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# **Access to higher education for disabled students in South Africa: a contradictory conjuncture of benevolence, rights and the social model of disability**

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The structures of support services for disabled students in the South African higher education system find themselves in a contradictory conjuncture of rights, benevolence and the social model of disability. To elucidate this argument, this paper (a) outlines the status of support provisions for disabled students in South Africa; (b) compares the state of these support provisions with those of the UK and the USA; (c) compares the different paths taken by South Africa and the developed countries in general towards disability rights. It concludes that South Africa seems to be moving along a contradictory path and that it should make a commitment to prioritize equal access to higher education for disabled students.

## **Overview of the South African situation**

### *Framework for support provision*

The South African higher education system provides support for disabled students within the diversity rights framework. In terms of this framework general national anti-discrimination legislation and policy inform the formulation of specific policies that protect disabled students. The normative standards underlying this framework are human rights, respect for diversity, equal opportunity and fair advantage for people who qualify for higher education courses and programmes. Institutions of higher education are expected to implement the policy of supporting disabled students and, if disputes arise, they should be resolved within the framework of human rights rather than on the basis of entitlement.

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Canada is also an example of this framework of support provision. In the Canadian context the Canadian Constitution and the provisions of Section 15 of the *Charter of rights and freedoms* are informed by the *Human rights act of 1976*, whose purpose is:

to extend the laws in Canada to give effect, within the purview of matters coming within the legislative authority of Parliament, to the principle that all individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated, consistent with their duties and obligations as members of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability or conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted. (Canadian Department of Justice, 2003)

Unlike Canada, where human rights have been institutionalized for a long time, South Africa has only institutionalized human rights and diversity since 1994. Moreover, its support structures for disabled students are not an integrated national effort. Disabled students have no policy or legislative framework for legal recourse in cases of discrimination based on disability. Academic institutions have been providing support services for disabled students at the institutions' discretion and within limited means. In 1997 the Office of the Deputy President of South Africa published the *White paper on an integrated national disability strategy*. According to the then Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki:

This White Paper represents the government's thinking about what it can contribute to the development of disabled people and to the promotion and protection of their rights. We believe in a partnership with disabled people. Therefore the furtherance of our joint objectives can only be met by the involvement of disabled people themselves. (Mbeki, 1997, p. 2)

While the strategy recognizes the need to provide support to disabled students, it relegates the task itself to the Department of Education. In this regard, the Department of Education, through its Council on Higher Education, funded a national survey on the status of disability support in higher education. Some observations, constraints and challenges emerge from the survey, and these are summarized below.

### *Findings of the survey*

*Response rate by institution type and history.* The findings are based on a national survey of 24 of the 35 public higher education institutions. Of the 24 that responded to the questionnaire, 9 were technikons and 21 were universities. Table 1 also shows their response rate by institution type and history. In the history category there are historically advantaged institutions (HAI) and historically disadvantaged institutions (HDI). The former benefited from apartheid policies and legislation, whereas the latter were exclusively non-white and negatively discriminated against during the period of apartheid.

*Structure of disability services.* Two types of support structures emerged from the survey. One is a separate disability unit, which functions independently of Student

Table 1. Response rate by institution type and history

	Technikons		Universities		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
HAI	6 (8)	75	9 (11)	82	15 (19)	79
HDI	3 (6)	50	6 (10)	60	9 (16)	56
Total	9 (14)	64	15 (21)	71	24 (35)	69

Source: Howell, 2005, p. 15.

Services. The other operates within Student Services, Student Counselling or Student Affairs as part of general student support. The origins of these organizational structures differ because of circumstances. The initial establishment of disability units depends on the availability of funding and the convenience with which support can be provided. The cases of the Disabled Students Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Disability Unit at the University of Cape Town, which were both established by Kathy Jagoe, suggest that availability of funding is mainly responsible for the creation of a separate disability unit. Moreover, it is significant that the person who established the two units had first visited America and been influenced by the American model of disability units.

In the case of the other 11 institutions, in contrast, the support structure is situated within Student Services, because that is where all students go for help. These structures also cater for disabled students. As one psychologist in a Student Bureau at a HAI put it:

I think we find it works well here because it is an integrated thing we work with here. We have a learning centre, we have a careers centre, and we have the disability one and they are all part of the Student Services Bureau. So there's a lot of links between them. We don't at this stage have such huge number of disabled students that we need to have a unit as such.

