has improved drastically, there are still individual, institutional and ideological barriers that limit the participation of students with disabilities in the academic programmes and their life at campus. At individual level, most students with disabilities feel discriminated against when at campus. This affects the strength of their personal confidence. Social and institutional support is instrumental in encouraging students with disability to build self-confidence.

Institutionally, the university needs to provide hearing aids for the hard-of-hearing and deaf, facilities for the blind, provide physical infrastructures to ease movement for the physically impaired, provide training for staff in issues related with disability, and to establish standard counselling units for those with psychological impairments.

Ideologically, although policies exist in establishing a more encouraging environment at entry and retention of students with disability, these articulations need to be implemented beyond mere rhetoric. Other students and staff’s awareness of the need to accept persons with disability as normal, equal and able members of society needs to be raised.

8. STUDY LIMITATIONS

As a limitation, we acknowledge that this study being purely qualitative does not provide a representative sample. Some paradigms undermine the qualitative paradigm for seeking to look at a situation or an issue with the individual participant’s eyes and presenting their unique voice not as a collective but individual one.

In addition, the study has used qualitative approaches to data analysis, interpreting participants’ voices basing on their individual characteristics, observed situation and policy related articulations on students with disability at Makerere Campus. This is also regarded a shortfall on qualitative study because probably collecting and statistically analysing structured responses from a bigger sample could add to the strength of this work.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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