# ACCESS TO INFORMATION & SERVICES BY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA

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## Abstract

In 2006, the United Nations adopted the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ICRPD) to guarantee the promotion, respect and enjoyment of the rights of people with disabilities. In the same vein, the Namibian Government signed and ratified ICRPD on 4 December 2007 in terms of Article 144 of the Namibian Constitution, it is part of Namibian law and, therefore, it is binding. Furthermore, at national level, Article 10 of the Namibian Constitution states that everyone is equal before the law and no persons may be discriminated against in terms of the groups set out in Article 10(2). The main purpose of this study was to find out to what extent students with disabilities have access to information and other services as well as identifying barriers these students face at the University of Namibia (UNAM). The study used a methodological triangulation, which consisted of questionnaires, and semi structured interviews. The total sampled population comprised of 32 students with disabilities, 14 academics and 5 service providers.

The findings show there is awareness of the needs of student with disabilities at UNAM but facilities are inadequate. There is also a gap between the format of information provided to students and the information seeking behaviors. The study provides recommendations to UNAM on how to improve access to services and information for students with disabilities.

**Keywords:** *Access to Information; Inclusive Services; Disabilities; Higher Education Institution*

**Background Information**

According to the National Statistics Agency Report of 2011, Namibia has a population of 2,113,077 people. This includes 98,413 or 4.7% people with disabilities. Within that percentage, there are more females (51,125) than males (48,288) with disabilities in Namibia.

The Khomas region has the highest (45%) record of persons with disabilities followed by the Erongo region (33.1%), which may justify why more students with disabilities are located at the main Khomas region Campus.

The University of Namibia (UNAM) was established in 1992 under the University of Namibia Act 18 of 1992. It is the largest National institution of higher learning in Namibia with a population of 25,267 students (2016) and more than 446 lecturers.

**Table 1: UNAM Total Population in 2016**

| Campus Name | Distance Programs | Full time/ Part-time | Grand Total | Student with disabilities | % students with disabilities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| WINDHOEK CAMPUS | 2196 | 11242 | 13438 | 33 | 48 |
| HP CAMPUS | | 2243 | 2243 | 5 | 7 |
| RUNDU CAMPUS | 384 | 1746 | 1746 | 6 | 9 |
| OSHAKATI CAMPUS | 1054 | 630 | 1684 | 2 | 3 |
| KHOMASDAL CAMPUS | | 1290 | 1290 | 6 | 9 |
| KATIMA CAMPUS | 257 | 1080 | 1080 | 6 | 9 |
| SOUTHERN CAMPUS | 176 | 568 | 744 | 1 | 1 |
| SCHOOL OF MEDICINE | | 641 | 641 | 0 | |
| ONGWEDIVA CAMPUS | | 304 | 304 | 5 | 7 |
| OGONGO CAMPUS | | 295 | 295 | 4 | 6 |
| NEUDAMM CAMPUS | | 181 | 181 | 0 | |
| SWAKOPMUND | 242 | | 242 | 0 | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CENTRE | | | | | |
| EENHANA CENTRE | | 214 | 214 | **0** | |
| OTJIWARONGO CENTRE | 144 | | 144 | **0** | |
| TSUMEB CENTRE | 144 | | 144 | **0** | |
| HENTIES    BAY RESEARCH CENTRE | | 92 | 92 | **1** | **1** |
| GOBABIS CENTRE | 75 | | 75 | **0** | |
| OPUWO CENTRE | 40 | | 40 | **0** | |
| KHORIXAS CENTRE | 29 | | 29 | **0** | |
| **Grand Total** | **4741** | **20526** | **25267** | **69** | |

There are 12 Campuses nationwide and 9 regional Centers for Distance Education (CES).  UNAM's vision is to provide quality higher education through teaching, research and advisory services to its customers with the view to produce productive and competitive human resources capable of driving public and private institutions towards a knowledge-based economy, economic growth and improved quality of life (UNAM, 2016) throughout the country.

According to 2016 records, the University of Namibia has a total population of 25,267, which includes 16,152 (64%) females and 9,115 (36%) males. Out of the total figure of 25,267, only 69 students have disabilities as per Table 1.

Based on these numbers (25,267), one would reasonably expect the number of students with disabilities to be higher. One of the reviewed reports indicated that the proportion of individuals aged 5 years and above that have, never attended school is 28.9%, based on the 2011 census. A majority (82.3%) of these are from rural areas while 17.7% are from urban areas. In terms of tertiary education, the proportion of persons with disabilities who completed tertiary education was 45.3% of the total recorded number, and from the Khomas region. In addition, the highest proportion of disabled persons with no formal education was from the blind and visually impaired group (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2016).

Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution states that all persons shall have the right to education and that primary education shall be free and obligatory for all children up to the age of 16. This means that urgent intervention needs to be considered by the government of Namibia in order to ensure children with disabilities receive primary, secondary and tertiary education, as is their right.

The Executive Chairperson of the Namibian National Association of the Deaf, Mr Nanyeni (2014) raised several issues on the plight of people with disabilities. One issue was that people with disabilities could only attend school up to Grade 10 because of lack of facilities to help them acquire an education beyond that point. In Namibia, there are only two schools for special education, which offer classes up to Grade 10. This means that people with disabilities are excluded from higher education. This can be another reason why there are few students with disabilities at institutions of higher learning.

Article 10 of the Namibian Constitution deals with equality and freedom from discrimination and prescripts that no person may be discriminated against. In addition, the Affirmative Action (Employment) Act of 1998 aims to address the injustices of the past, in order to place previously disadvantaged groups at the same level with other groups in society, for the full realization of their rights. Section 18 (c) of the Act provides for the rights of persons with disabilities. This means that every person has the right to enjoy all services without any discrimination.

Furthermore, Article 24 of the United Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006), of which Namibia is a party, recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to education in an inclusive education system. This means, all state parties need to offer education for persons with disabilities without discrimination.