The survey's employment profile revealed, furthermore, that the personnel of these two types of units were not specialist staff nor were they trained to handle learning disabilities such as dyslexia, for instance. Most of the staff in the Students Services units said that they were psychologists. Others perceived their jobs as simply helping any students, including disabled ones. Furthermore, as indicated below, given that there are limited disabilities to service, there appears to be no need to employ specialist staff.

*Availability of support services.* As Table 2 shows, a high percentage of institutions (83%) reported that they offered support services for disabled students, whereas only 17% said that they did not provide such support. Furthermore, 60% of the HDI said that they provided support and all HAI provided support. Of the four HDI institutions that said that they did not provide support services for disabled students, three said that they intended to establish such services in future.

Table 2. Institutions that provide support services for disabled students

	Availability of services		Total
	Yes	No	
HAI	14 (58%)	0 (0%)	14 (58%)
HDI	6 (25%)	4 (17%)	10 (42%)
Total	20 (83%)	4 (17%)	24 (100%)

Looking more closely at the responses it appears that, even though a high number of institutions do provide support services for disabled students the range of disability support services is limited to three disabilities, namely blindness, deafness and paraplegia. Of the institutions that were researched, 15 had services for people with physical impairments, 11 had ones for blind students, but only 4 serviced deaf students. The survey revealed that institutions appear to cater mainly for students who are blind or wheelchair users. The institutions did not mention other disabilities, explaining that they did not have enough funding to service any other disability.

Two higher education institutions that did not provide support for deaf students indicated that they had no deaf students on their campuses. However, it was not clear whether they would provide support if they had deaf students. Thus, academic support services for students with disabilities are limited to blind and physically disabled students, with little provision being made for deaf students.

*Funding.* The majority (70%) of institutions said that they received funding from their universities or technikons. Thirteen per cent said that they received half of their funding from their institutions and the other half from private donors. Nine per cent received funding only from private donors. Four per cent received it from grants, but it was not clear if the grants were internal or external. The other 4% the respondents were not sure how it received its funding.

The operational costs of disability services reveal a different view of the sources, distribution and need for funding:

Most institutions said in the interviews that their physical assets such as equipment, resources and/or buildings had been provided through donations, especially from the private sector. However, their daily running costs were generally borne by the institution and covered by the sources noted above ... . Some institutions emphasised that when new equipment needed to be purchased or a new service introduced it was generally expected that such funding should be raised from outside sources to cover these costs. Although staff salaries are generally drawn from the institution’s own budget, the one exception that stands out is the payment of sign language interpreters for deaf students. ... The payment for the interpreters is drawn from money specially raised for this purpose. (Howell, 2005, p. 31)

*Institutional and government policies.* As Table 3 shows, more historically advantaged institutions than historically disadvantaged ones have institutional policies to support

Table 3. Existence of policy by institution type

	Technikon		Universities		Total	
	Policy	No policy	Policy	No policy	Policy	No policy
HAI	5	1	9	0	14 (15) (93%)	1 (15) (7%)
HDI	0	3	4	2	5 (9) (56%)	5 (9) (56%)
Total	5	4	13	2	18 (24) (25%)	6 (24) (25%)

disabled students. Similarly, more universities have policies in place to support disabled students than do technikons. Technikons may lag behind in this regard because disability support was initially only introduced in universities. Moreover, the qualifications offered by technikons are career specific, which might have prevented disabled people from participating in an already discriminatory recruitment and labour process.

Not all institutional policies are formal in the sense of being recognized and adopted by universities. The majority (79%) of institutions reported that they used institutional guidelines that were based on general student support, and that were not necessarily specific to disabled students. Only 21% used formal policies to provide support for disabled students. Other institutions extrapolated ideas for disability support either from external organizations or from government policies on disability.

Institutions were asked to report on their familiarity with the *Integrated disability strategy* (Office of the Deputy President, 1997), *Education white paper 6* (Department of Education, 2001) and the *National plan for higher education* (Ministry of Education, 2001). As Tables 4 and 5 show, the majority (57% and 52%) of the institutions said that they had read and were familiar with the contents of the three documents. It is a concern, though, that almost half of people working with disabled students are not familiar with the government policies that provide guidelines for the disability support framework.

