

Academics with disabilities during transformation to a New African University in South Africa

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Abstract

The idea of transformation to a ‘new African university’ has become topical in contemporary African education scholarship. Whilst it is claimed that the process seeks to include all stakeholders, academics with disabilities are excluded because of discourses and dynamics in Africa’s higher education that have remained deeply embedded in Eurocentric thinking and mind-set. This paper applied Critical Disability Theory to analyse the challenges that face academics with disabilities in the areas of teaching, research, community engagement and doctoral supervision in South African higher education and that must be appropriately and adequately addressed for a successful transformation to a “‘new’ African University”. Data were collected through an analysis of South African literature on exclusion of students with disabilities as research, community engagement and supervision are regarded as a continuum and involve both students and the academics. Findings revealed that academics with disabilities are confronted with specific challenges similar to those faced by students with disabilities, as they all function within the same context during transformation to a ‘new African university’. The challenges are inaccessible physical environment, negative attitudes from the community members, impairment-related disadvantages, lack of adequate funding and lack of adequate media for use, which all compound to limit their functioning like their able-bodied counterparts. Including the voice of academics with disabilities in disability policy was proposed as a way to alleviate the challenges they confront enabling them to contribute positively to scholarship and thus affirm the transformation to a new African University.

Key words: New African University, transformation, academics with disabilities, teaching, research, community engagement

Introduction

Transformation to a ‘new African university’ in contemporary scholarship has become a global issue of debate. Among other African scholars, Mbembe (2001), Zeleza (2002), Nyamnjoh (2012), Maringe (2017) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) have published studies on what they understand as a ‘new African university’. These scholars have for decades, proposed transformation of universities in Africa from their colonial nature into an authentic indigenous one, which is a ‘new African university’. The role played by that kind of a university, the ideals and the approaches used in knowledge production, are explicitly stated by Maringe (2017). In a ‘new African university’, inclusion of all stakeholders in all their diversity as knowledge producers, is of paramount importance. During the transformation process, pluriversality is of paramount importance. All knowledges centred and all stakeholders included in producing it, is a move that transforms the context and the way in which all academics with and without disabilities contribute to knowledge production.

Reforms in a ‘new African university’

Cross and Ndofirepi (2017) and Maringe (2017) have suggested a number of reforms that should constitute a ‘new African university’. They argue majorly for Africanisation and pluriversality whereby African epistemology becomes central but with other worldviews also being considered legitimate. In other words, a pluriversal approach, which considers other knowledge such as the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) (Murove, 2018), is one of the reforms required during transformation to a ‘new African university’. Besides change in epistemology, there should also be curriculum reform, to address the needs of the community. This would mean aligning the curriculum content to ensure that graduates are equipped with knowledge and skills to solve problems in the local environment and to improve their communities (Maringe, 2017). In addition, a reform in methodology is also envisaged; employing methods that would enable access to knowledge by the diverse body of students, especially the African subjects who have been previously excluded. Sithole (2016) argued for methodological tools that were creative and decolonial. One of the reforms envisaged in the ‘new African university’ is that diverse students and academics, including those with disabilities are included in producing knowledge in higher education. Students and academics with disabilities are also in the social group that has been previously excluded in terms of accessing higher education system in South Africa. It could be argued that a number of reforms are expected in the process of transforming to a new African university. The paper’s main focus

is on transformation to the ‘new African university’ as it pertains specifically to inclusion of academics with disabilities in knowledge production.

Key concepts

Transformation

The term transformation could be understood in a number of ways in different contexts. Transformation refers to a reform or change, in an education system. Maringe (2017, p. 2) defined transformation as “...complete radical change, in which the original idea or process becomes unrecognisable, and the new creation serves new purposes”. It could be argued that transformation means a complete overhaul of the previous system of education to a new one. In the context of the paper, the term refers to a radical change in which academics with disabilities are also included in knowledge production in South African higher education. Transformation into a ‘new African university’ is a process that is underway in South Africa to include all students and academics in knowledge production, including those with disabilities.

‘A new African university’

The debate about and idea of a ‘new African university’ has emerged from the realisation that universities in Africa were modelled on ideals and template of the colonising countries of the West (Maringe, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). Universities in Africa t served the needs of African people but Western universities in Africa. The aim and purpose of a ‘new African university’ is therefore to move away from Western models, from colonialism and apartheid that have characterised universities in Africa, even after attainment of political independence, to democracy in African countries and in South Africa in particular. A ‘new African university’ is thus a completely transformed system of higher education that is dissimilar from universities that were informed by the Eurocentric thought and ideas and where ‘new’ refers to doing things differently.