*Study Objectives/ Aims*
The United Nations sustainable development goals that call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy their rights include provision of quality and inclusive education to all.  Sustainable Development Goal 4 (a) provides:

*Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all (UNDP website)*

The study will investigate how students with disabilities enjoy their rights considering that Namibia is a state party to the CRPD. No study has been done in this area in Namibia, and specifically at the University of Namibia, to establish the extent to which the university's services are inclusive of students with disabilities. This study was conducted to address this gap.

*Research objectives*

- ➢ To find out to what extent students with disabilities access information at the University of Namibia

- ➢ To establish the extent to which students with disabilities access general services at the University of Namibia

- ➢ To establish which services are provided to students with disabilities at the University of Namibia by different service units

- ➢ To identify barriers students with disabilities face in accessing information

- ➢ To identify barriers facing students with disabilities in accessing services

- ➢ To identify challenges faced by different service providers at the university who provide information and other services to students with disabilities

- ➢ To formulate recommendations for the improvement of information and service' provision to students with disabilities

**Literature Review**

*International and Regional Framework*

People with disabilities endure the worst forms of social stigma in communities, with some disabled children hidden by their family members because they consider deformation shameful. Such children are denied their rights to education.

Several legal frameworks, which offer protection to people with disabilities, are discussed below.

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 19 expressly guarantees the rights to access information providing that:

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers"

Furthermore, UDHR refers to accessibility by providing, in Article 21, the right to equal access to public services. Article 26 further provides for the need for tertiary, professional and higher education to enable equal access to all, based on merit (Ntinda & Mchombu 2014).

*United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)*

Namibia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2006. The convention plays a dual role; it is a human rights protection instrument and a developmental instrument to enable member states to better provide for the needs of persons with disabilities within their boundaries.

Article 24 of the Convention requires state parties to develop an inclusive education system at all levels, provide for reasonable accommodation for individual requirements and ensure that persons with disabilities are provided with "effective individualized support measures" to maximize their academic and social development.

*The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights[1]*

Namibia is a party to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) thus it has an obligation to take all necessary measures to ensure the rights of people with disabilities are protected. For example, Article 18(4) provides that disabled persons shall be entitled to special measures of protection.

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[1] African Charter on Human and Peoples" Rights (1986) was ratified by Namibia on the 30/07/1992 and was deposited on the 16/09/1992.

*National Level*

*The Namibian Constitution*
The Namibian Constitution is the supreme law of the land according to article 1(6). The Namibian Constitution does not specifically provide for the rights of people with disabilities. It does, however, contain several articles that can be used to provide for the rights of people with disabilities to ensure equal opportunities and full participation in the socio economy of the country. Article 5 places a duty on the state, individuals and public and private institutions to respect and uphold the rights and freedoms enshrined in the bill of rights. Article 6, refers to respecting the right to life. Article 8 refers to the respect for human dignity and prohibition of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and Article 10 provides for equality and non-discrimination.

*National Disability Act no 26, 2004*

Namibia only has a 1997 disability policy and does not have a disability act.The policy provides for measures to cater for persons with disabilities and the 2004 Disability Council Act provides for the means to implement the said policy. The 2004 Act and the scheduled policy provide for access to information in terms of section 3.4.1 and 3.11. (Ntinda and Mchombu 2014).

*National Policy on Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2013*

This policy seeks to address the needs of marginalised groups with special reference to children with disabilities. The policy refers to Article 24 of the CRPD, which urges member parties to adopt the principles of inclusive education. At the university level. a high number of students with disabilities are expected but due to lack of accessibility like "universal design" infrastructure, the University of Namibia can only enrol a few. The study by Nakuta (2013) found that the University of Namibia is not yet ready for students with disabilities although there are policies that should enhance access to tertiary education for people living with disabilities.

*Ministry of Education Strategic Plan 2012-2017*

The five-year strategic plan of the Ministry of Education calls for an accessible and equitable Inclusive Education System.

*Access to Information*

A Baseline study on human rights in Namibia noted that people living with disability face various problems, which include lack of employment, lack of access to education and lack of resources. The study found that teachers are not properly trained or equipped to deal with children with disabilities. This sometimes results in disabled learners being excluded, because they are viewed as slow. The study also noted that most schools have no sign (language) interpreters, no proper structures for people living with disabilities, and information is not accessible due to lack of braille and audio materials. The study also found that the Disability Unit at the University of Namibia is not well equipped.[2]

Seyama at el. (2014) noted that lecturers preferred to present information in PowerPoint, which JAWs software cannot read. In addition, student notices on campus were distributed as flyers and pamphlets, which blind and visually impaired students could not access. Furthermore, postgraduate students could not access databases because the computers did not have the JAWS software installed. Access to information is very important to students with disabilities in order for them to fully participate in the learning process of an institution.

Mr Nanyeni (2014), the Executive Chairperson for the Namibian National Association for the Deaf, once alluded that people with disabilities want access to braille and alternative communication, and all other accessible means and modes and formats of communication.

Access to education is very important in order to help people become better citizens. As Schur et.al (2013) notes that education is important to enable people to get better jobs, higher incomes and engage in political participation. Thus, people living with disabilities have a right to education so that they can make meaningful contributions to society.

*Access to Services*

Access to assistive technology and other learning support is critical to the success of students with disabilities in post-secondary education. Stodden et al (2001) defined assistive technology as that which includes any device, low or high tech that enhances the capability of a person to function in his or her

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[2] J Nakuta. Baseline Study Report on Human Rights in Namibia (2013).Windhoek: Ombudsman Namibia.

environment. These devices and services, when used accordingly, can improve the physical and intellectual capabilities of individuals with disabilities. The authors noted that the increased number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions has been partly due to the use of advanced technological devices and services.

A study on access to educational and instructional computer technologies, which was done in Canada observed the following: As institutes of higher learning adopt campus-wide computer systems and networks, it is important to consider accessibility for students with different impairments, most of the time this is not a priority. In some cases, CD-ROMs have small print or very light background, which cannot be changed; video clips lack captioning; and internet websites have small screen sizes (Fichten et al.2000).