*Academic staff involvement and development.* The lack of funding is also illustrated by the excessive burden that is placed on disability coordinators to do virtually everything regarding disabled students. This is mainly because academic staff members within South African higher education institutes are allowed to choose whether they want to 'help' disabled students or not. Similarly to Kathy Jagoe and some other benevolent staff members who established support services, there are also some

Table 4. Familiarity with the Integrated National Disability Strategy (1997)

Familiarity	<i>n</i>
Read and familiar	13
Not really familiar	1
Heard but not seen policy	3
Never heard of policy	6

Table 5. Familiarity with *Education White Paper 6: Special needs education: building an inclusive education and training system* (2001)

Response	<i>n</i>
Read policy and familiar	12
Heard but not seen or read policy	5
Not really familiar with policy	4
Never heard of policy	2

benevolent academic staff members who agree to ‘help’ disabled students, but they are not required to do so by their institutions. For example, during my exploratory study one disability coordinator said:

It is an ongoing battle. It is a fight between myself and the lecturers to make [course] work available to students. Not all of them are like this. Some lecturers I have to say are extremely very helpful, but I also have to say the fight is mainly for students with visual problems.

Similarly, a head of student services in one of the technikons explained:

It is not that the student knows that there is a disability office [and says about support provision]: ‘I go there from the beginning where I will be treated in a certain way and am cared for in a certain way until I leave campus’. It very much depends on the willingness and the goodness of the lecturers and whether they are able to accommodate. So the course head indicates whether they want the student or not.

The question of whether staff development should sensitize staff members about disability issues is an important one. According to the survey, 16 of the 24 institutions said that they were working with academic staff members on disability support, with the remaining 8 saying that they did not do so. One director of disability services explained:

We have very close links with the staff development unit where I would present workshops or just do lectures to lecturers on how to cope with students with disabilities in classes. As a lecturer it may be the first time that you are exposed to someone with a disability and you have no idea how to teach someone who is blind, someone who is deaf.

Staff development does not necessarily require academic staff to participate in the actual provision of support for disabled students. Academic staff members have the choice of not participating, even in the development workshops. It is my contention that such choice and the absence of formal policy requirements are effectively undermining the rights of disabled students to curriculum flexibility in general.

*Collaboration.* There is no nationally or locally organized body that pursues the interests of disabled students in South Africa. Rather, some institutions try to collaborate on their needs. The Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) is a consortium of nine public higher education institutions (in Gauteng province) that network to discuss problems and solutions in higher education,

including issues of students with disabilities. At the FOTIM Conference in 2005 (FOTIM, 2005), whose theme was 'Erasing the margins: researching disabilities in higher education', some observations and recommendations were made about the creation of a support framework for disabled students in South Africa. The observations and recommendations focused on improving access to higher education for disabled students in South Africa.

## Comparing South Africa to the USA and UK

### *Support frameworks*

This section is comparative, with the sole aim of highlighting the South African situation. The intention is not to support or be critical of either the USA or the UK, but to assess the situation in South Africa. The situations in the USA and the UK are different from each other, as well as from South Africa. The USA uses a legally mandated framework for disability support in higher education. This entitles disabled students to receive support in higher education institutions. The agents of provision and sanction are: general anti-discrimination legislation; a law that specifically provides for students with disabilities in higher education; policies that provide for the support of disabled students in higher education; regulations that specify the implementation of such provisions. The normative standards underlying this framework are equal opportunity, civil rights and fair advantage for people who qualify for higher education courses and programmes. Supporting disabled students is enforceable by a statutory agent or civil court and by grievance procedures within the institutions of higher education.

In the USA the *Rehabilitation act of 1973* prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programmes conducted by Federal agencies, in programmes receiving Federal financial assistance, in Federal employment and in the employment practices of Federal contractors. Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation act of 1973*, an amendment to this act, was enacted to guarantee civil rights for disabled Americans. This law is applicable to any programme or activity receiving Federal financial assistance and to recipients that operate, receive or benefit from Federal financial assistance for the operation of such programmes or activities.

All such recipients of Federal funding are prohibited from discriminating against disabled persons and are required to remove any communication, architectural, policy/practises or any other barriers that prevent disabled people from participating in, benefiting from, or being employed by such programs. (Bruno, 1980, pp. IA-1)

Section 504 covers programme accessibility, employment practices, pre-school education, school education, post-secondary education (higher education), health services and welfare and social services. In addition, the *Americans with disabilities act of 1990* prohibits disability discrimination in general. However, unlike the *Rehabilitation act of 1973*, it is not an entitlement for disabled students, even though disabled students can use it as a basis for litigation.