The concept of transforming to a ‘new African university’

The common understanding about transforming to a ‘new African university’, is that of a process of moving towards a totally transformed higher education that is radically different from the previous Eurocentric one. Conceptions of among other things, universalisation of knowledge, placing Eurocentric knowledge and ways of knowing at the centre and decentering other knowledges, should change during the transformation process (Maringe, 2017). The

system should also be radically changed, so that it does not exclude other social groups, such as those with disabilities, who are deemed not to suit the criteria of normalcy by dominant society standards (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). Thus, it is about rethinking educational practices, processes, structures and policies, so as to embrace pluriversality. Pluriversality refers to several cosmologies and epistemologies which are based on the understanding that multiple realities exist (Mignolo, 2011). It disrupts the whole idea of universalisation and construction of the world from a single perspective and one worldview. Pluriversality could therefore provide conditions that allow for inclusivity in terms of knowledge production and dissemination of knowledge by all academics, including those with disabilities.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) further argued that transformation to a ‘new African university’ is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional move, which involves new ways of thinking, requiring universities in Africa to draw knowledge from their own environments. It is about reinvention, where universities should reflect African identity and African soul imbued with African values, which should be embedded in its knowledge systems. It could be argued that reinvention should start from Africanisation in knowledge production and dissemination of African knowledge.

Transformation to a ‘new African university’ in South African higher education

The process of transformation to a ‘new African university’ is underway in the South Africa. It has been on-going since attainment of independence but intensified in the days of student protests in 2015/2016 and has continued to date (Heleta, 2015; Mbembe, 2016), as the idea of transitioning to a ‘new African university’ was being fuelled by debates on decolonisation of the universities and the curriculum. Institutional culture is changing to incorporate African cultures, which Metz (2017) refers to as the change to Africanisation of institutional culture in higher education. In some institutions of higher education, the language of teaching and learning is changing from being exclusively English to include the use of local languages for instruction (Cross, 2018). For instance, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of Limpopo have adopted a language policy which ensures that undergraduates have learnt their local languages (isiZulu and Sepedi respectively) in a formal way by the time they graduate (Metz, 2017).

Besides the transformation of institutional culture and language of teaching and learning, other changes taking place comprises of the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the curricular (Mkosi, Mavuso & Olawumi, 2023). Such as a move is to re-

centre knowledges from the non-Western worlds which has been de-centred in epistemology because of universalisation of Eurocentric knowledge and ways of knowing. African Indigenous Knowledges (AIK) is given priority to develop Africa-based generation of knowledge, develop local epistemologies and inculcate African values in all dimensions of higher education (Maringe, 2017).

The South African government has also made efforts from the early period of democracy to address issues of equity. It promotes equity through the Employment Equity Act, No 55 of 1998 (RSA, 1998a) and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, No 4 of 2000 (RSA, 2000). These legislations forbid discrimination on grounds of disability and maintain that all citizens, including those with disabilities, have the right to employment. However, academics with disabilities require more than mere access to formal employment; they require a totally transformed environment in which to function as effectively as their able-bodied counterparts.

Unfortunately, the 1994 dawn of democracy in South Africa did not see policy on disability put in place to inform the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education (Mutanga, 2017). However, in 2018, policy specifically designed for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education, the Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School and Training, was promulgated (DHET, 2018). Its purpose is to “...create an inclusive PSET system for people with disabilities, guide PSET institutions in the creation of an enabling environment for people with disabilities” (DHET, 2018, p. 6). The enactment of this policy in recent years is evidence that efforts of transformation to a ‘new African university’, with specific reference to inclusion of students and academics with disabilities, is being made in South African higher education. By virtue of the legislation largely, and policy specifically, it implies that qualified academics with disabilities now have the opportunity for formal employment in universities, to teach, conduct research, become involved in community engagement and supervise doctoral students, as expected during transformation to a ‘new African university’.

Transformation to a ‘new African university’ is however, a journey. South African universities are still engaged in the process of reform to meet the criteria for a transformed system of higher education that is radically different from the previous Eurocentric system. However, a ‘new African university’ in its true sense, has not yet emerged. Institutional ethos still draws from the Western philosophy and normativism still exists, hence issues of social

injustice and exclusion still prevail (Maringe, 2017). It intimates that though transformation to a ‘new African University’ is occurring, significant change has not yet taken place.

Inclusion during transformation to a ‘new African university’

Inclusion is a concept that can be understood and defined in different ways and it supports a broad and narrow conceptualisation (Ainscow et al., 2006). Broadly, it refers to the inclusion of all people in society largely or in an educational context such as higher education. Narrowly, the concept of inclusion is about including specific social groups that are vulnerable to exclusion, such as those with disabilities working in the mainstream. In the paper, inclusion is narrowly considered and is focussed on academics with disabilities.

Diversity is another important dimension required in the transformation to a ‘new African university’. The term refers to differences in people, which include among other things, gender, race, age, ability and disability, which has impact on inclusion. All diversity refers to different social groups being considered as legitimate knowers, who are capable of knowledge production. During transformation, universities are expected to implement this reform from being institutions that previously served the interest of the few elite to ones that are conducive for all to function in, including those who were previously excluded, such as academics with disabilities. Since 1994, those previously disadvantaged social groups have had formal access into South African higher education; however, inclusion of all diverse social groups have not been fully realised (Cross, 2018). Thus, despite being legitimate knowers also, academics with disabilities face challenges that exclude them from being effective knowledge producers as their able-bodied counterparts.