A study by Majinge and Stilwell (2015) on students with disabilities in Tanzania found that students in wheelchairs were not able to access many buildings on campus without being carried due to the unfriendly environment. They suggested that universal design in the early stages of planning helps to make the environment friendly and other services accessible to everyone. For example, too many stairs with no option of using a lift or ramps prohibit students with disabilities from accessing classes, the library, restaurant, dormitories and other services.

The study by Fichen et al. (2000) on access to educational and instructional computer technologies in Canada found that despite the advantages of using computer technologies, barriers could also be created. In this particular study, the barriers included: high cost which prevented students from using computers; attitudinal problems, for instance, a student wanted a computer to help take notes, but the lecturer refused and other students did not like it.

*Disability Models*

There are three models, which are used to understand the relationship between individual impairments and the environment. These are the Medical model, Social model and Universalist model.

The Medical model is a traditional view of disability, which focuses on functional impairments and health conditions. This model places importance on cure, without taking into account other factors such as social factors like discrimination. It puts responsibility on the individual with disability to overcome their disability through hard work, positive attitude and determination (Schur et al. 2011). Majinge and Stilwell (2015) who state that the Medical model regards disability as caused by disease, trauma or health conditions, which requires medical care.

Oliver's Social Model of disability (1996 & 2004) believes that disability is caused by society. As opposed to the Medical model, which believes that disability is located within the individual, the Social model maintains that disability is the interaction between the individual and the environment, and disability alone is not disabling. The Social model distinguishes between impairment and disability and thus, identifies the source of stigma and discrimination in society and provides the targets for political action. Seyama et al (2014) and Majinga and Stilwell (2015) summarised disability as a condition that is created socially. Features of the social environment, people's negative attitudes and an un-supportive physical environment cause the barriers of access for people with disabilities.

Schur et.al (2011) noted the advantages of the social model such as identifying a political strategy; removing barriers; and empowering people with disabilities by understanding social oppression. On the other hand, the model has been criticised for marginalising the experiences of minority groups such as women with disabilities; gay men and lesbians; and people from certain ethnic groups. Some authors have also criticised the model for failing to take into consideration other factors, apart from the environment, that cause disability, such as pain, fatigue and other physical and mental difficulties. In addition, not all people with disabilities are oppressed.

The Universalist Model proponents believe that every person experiences limitations and impairments, and those who do not experience disabilities currently, are referred to as temporarily able-bodied (Schur et al. 2011). Disability issues are considered as universal and not minority issues. The model maintains that every human being will experience disability at some point of his or her life. For example, the advantages of universal design and anti-discrimination laws are for everybody. Human beings are different and have a wide range of responses to disability issues and experiences.

**Research Methodology**

A semi-structured interview instrument was designed and used to gather data from students identified through the University of Namibia's Disability Unit. In this paper, disability shall be broadly defined to include visual impairment, hearing impairment; and physical impairment. The survey instrument was shared with the Disability Unit for scrutiny and then it was piloted, after which questions were revised. The instrument designed for lecturers and service providers were piloted.

The study used a qualitative research method based on the interpretive research paradigm to capture the changing reality of students with disabilities at UNAM,

in the context of access to information and services (Blanche and Durrheim, 2014).

A list of students with disabilities was obtained from the Disability Unit of the University of Namibia to establish eligible participants for the study. The Disability Unit staff members were also interviewed, as well as selected lecturing staff. Students with disabilities who were interviewed recommended the lecturers.

Based on the findings, the study formulated recommendations on how to improve the provision of information and services to students with disabilities at the University of Namibia.

Participation in this research was voluntary. Measures were taken to avoid harming participants in anyway, either physically or emotionally. Participants were provided with full information on the objectives of the research and told to feel free not to answer any questions they were not comfortable answering. The protection of the participant's identity was assured. The Human Rights & Documentation Centre worked closely with the Disability Unit to ensure that all students with disabilities were involved in the study.

*Sampling*
The sample size of the study consisted of 51 respondents from different faculties of the University of Namibia. These included 32 students with disabilities; 14 lecturers from different faculties who were suggested by students with disabilities; and 5 service providers.
The University of Namibia has 69 students with different disabilities across all campuses. Using cellphone numbers provided by the Disability Unit, requests for interview appointments were made directly to the students. Face to face interviews were conducted with students who studied at the main campus (Windhoek) and Khomasdal campus. Those from other campuses were interviewed telephonically and, in some cases, through their sign interpreters. This study interviewed 32 students with disabilities from all UNAM campuses, which amounted to 46% of the population.

Questionnaires were also sent to 35 lecturers who were identified by students from different campuses. Only 14 (41%) lecturers responded. Additionally, questionnaires were sent to 7 service providers identified by the researchers and 5 (71%) providers responded.

*Data analysis*

Qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews was tabulated under related themes, concepts and subheadings.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze data collected from closed questionnaires. The data was recorded in spreadsheets and statistical graphics for visual presentation of the results.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis were summarised consolidated and presented as the survey findings.

**Findings - Students Living with Disabilities**

*Section A - Demographic Information*

*Gender*

The study showed that there were more female students (20) than male (12), making up 63% and 37% of the student respondents respectively.

The age group of participants ranged from below 20 years to 36 years and above. The majority, 13 (45%), of respondents were students aged between 21-25 ; followed by 5(17%) below 20 years and 31-35 years respectively; and finally, 3 respondents did not indicate their age in the study as shown in table 2.

**Table: 2 Age group of students**
**N=32**

|           | N  | %     |
|-----------|----|-------|
| <= 20     | 5  | 17    |
| 21 – 25   | 13 | 45    |
| 26 – 30   | 3  | 10    |
| 31 – 35   | 5  | 17    |
| 36+       | 3  | 10    |
| Total     | 29 | 100.0 |

The study had 15 lecturers participating in the research, 7 (47%) males and 8(53%) female. The majority of respondents were between 35-39 years of age, but 1 lecturer did not indicate age group.as per table 3 below.