The UK has been using an enforceable rights framework for disability support in higher education. The enforceable rights framework provides for disability support



within legislation that deals with disabled people in general. The agents of provision and sanction are a general anti-discrimination disability law and policies that provide specifically for students with disabilities in higher education. Parts of that law and its policies are extrapolated and interpreted to support disabled students in higher education. The normative standards underlying this framework are human rights, equal opportunity and fair advantage for people who qualify for higher education courses and programmes. The support for disabled students is enforceable through a statutory agent or civil court. In effect, the *Disability discrimination act of 2005* (amending the *Disability discrimination act of 1995*): (a) makes it unlawful for operators of transport vehicles to discriminate against disabled people; (b) makes it easier for disabled people to rent property and for tenants to make disability-related adaptations; (c) makes sure that private clubs with 25 or more members cannot keep disabled people out just because they have a disability; (d) extends protection to cover people who have HIV, cancer and multiple sclerosis from the moment they are diagnosed; (e) ensures that discrimination law covers all activities within the public sector, (Directgov, 2007, p. 1)

The *Disability commission act of 1999* provides for the establishment of a Disability Rights Commission, which investigates complaints and enforces the regulations of the *Disability discrimination act*.

In a move towards the US framework amendment of the *Disability discrimination act* in the UK resulted in formulation of the *Special education needs and disability act of 2001*. Chapter 2 of this act creates new rights for disabled students in the UK higher education system. Since 1 September 2002 higher education institutions have been required to make reasonable adjustments, such as retrofitting and modifying their built environments in stages so that they are accessible to disabled students. Since 1 September 2005 the act specifically outlaws discrimination against disabled students in the UK. It requires both reasonable adjustment and anticipatory adjustment from higher education institutions. Reasonable adjustment means alleviating a substantial disadvantage for disabled students. This includes curriculum flexibility and alternative methods of learning. Anticipatory adjustment means setting up adjustments in anticipation of a disabled student enrolling on a course. However, any adjustment is subject to, among other things, academic standards, practicality, health and safety and financial availability.

At the level of higher education section three of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* in the UK contains the principles that guide institutions in providing support for students with disabilities in higher education. The general principle of the section is:

Institutions should ensure that in all their policies, procedures and activities, including strategic planning and resource allocation, consideration is given to the means of enabling disabled students' participation in all aspects of the academic and social life of the institution. (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (1999)

All this legislation and these policies are now effected by the Disability Scheme (December 2005–November 2009) under different County Councils across the UK.

This is a statutory obligation to plan and implement the promotion of quality, eliminate the harassment of disabled people and encourage public participation by disabled people.

### *Disability rights paths*

In countries such as the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and Denmark the establishment of disability rights began with struggles against stigma and benevolence towards disabled people. The term benevolence refers to what Johnstone (2001, p. 7) called the legacy of philanthropy (which is associated with almshouses, the industrial revolutions and asylums) or what French (1994, p. 7) referred to as the philanthropic model of disability, which portrays disabled people as helpless and charitable cases. It is a paternalistic form of benevolence, in terms of which particular members of society assume custody and responsibility for the welfare of people with disability to an extent that it becomes a pattern for most disability services to be established by benevolent individuals instead of disability being part of mainstream services. Such benevolence in industrial societies is characterized by charity and welfarism, which Coleridge (1993) argued is disempowering because it allows disabled people to be controlled by non-disabled people.

The disability rights movements across the world have challenged condescending, discriminatory and stereotypical portrayals of disabled people. Through activism and formulation of the social model of disability, disability can no longer be perceived as a tragic personal state that warrants exclusive medical control, social stigma, welfare, pity and benevolence. Instead, the counter argument is that disability is relational (Thomas, 2004), in that it is:

The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream social activities. Disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression. (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976, p. 4)

As disability rights complement the social model of disability they do not remain mere formal rights. They became real rights. The institutionalized support services for disabled students are evidence of the translation and actualization of these rights. In order to make these rights real in the provision of support for disabled students at least three processes have had to take place. The first one is pragmatism, in that trial and error informed the development of support provision. For example, Tickton *et al.* (1981) described some of the struggles and challenges that faced the provision of disability support in the USA in the 1980s. Stodden and Whelley (2004) similarly indicated that there are contemporary challenges that developed countries have to face in providing teaching and assistive technology services for disabled students. The second process concerns the availability of resources in developed countries. Developed countries have the necessary capital and human resources to provide services for their disabled students. The present challenge for such countries is to develop and improve

resources and no longer to worry about the actual initial processes of establishing disability services. The third process is litigation. In countries like the USA and UK disabled students have a specific legal recourse in cases of discrimination, as explained above.