With specific reference to those with disabilities, Masitera (2023) argued that they should be included on the basis of tolerance, respect, acceptance “and inclusive attitudes that emanate from African moral thinking” (p. 3). Moral African thinking considers all people as human and thus deserving of equal dignified treatment. Thus, during transformation to a ‘new African university’, academics with disabilities need to be included on the moral grounds that they are human and should also have the opportunity to fully participate in knowledge production. Hence, African scholars like Mbembe, 2001; Zeleza, 2002; Nyamnjoh 2012; Maringe, 2017; and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017 consider inclusion of all diverse social groups in knowledge production as fundamental to the transformation to a ‘new African university’. However, as transformation to a ‘new African university is a process underway, the issues of diversity and inclusion of all are yet to be fully realized because academics with disabilities

are still left out in terms of fully contributing to knowledge production in the system of higher education in South Africa.

In the context of the paper, academics with disabilities refers to the teaching staff members who live with different categories of impairments such as hearing loss, visual impairments or physical disabilities and other limitations that restrict their physical functioning. Transformation to a new African university demands that these challenges be explored and overcome to ensure that these academics with disabilities are also included in knowledge production in higher education.

There is considerable literature on challenges faced by students with disabilities in Africa (Matshediso, 2017; Mutanga, 2017; Ndlovu, 2017; Ntombela & Mahlangu, 2019; Ndlovu, 2020a; Ndlovu, 2020b; Ndlovu, 2020c; Ntombela, 2020). In contrast, literature focused on challenges confronting academics with disabilities during transformation to a ‘new African university’ in the South African context of higher education are few. This paper thus contributes to the literature in an area of study that has not received adequate research publication. The fact is that academics with disabilities also face challenges that confront students with disabilities, and both groups exist in the same context of higher education, during transformation to a ‘new African university’. By exploring these challenges, this paper offers a contribution to scholarship on the intervention to assist the inclusion of academics with disabilities so that they can also contribute to knowledge production in the South African context of higher education.

The paper thus seeks to answer the following central questions:

1. What are the challenges for academics with disabilities during transformation to a ‘new African university’ in South African higher education?
2. What are the intangible underlying causes for the challenges confronted by academics with disabilities?
3. What intervention could assist in overcoming challenges confronted by academics with disabilities, to produce knowledge during transformation to a ‘new African university’ in South Africa?

This paper argues that while academics with disabilities have opportunity of being included during the transformation process to a ‘new African university’ in South Africa, they are still confronted with challenges in teaching, supervision, research and community engagement; all limiting their full participation in producing knowledge. The system is not yet fully transformed

to include their voice in policy, hence the current study addresses the challenges they are confronted with and the need for their voice to be integrated into policy making so as to include them in knowledge production as well.

Theoretical Frame: Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) draws from Critical Theory which is focused on emancipation of social groups from oppression (Horkheimer, 1972). CDT seeks to bring about social change by raising awareness of hegemonic practices that have been taken for granted. CDT provides theoretical tools that can assist the oppressed in becoming liberated. The theory thus seeks to improve the living conditions of all diverse people, but particularly those with disabilities who find themselves undervalued and discriminated against (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). As it seeks improvement and change for the marginalised, such as those with disabilities, the theory is relevant for this study because the ultimate goal is to ensure that the voice of academics with disabilities is being included and heard by the responsible authorities during transformation in the ‘new African university’ in South Africa.

CDT also helps to understand how the material and local contextual conditions shape the marginalisation or privilege of social groups, more particularly those with disabilities (Shildrick, 2012). The theory therefore helps to illuminate and create an understanding of the obstacles or opportunities the marginalised meet in their day-to-day activities within a specific social environment. It is a theory that critiques the social practices, processes and structures that result in the marginalisation of social groups and especially those with disabilities (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). It assists in developing an understanding of what influences the exclusion, where they are excluded, how they are excluded and why they are excluded. For a study focused on the context of a ‘new African university’, the theory was useful in understanding the obstacles that confront academics with disabilities.

CDT is concerned with shifting focus about disability writing from the Global West perspective to that of South and non-Western perspectives (Meekosha, 2011; Grech, 2015). The theory thus privileges the voice from the Global South (Grech, 2015), which has been placed at the periphery, particularly as disability writing has been viewed from Western perspectives and dominated by the scholars from the West. The argument is that it is those with a lived experience of disability, who know exactly what they need (Hosking, 2008) and whose voice needs to be privileged (Devlin & Potheir, 2006). As the appeal in contemporary scholarship requests that the voice of the marginalised be heard, the theory is relevant for a

study focused on academics with disabilities, whose voice also needs to be heard to overcome the challenges they confront in knowledge production.

The theoretical tools of context and intersectionality were drawn from CDT and used to illuminate and explain the challenges that are confronted by the academics with disabilities during transformation to a ‘new African university’ in the South African context of higher education. The two concepts were important in order to understand the hidden and underlying causes of the challenges, as when these are identified and established, practical solutions for those with lived experiences can be sought.