**Table: 3 Gender and Age Group of Lecturers N=15**

|  |  | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 7 | 47 |
|  | Female | 8 | 53 |
|  | Total | 15 | 100.0 |
| Age group | <= 34 | 2 | 14 |
|  | 35 - 39 | 4 | 30 |
|  | 40 - 44 | 2 | 14 |
|  | 45 - 49 | 2 | 14 |
|  | 50 - 54 | 2 | 14 |
|  | 55+ | 2 | 14 |
|  | Total | 14 | 100.0 |

The respondents (lecturers) were from five faculties: Agriculture; Economics and Management Science; Education; Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; and Law.

The study sought to find out students with disabilities' mode of study. The majority, 23 (74%), of the participants were enrolled on programmes on a fulltime basis, while 8 (26%) were registered as part time students on the distance mode, and one student did not indicate mode of study.

The University of Namibia service providers who are non-lecturers also took part in the survey. Five (5) service providers from different centres/faculties took part in the study. One faculty officer from the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; one senior student record officer from the registrar's office; one librarian who deals with disability issues; one faculty officer from the Faculty of Law; and one coordinator from the Disability Unit, Dean of student affairs office.

The services offered by these centers/units/faculties include:

| Unit/ Faculty/Centers | Responsibilities |
|---|---|
| • Faculty officer | Advise the Dean, Head of Department (HOD) and staff on all academic administration |
| • Senior Student Record Officer | Responsible for the preliminary selection of administration |
| • Faculty Administrator | Deals with student administration |
| • Disability Unit | Coordinate disability issues as well as advocacy and awareness at the University |
| • Librarian | Ensure needs of students with disabilities Are taken care of when entering the library |

**Year of Study**

The majority, 15 (47%), of respondents were in their second year of study, followed by first years with 8 (25%) respondents, 4 (12%) in third year and 5 (16%) in their fourth year. It seems that in 2015 there was a good campaign to admit students with disabilities at the University of Namibia.

**Figure 1: Percentages of type of impairment**



32
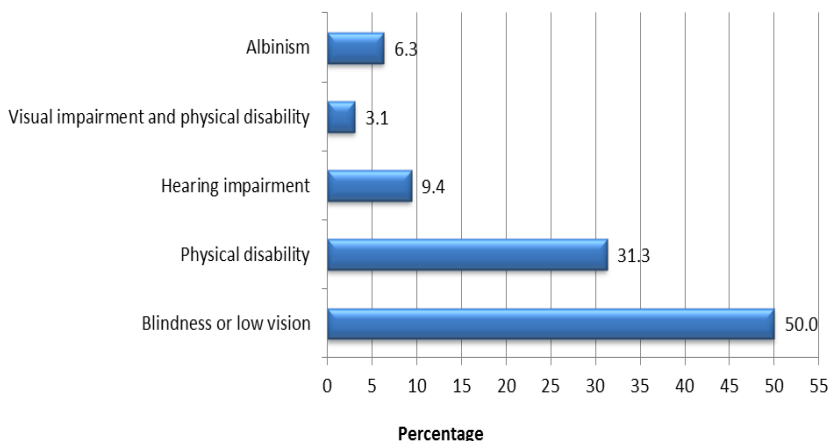
This study found that half of the respondents, 16 (50%), were blind or had low vision, followed by 10 (31%) who were physically challenged, while 3 (10%) had hearing impairment, 2 (6%) were students with Albinism and 1 (3%) had both visual and physical disability. These findings should give an indication to the university community that whatever information to be disseminated on campus should take cognizance of students who are blind or have low vision.

The study also asked a question to find out at which UNAM campus/centers respondents were located. The study revealed that the majority, 23 (71.9%), of respondents were at the Windhoek Main Campus and a few, 2 (6.3%), were found in Ogongo; Southern Campus and Khomasdal Campus; while the Rundu; Hifikepunye Pohamba and Oshakati Campuses each had 1 respondent.

The study wanted to find out which programmes/disciplines the students were pursuing.

**Table 4: Discipline or course registered for**

|  | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Secondary education | 1 | 3.1 |
| Diploma in Library & Information Science | 2 | 6.3 |
| Diploma in Accounting & Finance | 1 | 3.1 |
| Diploma in HIV/Aids Management & Counselling | 2 | 6.3 |
| Computer Science | 1 | 3.1 |
| Higher Diploma in Natural Resource Management | 2 | 6.3 |
| Diploma in Life Long Learning and Community Education | 1 | 3.1 |
| Diploma in Junior Primary Education | 1 | 3.1 |
| Majoring in languages English & Oshindonga | 1 | 3.1 |
| Bachelor of Accounting (honours) | 2 | 6.3 |
| Bachelor of Education | 7 | 21.9 |
| Bachelor of Arts | 2 | 6.3 |
| Bachelor of Education (Adult Education and Community Development) | 2 | 6.3 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bachelor of Law | 2 | 6.3 |
| Degree in Life Long Learning (Adult Education) | 1 | 3.1 |
| Bachelor of Social Work | 1 | 3.1 |
| Bachelor in Media Studies | 2 | 6.3 |
| Bachelor of Science (Population Studies) | 1 | 3.1 |
| Total | 32 | 100.0 |

The results showed that students were enrolled on different programmes at the university with the largest group of 7 (21.9%) studying for a BA Degree in Education. Unfortunately, there was no student doing Medicine or Engineering.

**Section B- Access to Information**

The study wanted to find out how students access information from the UNAM portal. The findings revealed that some students used more than one option. A significant number of respondents, 14 (33%), used personal computers but they did not indicate if they were using special software ; 8 (19%) used the university's library computes; while 6 (14%) used personal computers with speaking software (JAWS and NVDA); and 6 (14%) of the students had to ask for assistance from friends/colleagues if they wanted to access the UNAM portal; 4 (9%) used their cellphones which they indicated had talking features; 2(5%) used the Disability Unit computers; and 1(2%) used a laptop using the zoom text programme or MS Office Magnifier. It is distressing to see students with disabilities depending on other students to access information from the portal. Measures need to be taken to ensure that these students can access vital information from the portal independently.