The path towards disability rights and their relevance for support services for disabled students is different in South Africa. The struggles against apartheid in South Africa have overshadowed struggles for disability rights. While disabled students in some developed countries fought for their rights and access to higher education, South African students were generally fighting for political rights and access to exclusively white higher education institutions. Thus, while debates about the social model of disability and about anti-discrimination and the enforceable rights model applicable to disability were taking place in developed countries, South Africa had not yet prioritized disability discourse. Disability remained within the medical model of disability.

Even though the political terrain in South Africa meant that the country's politicians were ignorant of disability rights developments, disability activists in South Africa were not. In the 1980s, even before the advent of democracy in 1994, disability rights activists in South Africa had already adopted disability rights and the social model of disability. However, for about 10 years, until the 1990s, the social model of disability and disability rights in South Africa was not part of the official discourse. Disability rights became part of the official discourse after Maria Rantho (MP) introduced disability issues to government in 1994. I emphasize the word 'official' because the disability rights discourse had already been in existence at least a decade before 1994. In fact, the Disabled People of South Africa (DPSA), a cross-disability umbrella body, has subscribed to the principles of independent living, the disability rights model and the social model of disability since its establishment in 1984. It is, furthermore, a long-standing member of the Pan-African Federation of Disabled Persons and of Disabled People International. Moreover, DPSA was involved in the drafting of the *1992 disability rights charter of South Africa*. It was also involved in the establishment of the Disability Desk in the then Office of the Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa in 1995, which later became known as the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons. However, as Maria Rantho recalled:

When I went to Parliament, disability was not on the agenda of Parliament. The struggle I had to wage to place disability on the agenda was a lonely one, because people were not familiar with disability issues. (Pahad, 2002, p. 1)

With the absence of disability rights in the official discourse support services for disabled students seemed to remain a benevolent effort of either faculty members or private individuals. It seems that Jagoe (1987a, 1987b, 1987c) pioneered the establishment of support services for disabled students in 1986. Kathy Jagoe is disabled and has mobilized funding for and advocated the establishment of a Disabled Students Programme and a Disability Unit in the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town, respectively. At one of these universities involvement in

providing support for disabled students is different. Their disability coordinator recounted:

I was administrator of the Student Counselling. And the reason why I got involved is because we are very much involved with first year students and the students generally speaking. And I was involved in the orientation programme—which is a programme to initiate first year students to campus life—and one of the peer facilitators on that programme noticed a blind student on campus and told the student to come to me 'cause he was sure I would try and help him. And that is how I met a student who I can almost say caused this unit to be opened. He was not getting his exams in Braille. He was not getting any assistance at all. So in that first year I negotiated that I would type his papers and things and take them to the 'X' School for the Blind and they would Braille it for me. And that is how it started.

These examples are not exhaustive, as there may still be some undiscovered processes. For example, Mr Herbet Levin, a blind student, graduated from the University of Cape Town in 1965. It is not clear, however, how he experienced his university life. Nonetheless, the point is to indicate that the establishment of support services for disabled students in South Africa has been perceived as an optional and benevolent gesture.

### **Contradictory conjuncture on benevolence, rights and the social model of disability**

This perception of benevolence is irreconcilable with the discourse of disability rights and the social model of disability. The latter denounces benevolence in favour of real disability rights. Real rights imply entitlement to disability support services, rather than discretion and benevolence. Yet, in South Africa benevolence, disability rights and the social model of disability have intersected and still intersect in the thinking on support services for disabled students. The lack of a coherent policy or a legal framework regarding disability in higher education exemplifies this thinking. Moreover, higher education institutions and faculty members are not legally obliged to assist disabled students. This is further proof of the thinking that services for disabled people in general are not an entitlement but rather a favour from benevolent individuals in and outside higher education institutions.