Context

Context as a theoretical concept of CDT refers to how disability is generally perceived, socially constructed, and conceptualised within a specific social environment (Sherry, 2009). The context within which disability is located shapes and influences how disability is conceived and how those located in a specific social context view disability. As Sherry(2009). notes, disability should be understood as a contextual issue because it is in itself defined by context and as a result, is conceptualised differently from one context to the other. Furthermore, context influences perceptions and perceptions determine people’s actions (William, 1999). Thus, the stakeholders’ perceptions about disability within a specific context can influence how those with disabilities are accommodated, provided for, included, or excluded.

In the South African (and African) context, for example, disability has been conceptualised in a negative light because historically, the view has been informed by cultural tradition and African belief systems whereby disability was perceived as a curse (Kisanji, 1995). Persons with disabilities were traditionally viewed as charity cases, who needed to be ‘normalised’ in institutions (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). They have often been cast as ‘less normal’ and therefore less human (Barnes, Oliver & Barton, 2008). The way disability has been conceived has therefore led to segregation and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in society. Though gradual changes have occurred in the way context has influenced the negative conception of disability in African societies, some stereotypes about disability have continued.

Negative conceptions about disabilities that draw from the historical traditions and African beliefs have spilled over into higher education in South Africa. It has been reported that due to negative conceptions about disability, academics have low expectations of students with disabilities (Howell, 2006). In classroom teaching and learning, some academic staff are unwelcoming of students with disabilities as they view them as burdensome (Mutanga, 2017).

Disability is still conceived, perceived and constructed in a negative way in higher education because the stakeholders have not disposed of the stereotype perspective they hold about disability. The issue of context as a theoretical concept is therefore critical to explain the challenges confronted by academics with disabilities during transformation to a 'new African university', within the context of South African higher education. It was thus a useful analytical tool that provided an insight into important contextual issues that could have been overlooked in the analysis process.

Intersectionality/Intrasectionality

Intersectionality as a theoretical concept in CDT helps to explain diversity within disability and those with disabilities. It is a concept that recognises the overlap of identities and different layers of oppression and privilege in the positioning of social groups. Persons with disabilities have been mistakenly understood to be a homogenous social group with 'special needs', who require 'special' intervention. However, disability embodies and intersects with other identities such as race, gender, class, economic and educational backgrounds and ethnicity (Sherry, 2009). The concept of intersectionality therefore helps to understand different aspects of disability and how these interact to influence each individual differently. In other words, the concept of intersectionality assists in illustrating that persons with disabilities are also diverse in themselves, in their own various ways, as they are placed in different positions of oppression and privilege.

Persons with disabilities could have the same impairment, but have different needs (Picard, 2015). This explains the heterogeneity that goes with disability as the same disability category might require different support and intervention. Critical disability scholars like Sherry (2009) places an emphasis on intra/intersectionality as a factor of diversity. Her argument is that disability should be understood as being at the centre of other identities and not an isolated entity. In essence, intersectionality disrupts the notion of homogeneity and enables consideration of other identities and factors that are in intersection, and how they interact and have an impact, positive or negative, on an individual with disabilities (Moodley & Graham, 2015).

Privilege that may go with disability has, in most instances been glossed over. Goodley (2011) argued that persons with disabilities were intersectional subjects who also embodied other powerful positions, valued in an ableist culture (Goodley, 2013). It implies that while disability has always been associated with disadvantage and oppression, intersectionality

helps to understand that disability could also yield positions of privilege and advantage. In essence, persons with disabilities could also be placed in positions of power; they are not always placed in the position of oppression, as assumed. Thus, the concept of intersectionality helps to understand that challenges for academics with disabilities may not be overgeneralised. It is no doubt that intersectionality of privilege and oppression exists with academics with disabilities during transformation to a 'new African university'. Illuminated by intersectionality, overgeneralisations and glossing over the specifics were avoided in terms of challenges encountered by academics with disabilities and interventions proposed.

Method

A systematic literature review was considered as an appropriate approach for sourcing data relevant for understanding the challenges that could be confronted by academics with disabilities during transformation to a 'new African university'. Data were sourced from published books, journal articles, online sources and book chapters. The search terms and their combination such as transitioning, new African university, students with disabilities, academics with disabilities, South African higher education, South African higher education and challenges, were used to search the online databases, which include ProQuest, EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, PsycInfo, SAGE, SpringerLINK and Taylor and Francis Online.

Selection criteria for literature for review

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used as protocol to select relevant sources and literature, with sources matching the inclusion criteria being selected. There was a paucity of literature on sources specifically focused on the challenges confronted by academics with disabilities during transformation to a 'new African university'. Thus, though the paper meant to specifically focus on academics with disabilities, there was limited literature on the issue both internationally and in the South African context.