The study also sought to find out how disabled students access the library to get academic materials. The findings are as follows:

**Table 5: How do you access academic materials in the library?**

| | Resp | Col R % |
|---|---|---|
| Go to the library and search for the books relevant to my course | 5 | 11.9 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I borrow books from the library (just like any other student) | 6 | 14.3 |
| Use the Internet to search for E-Books/ use OPAC | 2 | 4.8 |
| Use the computers to download relevant information for my studies | 1 | 2.4 |
| Ask the library assistant for information I want, e.g. from the Internet | 1 | 2.4 |
| Normally borrow books for an hour because I cannot carry books home | 1 | 2.4 |
| Search for the material in the library system | 1 | 2.4 |
| Ask a friend or librarian to find the material I want for me physically | 3 | |
| Go with an assistant to the library and they find the materials I request | 1 | 2.4 |
| I know what journalism books I need, so I get whatever material I need from the relevant section | 1 | 2.4 |
| Use OPAC to search for material I want and then pick the materials from the shelf | 1 | 2.4 |
| Don't use the library because it is a struggle to find someone to get the materials for me | 1 | 2.4 |
| Only visit the library when there is a friend to assist me; other than that I don't go at all | 1 | 2.4 |
| UNAM library is not user friendly, climbing stairs is exhausting and elevators do not work | 3 | |
| I use the public library because the UNAM library is inaccessible due to stairs and the lifts are restricted (locked) | 1 | 2.4 |
| Never use the library because they have no electronic material that is audio-typed or readable by Jaws software | 1 | 2.4 |
| Don't use materials from the library, only for extra reading | 1 | 2.4 |
| I don't go there at all because they don't provide braille material | 5 | 11.9 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I don't usually go there because they don't have books for my field of study | 1 | 2.4 |
| Always have to be accompanied by someone to pick material for me, that's why I don't use it at all | 1 | 2.4 |
| Library in Lüderitz is far from my home and there is no one to take me | 1 | 2.4 |
| Don't access library material as it's hard to find someone to read a print book to me, everyone is busy with own studies | 1 | 2.4 |
| Go with someone because I have to use the elevator; need them to press the floor number or push the wheelchair | 1 | 2.4 |
| It is a challenge, only use it sometimes because I can't walk properly | 1 | 2.4 |

The shocking results showed that only 11 (26%) participants could go to the library and borrow materials without a problem, but the rest had difficulties due to several reasons. Some, 5 (12%), said there were no braille materials; 3 (7%) could only access the library if they had somebody to help them with the lifts, e.g to press the buttons, and regarding the lifts, some mentioned that they did not work. Other respondents said they could not use the library because it was far; there was no speaking software available in the library; and they needed somebody to read for them.

Participants were also asked how they access the University Of Namibia Website.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Use my personal laptop | 18 | 43 |
| Use the library computer | 5 | 12 |
| Use computers at Disability Unit | 2 | 5 |
| Use my cell phone | 4 | 10 |
| Through my friends and colleagues because I am not computer literate/ Don't use it because there is no one available to direct me on how to use it | 7 | 17 |
| Not interested in the website | 1 | 2 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Use my personal laptop using zoom text programme or MS Office Magnifier | 1 | 2 |
| Hardly access the website because I don't have a laptop | 1 | 2 |
| Use my personal laptop with speaking software (NVDA) /JAWS | 2 | 5 |
| Trying to access it with the Jaws software, hopefully I will master it with time | 1 | 2 |

It is very encouraging to see a majority of respondents, 18 (43%), use their own laptops, but more needs to be done in order to empower students with disabilities with computer skills as 4 (10%) of respondents indicated that they were not computer literate.

The study wanted to find out what problems students with disabilities face when trying to access the UNAM portal. The results are as follows:

**Table 6: What are the barriers/problems you are facing in getting the information from the UNAM Portal?**

| | Resp | Col R % |
|---|---|---|
| The wireless/ Internet is (always) slow | 5 | |
| Don't access it because I don't know how to use the Internet | 1 | 3 |
| When the computers are occupied | 1 | 3 |
| If my friends/ colleagues who usually help me are busy, it becomes a challenge | 1 | 3 |
| Can't access the Internet all the time | 1 | 3 |
| Challenge to find someone to download notes for me; I am computer illiterate | 1 | 3 |
| There are only PowerPoint or PDF documents that are not readable by Jaws or screen readers | 2 | 6 |
| Get an abled person to assist me because I can't use the computer mouse like abled students | 4 | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Have not mastered the skill of using short cuts to get to the portal | 1 | 3 |
| Problem with password which is reset without informing me | 3 | |
| No problem | 15 | 43 |

At least 15 (43%) students responded positively by stating that they have no problem accessing the UNAM portal, but some indicated that they faced problems like needing somebody to help them. One indicated that their password was reset without their knowledge. Some respondents said they were computer illiterate and others indicated that they had problems with PowerPoint or PDF documents because are not readable by Jaws or screen readers.

Respondents were also asked what problems they faced in accessing the library. The following were the responses:

**Table 7: What are the barriers/problems you are facing in getting the information from the Library?**

| | Resp | Col R % |
|---|---|---|
| Difficult for me because of the stairs | 3 | 8 |
| Due to my disability I don't get enough information | 1 | 3 |
| I don't go to the library | 1 | 3 |
| Books or notes are not available in braille | 7 | 18 |
| Sometimes specific books are not available | 1 | 3 |
| Don't use library material because there are no electronic materials, only print materials | 1 | 3 |
| Unable to use the library when there is no one available to take me | 1 | 3 |
| No access to library because the elevators are not working | 2 | 5 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Library material is not available on audio or MP3, only in black and white | 2 | 5 |
| Challenge to find someone to read print material to me | 4 | 10 |
| Don't access the library, it is too far from my house | 1 | 3 |
| Not aware of library staff who deal with disabled students that have a problem | 1 | 3 |
| Don't find someone at the library basement to help us with the lift | 1 | 3 |
| Would be helpful for visually impaired students if the stairs at the library would be shaded to separate them visually | 1 | 3 |
| No problem | 13 | 32 |

Less than half of the respondents, 13 (32%), indicated that they had no problems accessing the library, but the rest faced various challenges to access the library. It is important to note that these are students from different campuses though the majority are from the Windhoek Campus.