The contradiction involved in this becomes clear when the social model interacts with benevolence and the right for disabled people to access higher education. The establishment of support services in South Africa constituted both benevolence and rights, which was not supposed to happen because the struggle for disability rights was in fact a struggle against benevolence. Yet, South Africa inadvertently constituted its support services with the very seeds of the tension. For some time this was not a problem because disability was not an issue in higher education. It was only during the transformation of higher education that the tension surfaced, when the social model of disability became part of the promotion of disability support services in higher education. The social model demands rights. Specifically, it demands that disabled students have the right to support services. Yet, in the South African case,

for those rights to be real and to emulate those of developed countries there is a dire need for resources, academic staff development, academic staff commitment, assistive technology and curriculum flexibility

The intersection of benevolence, rights and the social model of disability seem to produce two directions in thinking about support services for disabled students in South Africa. The first direction is that our support services will follow the path of such developed countries as the USA and UK that used the social model to argue and fight for disability rights and translate them into real rights. I think this path is based on misconceptions. In the case of South Africa such a path is impossible in the absence of resources, discussions, policy and official commitment to real disability rights.

The second direction is that of transformation. Transformation in general has become a powerful discourse in South Africa. If an official document mentions that our higher education system needs to transform to ensure equal access for disabled students it seems enough to convince the reader that the transformation is imminent and that it is a good idea. However, reliance on the word 'transformation' is also tenuous, because it does not specify a course of action or allocate responsibilities at the levels of government and higher education institutions. The examples of two documents on the transformation of higher education in South Africa show the problem of over-reliance on such 'transformation', namely the *National plan for higher education* (Ministry of Education, 2001) and *Education white paper 6 on special education: building an inclusive education and training system* (Department of Education, 2001).

The *National plan for higher education*, which was formulated by the Ministry of Education (2001, p. 41) sets down guidelines on the transformation of higher education in South Africa. Unfortunately, the document contains only 13 lines on equity with regard to disabled students in higher education in the country. In these few lines it decries the lack of statistics on disability and recommends the development of regional strategies to support disabled students. It reveals a lack of data on students with disabilities and promotes the development of a new system that would include disabled students. It then concludes:

The Ministry recognises that it may not be possible for every institution to provide the full array of infrastructure needed to service the specific educational needs of disabled students. This provides an opportunity for institutions within each region to develop regional strategies, which would ensure that disabled students are catered for within the region. However, at a minimum, all institutions should have the basic infrastructure to allow access to the campus for disabled parents and members of the community more generally. (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 41)

*Education white paper 6 on special education: building an inclusive education and training system* was released by the Department of Education in July 2001. It primarily covers the education of disabled pupils at school level. When it briefly mentions the education of disabled students in higher education it repeats and summarizes the *National plan for higher education* by stating:

The National Plan for Higher Education ... commits our higher education institutions to increasing the access of learners with special education needs. The Ministry therefore,

expects institutions to indicate in their institutional plans the strategies and steps, with the relevant time frames, they intend taking to increase enrolment of these learners. (Department of Education, 2001, p. 31)

It thereafter mentions that the Ministry would make recommendations on the minimum level of support provided and that facilities would be organized on a regional basis because 'It will not be possible to provide relatively expensive equipment and other resources, particularly for blind and deaf students, at all higher education institutions' (Department of Education, 2001, p. 31).

This direction is a path of hope. It is based on the hope that someone (perhaps a benevolent individual?) will carry the task of equalizing access to higher education for students with disabilities. Such observations justify the criticism that argues:

With only a vague commitment towards addressing this area of concern, little attempt has been made in the process of policy implementation to address the barriers in the education system, which continue to exclude learners with disabilities from higher education institutions and/or from the process of teaching and learning. Similarly, to date, initiatives to accommodate diversity and the building of equity have failed to specify mechanisms towards addressing the full spectrum of learning needs among the learner population. (Howell & Lazarus, 2000, p. 1)

### **Possible ways forward**

- Disabled People South Africa, the Department of Health and Statistics South Africa need to undertake a special survey on the extent of disability in South Africa.
- Higher education institutions also need to undertake surveys of their student profiles to identify those who consider themselves to be disabled.
- The Department of Education should formulate a national policy for the support of disabled students and require all institutions of higher education to have a binding institutional disability policy.
- Funding for institutional disability support should be of the same form as funding for expanding access by black and women students.

### **Conclusion**

The provision of support for disabled students in South Africa finds itself in a contradictory position of espousing disability rights and the social model of disability yet being embedded in the practice and legacy of benevolence. This position is evident from the challenges that disability support services face and the lack of political commitment to disability issues by government and higher education management structures. Hence, it is my contention that South Africa's current path towards equal access to higher education for disabled students is based on misconceptions, without an explicit strategy for transformation. A part of dealing with the problem is to have a disability policy for higher education institutions and to prioritize disability as part of redressing social inequalities in South Africa.

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