As literature that would provide adequate data for analysis was not available, the author had to select from a wide array of literature related to challenges confronted by students with disabilities. This was based on the fact that, as students and academics with disabilities belong to one social group of persons who live with a disability and as they function within the same context and time of transformation to a 'new African university', they face the same challenges. Secondly, teaching and learning, research and community engagement are a continuum and not mutually exclusive, in that they inversely involve both students and staff members. If students with disabilities are confronted by challenges in their respective practices,

academics with disabilities could also be confronted with similar challenges within the same context. Taking this in account, literature on challenges that students with disabilities face was selected and reviewed to understand the challenges that academics with disabilities face.

Publications that matched the search criteria were identified and duplicates were deleted. Selected literature was read and re-read, guided by the research questions of the study. Journal articles, books, book chapters, online resources, reports and conference papers presented from the 1979 to the 2021s were selected. The significance of the period speaks to struggles of persons with disabilities against exclusion in general, but also during transformation to ‘a new African university’ when scholarship, globally and nationally, is shifting to embrace inclusion and diversity.

Challenges for academics with disabilities during transformation

Infrastructural challenges limiting teaching

Academics with disabilities are limited in teaching by the challenge of inaccessible physical structures during transformation to a ‘new African university’ in the South African context of higher education. Challenges of the inaccessible built environment have not yet been resolved in institutions of higher education in South Africa. Literature has revealed that students with physical disabilities and low vision have the challenges of inaccessibility of physical structures. Academics with physical disabilities and total visual impairment have the same challenge because they operate within the same university environments that are inaccessible in terms of physical infrastructure. Literature reveals that despite efforts of renovations and retrofitting of old buildings, the built environment is still inaccessible to many, particularly those with physical disabilities and total visual loss (Engelbrecht & de Beer, 2014). Negotiating their way to lecture-venues to teach is a challenge resulting in them missing lectures or arriving late, as has been experienced by students with disabilities (Hall & Belch, 2000). Swartz and Schneider (2006) argued that renovating and retrofitting all buildings is still in the pipeline because of the expense involved. It implies that even as universities are transforming to a ‘new African university’, physical structures in higher education remain inaccessible to academics with disabilities, resulting in them getting to lecture-room late. The negative impact on teaching cannot be over-emphasised.

Some institutions of higher education have made significant progress in terms of renovation and retrofitting of physical structures to conform to the principles of Universal Design (Fitchett, 2015). However, inaccessibility within the new buildings has been reported

by students with disabilities at an institution of higher education in South Africa (Ndlovu, 2017), which implies that not only students with disabilities, but also academics with disabilities who use the same venues for teaching, are limited in the same way. For example, the distance between student seating and the podium is a challenge for academics with hearing impairments as they have difficulties hearing what students are saying. This in turn has an effect on knowledge production. Thus, the inaccessibility of physical structures in the South African higher education context hinders academics with disabilities to effectively produce knowledge with all students with and without disabilities, which is a core mandate during transformation to a 'new African knowledge'. Evidence from literature is that students with disabilities experienced challenges to learning within the new buildings as these new buildings were built without diversity in mind (Ndlovu, 2017). Hence, academics with disabilities suffer similarly.

Impairment-related disadvantages in research

Academics with disabilities are confronted with impairment-related challenges in conducting research. Impairment-related disadvantages hinder functionality and academics with disabilities are also faced with the challenge of functioning effectively which limits them in terms of participating in specific activities. Shakespeare (2010), a person with total visual impairment, stated that she cannot drive because driving is an activity that requires sight. Some scholars have continued to embrace the medical model of disability because it does not evade the reality of impairment. Although Oliver (1990) argues that disability is imposed on individuals by society and a fully transformed social and physical environment should include persons with disabilities, Shakespeare and Watson (2001) in contrast, argue that the effects of impairment should not be overlooked because they do limit persons with impairments. Academic who are totally visually impaired confront challenges to do with sight in conducting research that requires observation at the institution or in the community. Cues and facial expressions in which deep meaning is derived, are missed by a visually impaired academic when conducting empirical research with participants. The evidence from literature shows that students with disabilities were limited in doing research and activities in their field of study due to impairments. A medical student with albinism, who had low vision stated from a lived experience that he could not use small needles on patients because of his limited sight (Ndlovu, 2017). It is the same experience with academics with disabilities because they confront the same challenges using some specific equipment during research.

Academics with severe physical disabilities also find it difficult to handle specific research equipment or instruments that are used in fields of architecture, mining or in engineering research. Literature has revealed that students with disabilities implementing off-campus integrated learning reported that they had challenges with handling specific equipment during fieldwork (Odendaal-Magwaza & Farman, 1997). The experience is similar for academics with total visual impairment and severe physical disabilities because as already highlighted, an impairment is a restrictive reality that can disadvantage all persons with disabilities in their functioning, including academics with disabilities.

Compounded challenges in supervising doctoral students

During transformation to a ‘new African university’, doctoral training has especially become very important because it can enable quality knowledge production through research (Sawahel, 2018). Training more doctoral researchers through supervision is one of the reforms expected during transformation to ‘a new African university’ (Maringe, 2017). The increased demand for quality research and output by doctoral graduates has spurred an increase in the recruitment of doctoral candidates in South African higher education (ASSAf, 2010). Despite the demand, some doctoral candidates have not developed the relevant basic research skills (Ungandi, 2021). Supervision of doctoral students by academics with disabilities has a range of challenges, which limit them in terms of contributing to knowledge production.