Respondents were asked who they consult when they face a problem.

The study revealed that 21 (34%) consulted their friends/fellow students; 17 (28%) their lecturers; and 11(18%) consulted the Disability Unit; while 12 (20%) consulted other sources. The majority of the respondents depended on their colleagues and friends for their information needs. There are a few respondents who consulted the Disability Unit and the reason may be that it is only available in Windhoek meaning that those in the regions have no access to it.

**Section C: Access to Services**

Respondents were also asked if they were aware of any unit or department that assisted students with disabilities. The study found that 22 (69%) of the respondents were aware of the existence of the Disability Unit, while 10 (31%) were not aware of any unit or department that assisted students with disabilities.

The study also wanted the respondents to name the specific units/departments that provide services to students with disabilities. The majority, 21 (65%), mentioned the Disability Unit and 11 (35%) did not mention any unit. The reason might be that some students were located in other campuses and were not registered with the Disability Unit.

Respondents were asked how they knew about the Unit. The majority, 23 (85%), mentioned different sources as provided in the following table, while 4 (15%) were informed by their friends.

**Table 8: How they knew about the Unit**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| By myself because I became blind while studying at UNAM | 1 | 4.3 |
| During first year orientation | 2 | 8.7 |
| Faculty officer, Mr. van Wyk | 1 | 4.3 |
| Family members | 1 | 4.3 |
| From the radio | 2 | 8,7 |
| Head of the Disability Unit, Mrs. Kandji | 6 | 26 |
| Mr. Toivo, WHK Tech. High School | 1 | 4.3 |
| Notice board | 1 | 4.3 |
| OPM, I was one of those who formed the unit | 1 | 4.3 |
| Saara, assistant co-ordinator at the Disability Unit | 3 | 13 |
| Through a meeting at our school | 1 | 4.3 |
| UNAM website | 1 | 4.3 |
| Was told by Mr. Levi | 1 | 4.3 |

The study wanted to find out the type of services received by the respondents. The list of services is shown in the following table:

**Table 9:  Service/ support received from these unit(s) or department(s)**

| | Resp | Col R % |
|---|---|---|
| Provide counselling to students (social workers) | 4 | 9.1 |
| Accommodation | 2 | 4.5 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Transport from the gate to campus | 1 | 2.3 |
| Provide academic information | 1 | 2.3 |
| Scan and convert material into electronic format | 1 | 2.3 |
| Provide separate computer course with special programmes | 1 | 2.3 |
| Interpret graphs | 1 | 2.3 |
| Typing services | 1 | 2.3 |
| Escorts | 1 | 2.3 |
| When you are in pain they give a cream to help calm the pain | 1 | 2.3 |
| They always enlarge my question papers in large fonts/ script enlargement | 2 | 4.5 |
| Not yet received anything from them | 2 | 4.5 |
| Provide test and examination venue (for extra time) | 7 | 16 |
| Access to computers | 1 | 2.3 |
| Even personal problems | 1 | 2.3 |
| Study services | 1 | 2.3 |
| Internet services | 1 | 2.3 |
| Do my assignments there in case I cannot access the library | 1 | 2.3 |
| Assistance with UNAM registrations | 5 | 11.4 |
| Convert academic material to braille | 7 | 15.9 |
| Help with any problems experienced by disabled students | 1 | 2.3 |
| Give important notices, e.g. about meetings | 1 | 2.3 |

The study wanted to find out how easy it was to access services on campus. The majority, 20 (52%), indicated that it was difficult and 11 (48%) indicated that it was easy. These findings show that it is not easy for students with disabilities to access services on campus.

The respondents were asked if they sometimes needed information to cope with their challenges in life and the majority, 21 (70%), said yes, while 9 (30%) indicated no and 2 did not indicate anything.

The respondents were asked to explain their rating on access to services. Those who rated easy to access had the following to say:

**Table 10: Easy to Access**

| | |
|---|---|
| I can do whatever an abled (normal) person can do | 1 |
| It is fast and user friendly, for example, accessing the portal | 1 |
| Always get assistance from my friends | 1 |
| The Disability Unit always enlarges the font of my question papers for me to read | 1 |
| Disability Unit assists if I have a problem | 2 |
| It's very easy because I just need to log in on the UNAM Portal to have access to anything I want, e.g. notes | 1 |
| Once you sign up with the Disability Unit, getting access to information is easy as you just have to walk there | 1 |
| They provide us with information regarding our course | 1 |
| Disability Unit coordinators are always available when needed, their phones are always on | 1 |
| In case of emergency, UNAM provides transport to main campus in order to talk to the coordinators personally | 1 |
| It's easy for me because I write examinations with other students and don't have to go through procedures to get a venue | 1 |
| I get extra time if I don't finish writing my examinations on time together with the other students | 1 |
| I have not come across a problem yet | 1 |
| Total | 14 |