A multitude of challenges, which include miscommunication, negative attitudes, limited media, inadequate funding for the services of language interpretation and increased pressure, are confronted by academics with disabilities in supervising doctoral students during transformation to a ‘new African university’ in South African higher education. A number of these challenges have been identified with academics supervising doctoral candidates in the South African context of higher education (Ungandi, 2021). Overcoming these challenges has resulted in a greater workload for supervisors, increased time for supervision, and more time required for building student-supervisor relations, which when compounded, takes its toll on the supervisors (Ungandi, 2021). It is argued that while supervisors are pressured to increase their research output, they are also pressured to produce doctoral graduates (Carter, Miller & Courtney, 2017). Academics with disabilities face the challenge of even more increased pressure to meet the requirements of doctoral supervision in comparison to other supervisors because the challenges are exacerbated for those with disabilities.

Academics with disabilities face the challenge of miscommunication resulting from using special media to communicate with doctoral students without disabilities. Literature has revealed that students with disabilities have experienced miscommunication that result from those with disabilities being not able to use special media to communicate effectively. For example, PowerPoint slides were used in lectures which was a challenge for students with visual impairments (Mutanga, 2017). Academics with disabilities also experience the same challenge of miscommunication in the use of special media with doctoral students without disabilities. Miscommunication leads to further challenges in building good student-supervisor relationships due to negative attitudes from students without disabilities. Evidence from literature shows that some students without disabilities lack sensitivity and hold negative attitudes about disabilities (Ntombela, 2020).

While there are common challenges for all academics in supervision, there are also impairment-related challenges for academics with disabilities. Evidence from the literature shows that students with disabilities who were totally hearing impaired had challenges in conducting research with hearing participants (Ndlovu, 2020a; 2020b). Academics with hearing impairment, who use sign language and not oral communication, also face a communication barrier with their doctoral students without disabilities in both desktop and empirical research. Participants without disabilities are not able to use and interpret sign language, and vice-versa, and the academic who use sign language do not hear oral communication from participants without disabilities. The communication barrier negatively affects academics with total hearing impairments as they supervise students without hearing impairment who do not use sign language for communication.

In cases where sign language is used, the cost implication is a challenge if interpreters are involved. Sign language interpretation in South Africa is currently an expensive service, charged per an hour (Ndlovu, 2017), hence only a few individuals and institutions have adequate funding for this type of support. Matshediso (2007) argued that some institutions in South African higher education do not even admit students with hearing impairments because of issues of inadequate funding for sign language interpretation and lack of funding to hire interpreters. The issue of inadequate funding for language interpretation reported some years ago, is still being reported in more recent studies (Ndlovu, 2017). Academics with disabilities relying on interpreters are limited in conducting research as institutions of higher education do not have adequate funding to pay for the service, to facilitate their research engagements with hearing participants.

Relying on interpreters to facilitate communication during research engagement is another challenge for academics with disabilities because of unreliability of human resources, which could affect the research process. An interpreter could fall ill, take leave or decide to change jobs at any time (Ndlovu, 2017). The absence of human resource for interpreting sign language impacts the academic with hearing impairment negatively, and consequently, the doctoral student and the research process. Arguably, though academics with disabilities are capable of producing knowledge, there are unique obstacles they face in the process of knowledge production, which are not confronted by those without disabilities.

Negative attitudes in community engagement

Academics with disabilities who are expected to participate in community engagement face with the challenge of negative attitude in society at large, which has an impact on the effective engagement with the local community members. Society in South Africa, as in many other African countries, still holds negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities, which are traced to the Eurocentric disability writing, resulting in myths and stereotypes about persons with disabilities in particular (Grech, 2015). In addition, the negative perception of disability has generally been passed from one generation to the other. Society denies that there are people who are ‘different’, and as such, deviate from the ‘normal’ because it uses a standard for ‘normalcy’ and continues to hold onto the mentality of the normative. Persons without disabilities are sceptical of those with disabilities, consequently manifesting negative attitudes towards them, resulting in people with disabilities having low expectations of their capabilities. Literature reveals that students with disabilities were limited in doing their fieldwork outside the university because of negative attitudes and low expectation of their performance by members of the community (Ndlovu, 2017). It is the same experience with academics with disabilities as they do research in the able-abled communities.

It could be argued that negative attitudes manifested towards people with disabilities result in academics with disabilities not engaging effectively with community members and working together to produce knowledge relevant and useful for solving community problems. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argued that community engagement helps to solve the problems of the local community through knowledge produced in higher education that is context-relevant. He argued that it is a prime concern for the ‘new African university’ to ensure epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). When academics with disabilities are limited in community engagement, they are unable to contribute to epistemic freedom during transformation to a ‘new African university’. In summary, South African society as a social context, is not yet fully

transformed to be inclusive to diversity in terms of disability (Ndlovu, 2017), and consequently, a range of factors hinder community engagement by academics with disabilities.

South African higher education context during transformation

As explained in detail in the theoretical framework section, context plays an important role in shaping and influencing how disability is conceived and consequently, how those with disabilities are included or excluded. The process of transformation to a 'new African university' is still in process, hence the South African context of higher education, which has always been exclusive to those with disabilities as the 'Other', has not yet fully transformed. This means that social, physical, academic and institutional environments are still restricted for some social groups, more particularly the previously disadvantaged, including those with disabilities. Literature has revealed that students with disabilities are confronted by challenges in learning (Mutanga, 2017; Ntombela, 2020; Ndlovu, 2020c), when doing fieldwork (Ndlovu, 2017), in research engagement (Ndlovu, 2022) and limited by infrastructure (Hall & Belch, 2000; Fitchett, 2015). As already indicated, teaching and learning and research are practices that are a continuum and involve both students and academics. When they occur within a similar context of higher education that is not yet fully transformed during transformation to 'new African university', challenges confronting students with disabilities also confront academics with disabilities.

Intersectionality and challenges for academics with disabilities

From the perspective of intersectionality, the range of challenges that confront academics with disabilities of different categories are different from one academic to the other. Goodley (2013) argued that persons with disabilities are intersectional subjects who embody other identities such as gender, race, class and ethnicity. They are not a homogeneous group and their challenges are not the same. Academics with disabilities confront varying challenges during transformation to a 'new African university' in the context of South African higher education. The challenges differ because of different variables such as disability category, severity of disabilities, gender, age and/or economic background of individual academics with disabilities.

Severity of impairment, for example, determine whether or not academics with disabilities face challenges during transforming to a 'new African university'. Those whose impairments are severe are more hindered than those with mild ones, in teaching, conducting research, community engagement and supervision of doctoral students. For example, academics with totally hearing impairment who use sign language have more challenges than

those with the same impairment at a mild level who may use oral language, can sign- or lip read. The literature revealed that it is students with total loss of hearing who experience greater communication challenges when conducting research with participants who have a hearing sense (Ndlovu, 2022). In addition, academics with disabilities from disadvantaged backgrounds confront more challenges in doing research or community engagement because of lack of adequate resources. Literature revealed that students with disabilities from disadvantaged contexts face more challenges in conducting research (Ndlovu, 2020) and in doing field work (Ndlovu, 2017). It is the same with academics with disabilities. Those from disadvantaged social contexts face more challenges in doing research, teaching, and community engagement.

Privileged and under-privileged academics do not confront the same challenges in knowledge production during transformation to the 'new African university'. From the perspective of intersectionality. Disability should not always be looked at from the perspective of oppression, disadvantage and exclusion, but also privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). By way of association and interaction with privileged persons in society, some academics with disabilities occupy privileged positions, which advantage them and enable them to engage effectively during transformation to a 'new African university' and produce knowledge even more effectively than academics without disabilities. For example, academics with an impaired bodies from a high economic class family who had an elite background of previous schooling, also have habitus, social and cultural capital, which has always been associated with those from the privileged and elite backgrounds (Cross, 2018). They bring from their elite backgrounds, skills and knowledge of technology, high self-esteem and confidence as assets, which they use effectively for teaching, for research, community engagement and supervision of doctoral students, and are thus not hindered by challenges that other academics with disabilities, experience during transformation to a 'new African university'. Technology savvy academics with disabilities do not face challenges experienced by those who are not equipped with the relevant technological skills. Being acquainted with technology assists functionality and performance of those with disabilities. The literature also revealed that students with disabilities from privileged backgrounds were not faced with the same challenges in learning because they brought with them the social capital and habitus that assisted their learning (Cross, 2018). So it is with academics with disabilities.

Thus, intersectionality explains why some academics with disabilities are confronted with different challenges while some do not face any challenges in the transformation to a 'new

African university' in South African higher education. Thus, without considering intersectionality, the challenges for academics with disabilities are over-generalised. Arguably, some academics confront challenges which are similar, but they are not confronted in the same way or at the same level. Thus, before thinking that all academics with disabilities are disadvantaged and have challenges which require intervention strategies to help their inclusion, the author reiterates that it is not all academics with disabilities who are limited and experience challenges in research community engagement and supervision of doctoral candidates.

'Publish or perish' requirement of higher education

The pressure of the popular 'publish or perish' requirement applies to higher education institutions in South Africa. It is a popular mantra that puts all academics under pressure as they are compelled to publish research studies. Academics with disabilities are subjected to the pressure of publishing with much greater disadvantage compared to those without disabilities. As previously discussed, academics with disabilities face a myriad of challenges in producing and disseminating knowledge through research because of their impairments. This pressure is exacerbated within a higher education context that is not yet fully transformed. It is argued that the notion of 'publish or perish' counteracts and contradicts the reform ideal of including academics with disabilities in transformation to a 'new African university'. It is in that respect that the intangible and invisible underlying cause for the challenges confronted by academics with disabilities during transformation to the 'new African university', should be understood, so that interventions could be put in place.