**Table 11: The respondents who rated 'difficult to access' services had the following to say**

| | |
|---|---|
| More could be done for disabled students, such as separate classrooms, transport around campus etc. | 1 |
| Because of my hearing impairment, I have problems following lectures and getting support from lecturers | 1 |
| Students with visual & physical impairments face more challenges as they are dependent on assistance to access services | 1 |
| Fear of judgement by peers hinders the provision of a service if one is not comfortable with one's disability | 1 |
| Question competence of braille examination markers as answers given in the examination do not correspond to final mark | 1 |
| Due to inaccessible lecture venues at Block X and Y (elevators out of order), I study by myself but fail academically | 1 |
| Students with disabilities are a minority that are not always considered when providing services such as notice boards | 1 |
| Important notices on notice boards on campus/ on lecturers office doors are not accessible to the visually impaired | 1 |
| Inclusive education disadvantages the visually impaired who receive notes that are not in braille or readable by Jaws | 2 |
| Some lecturers are insensitive to the needs of visually impaired students, e.g. display notes using a projector | 1 |
| We are not aware of the services we are supposed to get from the DU, only found out by chance | 1 |
| Fellow students don't help to get library books on the shelves that I can't reach | 1 |
| I am always late for class because the elevator does not work and I have to use the stairs | 2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| I don't have a hearing aid so it's difficult for me to access some services | 1 |
| I don't get enough time to finish writing my tests | 1 |
| Difficult to access classes/ other services because many of the campus buildings have stairs | 2 |
| At the library I don't get information on time because I have to use the stairs | 1 |
| Need free access to the gym because without exercise my academic performance gets affected | 1 |
| Some lecturers are rude when I ask for a soft copy of the notes; others are helpful | 1 |
| Sometimes experience problems in accessing material at CES because the staff refuse to give us books | 1 |
| Difficult to access the services provided because of dependence on specific person to assist who is not always available | 1 |
| Dependency of assistance from others is a problem; sometimes have to pay someone to help me | 1 |
| UNAM portal and website are not user friendly for the visually impaired; need assistance from someone to access these | 1 |
| Important notices on notice boards on campus/ on lecturers office doors are not accessible to visually impaired | 1 |
| Difficulties in editing our assignments | 1 |

The study wanted to find out if the respondents experienced problems in accessing services. The findings showed that 17 (61%) of the respondents did experience problems while 10 (35%) did not experience any problems and 1 (4%) respondent experienced problems sometimes. There are 4 respondents who did not respond to this question.

A follow up question was asked to find out how respondents solve their problem(s). The responses were provided as follows:

**Table 12: If 'Yes' or 'Sometimes', what did you do to solve the problem(s)?**

|  | Resp |
|---|---|
| I always to speak to other students to ask for assistance | 1 |
| I always send someone to help me, e.g. borrow books for me from the library | 1 |
| Complained to the SRC about fixing the elevators and providing free access to the gym | 1 |
| I always report the problems to the Disability Unit | 1 |
| Access the portal using the computers at the Disability Unit or use my cell phone | 1 |
| Employ more people that can assist with braille notes as this service is very slow | 1 |
| I approached the Student's Council but they are not familiar with the Disability Unit | 1 |
| I have spoken to someone about the cars that block the pathways for wheel chairs; she is busy finding a solution | 1 |
| In order to use the lifts at the library, I would ask a fellow student to tell the staff to open the door to the lifts | 1 |
| As a distance student, it is a process to get the key to the lifts at the library | 1 |
| I have to rely on volunteers (who are not always available) from the DU to escort me to different campus places | 1 |
| I have done nothing to solve the problem of unavailable volunteers to escort me | 1 |
| Nothing was done about the problem I reported to the DU about receiving notes late & finding someone to read them to me | 1 |
| Reported my hearing problems with lectures to DU coordinators who said they would talk to the lecturers; nothing happened | 1 |
| Consulted lecturers, faculty deans, ODS about my academic failure due to inability to attend classes, but there was no solution | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| I am sure the DU is aware of the challenges faced by students with disabilities but nothing is being done | 1 |
| I spoke to the Khomasdal SRC and now I get extra writing time during exams due to my physical disability of my arm | 1 |
| I did not do anything about the de-brailling of examination answer sheets; it is just a thought I always had | 1 |

The study wanted to find out if the students needed additional information to cope with their challenges. The majority, 21 (65%), indicated that yes, they need additional information and 9 (28%) indicated that no, they did not, and 2 respondents did not indicate anything.

The respondents were asked to give the reasons why they needed additional information. The following where the responses:

**Table 13: If yes, for what reasons do you need more information?**

| | Resp |
|---|---|
| More information about the DU and the services offered/ provided for us | 2 |
| Information to be aware/ updated with what is going on around the world | 4 |
| Information about where to get previous question papers | 1 |
| Information on how to keep healthy (carry too heavy things like laptop which doctor forbade) | 1 |
| Information on how to complete my school work | 1 |
| Need more information in order to catch up with my studies because I only depend on listening | 1 |
| More information on how to use computers, because every time I have to ask someone to help me | 1 |
| What procedures to follow for the handing in of late assignments due to illness & inability to see doctor | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Information on who to talk to about my personal life and how to deal with the stigma of being disabled | 2 |
| Information (books) and counselling on how to deal with depression and loneliness as a result my disability | 3 |
| Information related to my disability and how I can cope with it on a daily basis | 3 |
| Learn about ways to lead a social life apart from academics as a disabled student, e.g. joining a sports club | 1 |
| Need more information on how to study and pass on my own because my hearing impairment affects my grades | 1 |
| I need to know who the right person is to talk to about my struggle with my studies; so far nobody could help | 1 |
| Information on how other visually impaired people live their lives in order to motivate me to keep moving forward in life | 1 |
| Need assistance in being confident about myself, e.g. take part in campus activities without fear of what other students think or say | 1 |
| Information on assignments as I only rely on study guides and library material my friends get for me | 1 |
| Need vocabulary and spelling lessons in braille to improve my English | 1 |

**Suggested ways to improve access to information by respondents**

When respondents were asked for suggestions on how to improve access to information for disabled students, a wide range of suggestions were made but there was no clear consensus. The most popular suggestions made only by three (3) respondents each were the following i) library materials should be available in braille and audio format ii) an increase in the number of computers in the library with the talking software JAWS. Slightly fewer respondents, at two (2) each, suggested as follow i) UNAM should provide a platform where disabled students can obtain important information ii) lecturers should provide soft copies of lecture notes to students who have visual impairment iii) SWD should have security key to the library basement so they can use the lifts in the library iii) DU and library should provide more computers. There was a lengthy list of suggestions, made by one respondent each, touching on a wide range of issues,

including: notice boards should have a device to read all announcements for blind students, UNAM website should be improved to make it disability students friendly, UNAM staff members should be aware of the needs of SWD, employ staff with disabilities who can ensure that SWD are helped more efficiently, provide more computers for SWD, more reading materials, and more laptops for SWD, sign language