The way forward: The voice of academics with disabilities

Taking note of the voice of academics with disabilities who have lived experiences of disability is the way in which their teaching, research, community engagement, including supervision of doctoral students, can be improved. Hosking (2008) emphasises that the able-bodied have been speaking and continue to speak for disabled persons, which has resulted in those with impairments being seen as powerless and voiceless. The experience of disability has been and generally continues to be viewed from the able-bodied perspective. This implies that the needs of those with disabilities are not been taken into consideration. Assistive devices are designed for those with disabilities without consultation, with the voice of those with disabilities not being noted. It has been observed that when the disabled say things that the mainstream society wants to hear, they are listened to, but when they speak of what they do not want to hear, it is considered as an inappropriate response to disability (Titchkosky, 2003). It is therefore

imperative that during the process of transformation to a ‘new African university’, the voice of those with lived experience of disability should be privileged and they should be given the opportunity to express themselves, be listened to and be heard (Hosking, 2008).

In a practical way, it could start with transforming the social context so that it also includes academics with disabilities. This could be operationalised by including the voice of the academics with disabilities in disability policy, starting at institutional level. The limitations of the current disability policy, the Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School and Training System (DHET, 2018) promulgated in 2018 is that firstly, it excludes the voices of those with disabilities and, secondly, it homogenises disabilities and does not disaggregate them according to categories (Mutanga, Manjonga & Ngubane 2018). When institutional disability policies are being reviewed, academics with disabilities should be invited to participate so that they give voice to the challenges they face in research, community engagement, supervising doctoral students or even in teaching, and offer suggestions on how those challenges could be addressed.

Individual academics with different categories of disabilities should speak out because persons with disabilities may have the same impairments but different needs (Picard, 2015). The value of voicing these individual and unique needs may assist in them being effectively addressed. It is argued that disability, persons with impairments and their voice, concepts and knowledge are over-simplified and over-generalised as homogeneous and disability in general is decontextualised in the Global South (Grech, 2015). When their voice has been included in institutional disability policies, responsible authorities as members of the transformation committee in institutions can collate their collective voice and escalate it to the policy makers at national level, to include in the current disability policy, which is available at national level (DHET, 2018). When operationalised accordingly, the voice of academics with disabilities could be heard, and a conducive environment could be created during transformation to a ‘new African university’. This would allow them to be core producers of knowledge through research, community engagement and doctoral supervision, just as their abled-bodied counterparts.

A bottom-up approach (Devlin & Pothier, 2006) in which the voice comes from the academics with disabilities through the university authorities to policy makers allows the previously stifled voice to emerge. In a previous study in Britain, collective voice of persons with physical disabilities resulted in the transformation and their inclusion (UPIAS, 1979). The same is possible for academics with disabilities during transformation to a ‘new African

university in South Africa. Leaders and authorities in the South African higher education context can also hear a collective voice from the academics with disabilities on how they want to engage in research and community engagement and how they want to be supported in their supervision of doctoral students. Assistive devices should be designed according to the needs of the individual and unique needs of academics with various disabilities. Thus, there should be a shift from offering support and making provision for academics with disabilities, without them being involved and considered. Stakeholders should be reminded that it is the agenda of the 'new African university' that the previously silenced voices be heard, listened to and what they are saying be implemented, with the backup of policy.

Limitations of the study

As highlighted in the methodology section, the challenges confronting academics with disabilities are the same as confronted students with disabilities. Literature review based on studies used for analysis and evidence focused on students with disabilities and it is understood that the same context of transformation to a 'new African university' has similar influence and challenges for both students and academics as they belong to the same social category of persons with disabilities. The existent literature reviewed for this study was focused on challenges confronted by students with disabilities which we then use as evidence for the challenges faced by the subject of research, i.e., academics with disabilities. However interviewed academics have different experiences in terms of the challenges they confront during transformation to a 'new African university' in the system of higher education in South Africa. Thus, though the study is limited in that regard, it lays a foundation for empirical studies in which academics with disabilities can confirm or refute the challenges presented in the paper.

Concluding remarks

During transformation to a 'new African university' in the context of higher education in South Africa, academics with disabilities face challenges in conducting research, being involved in community engagement, and supervising doctoral students. Because they experience unique challenges, this limits their engagement because the context has not yet fully transformed to include them. Total transformation at institutional and national levels would call for an overarching intervention that could help academics with disabilities become included and effectively engage in producing knowledge, just as their able-bodied counterparts do.

Total transformation of the social, academic, and physical context to fully include academics with disabilities might not be achieved within a short period due to over-stretched

resources experienced in South African higher education. However, incorporating the voice of academics with disabilities into the disability policy is a possible strategy that could assist in creating a conducive higher education environment in which academics with disabilities effectively engage in teaching both students with and without disabilities, conduct research and become involved in community engagement, including supervising doctoral students. The fact is that academics with disabilities are legitimate knowers who have the capacity and capability to produce knowledge and take their rightful place in the South African higher education context, during transformation to a ‘new African university’.

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