Lastly, respondents were asked to suggest how access to services for students with disabilities can be improved. The following were their suggestions:

**Table 14: Suggestions on how access to services for students with disabilities can be improved**

|  | Resp |
|---|---|
| Investigate whether all students with disabilities receive the right service at the right time | 1 |
| Solve the parking problems, i.e. cars block the special pathways for SWD such as the entrance to the study centre, preventing the students from accessing the services | 2 |
| Repair the elevators on campus so SWD (especially those who are wheel chair bound) can access all floors (and do not have to be carried with the risk of falling) | 4 |
| Student assistants at the DU should be prevented from using computers reserved for SWD | 1 |
| When ordering material, UNAM should strive to cater for every type of disability | 1 |
| Provide more assistants who can help us access services that we cannot access on our own | 2 |
| UNAM should build wheelchair friendly buildings | 1 |
| Extend the interval between classes because 5 minutes is not enough for me to walk from the computer centre to science block | 1 |
| Review examination time table to include enough resting and revision time between examinations for SWD (physical disabilities) | 1 |
| Classes for visually impaired should be on the lowest floor | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| UNAM should employ the lecturers who are aware of the needs of blind students and can provide what they need | 1 |
| Employ more staff at the DU; currently it is understaffed and not every student is assisted on time | 3 |
| In future, UNAM should consider the fact that the taxi ranks are far from the hostel; have to compensate (pay) security guards to walk us to our rooms | 1 |
| Provide separate bathrooms for SWD at the hostel | 1 |
| Create/ promote awareness of SWD needs amongst other students, e.g. visually impaired to sit in front row | 1 |
| The DU should extend their opening hours to give SWD enough time to complete their study work | 1 |
| The DU should have full time assistants | 1 |
| Have local experts that repair the photocopy machine because currently we have to wait for experts from South Africa | 1 |
| DU should deliver services on time so that SWD can benefit from these | 1 |
| Consultations by faculty (officers) with SWD on an individual basis will improve service delivery as awareness of the needs of SWB can be established and fostered | 1 |
| To prevent abuse of lifts by other students, management could issue access cards for SWD only | 1 |
| SWD should be able to use online payment facilities to avoid stressful queuing, especially for students with physical disabilities | 1 |
| If the elevator problem is not attended to, SWD should pay less tuition and service fees as the service they pay for is not provided | 1 |
| Provide private transport for physically disabled student to move around campus (because not every student can afford a wheel chair) | 1 |
| Provide private transport for other SWD to move around campus as, for example, there is not always someone to guide visually impaired students | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Living with disability is costly ; therefore consider reducing service costs, e.g. reduce the cost of enlarged printing for visually impaired | 1 |
| SWD should be allowed to go directly to offices or departments without having to queue like other students | 1 |
| Instead of having to wait for someone, SWD should be handed the keys to the resource rooms at the DU so that they can complete their study work on time | 1 |
| Wheel chair pathways should be provided for students with physical disabilities for them to be able to access the library or study centre | 1 |
| Entrances to classes, study areas and other resource centres should be made disability friendly to make the study environment for SWD more comfortable | 1 |
| UNAM should consider establishing a DU at Khomasdal Campus to enable immediate provision of services | 2 |
| UNAM should create a platform where SWD are made aware of the type of services available and the person responsible for providing them | 1 |
| Improve awareness of services for SWD, e.g., visually impaired students should be aware of who to approach in the library to help them operate the computers | 1 |
| Rather than getting discouraged from using the library and not doing their study work, SWD should be made aware of the services the library offers | 1 |
| In order to provide efficient services for SWD, lecturers and staff members should have an understanding of what disability is, what a disabled person goes through | 1 |
| UNAM should provide us with transport, especially from the taxi rank because it is far | 1 |
| Extend the size of the room (Disability Unit on main campus) | 1 |
| No suggestions | 2 |

**Discussion**

Access to information is very important, especially at the tertiary level, in order for students to fulfill their work. The study found that students with vision impairment don not have enough material to support their academic work. This includes braille and audio materials. Some of the students have to depend on their friends/colleagues to assist them to read books or borrow materials from the library.

A number of challenges were indicated by respondents such as the lack of elevators to access the library, and computer illiteracy among students with disabilities. Additionally, the lack of a ramp to access the library is a thorn in the flesh as students using wheel chairs struggle to access the library because of the stairs, as some respondents commented the "*UNAM library is not user friendly, climbing stairs is exhausting and elevators don't work*"

Important information is mostly on the UNAM portal, which includes timetables; class notes; academic reports and notices. Unfortunately, vision impaired students face problems in accessing this information because there is no software, which can read for them. In addition, a number of students with disabilities are not computer literate or have problems with passwords as indicated by one student who mentioned a '*problem with password which is reset without informing me'*.

The respondents have to depend on the Disability Unit to transcribe guidebooks and notes to the right format. The Disability Unit has a limited number of staff members and lacks equipment, which can cause delays in service delivery. As it was recommended, '*The staff component at the disability unit should be seriously revisited and should be well resourced'*.

In addition, some lecturers put their notes in power point format and refuse to assist the students with the soft copies and others use the UNAM portal and Facebook groups. A study by Seyama et al (2014) had similar findings where lecture notes were presented on PowerPoint, which JAWS software cannot read.

Namibia has a legal framework in place, which promotes and protects the rights of people with disabilities including access to information and services. For example, Namibia is party to the United Nations Convention on People with Disabilities, which aims at promoting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities. It is also a party to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which provides that the disabled shall be entitled to special measures of

protection. Furthermore, Article 10 of the Namibian Constitution promotes equality and non-discrimination.

Students living with a disability have the right to information in order to access quality education like abled students. Schur et al (2013) noted that quality education is important to enable people to get better jobs, higher income and engage in political participation which leads to national development.

Access to services was found to be a problematic issue due to the following: unfriendly buildings; too many stairs or lack of elevators; insensitive lecturers; and lack of appropriate devices. For example, some respondents stated:

- *Due to inaccessible lecture venues at Block X and Y, I study ]by] myself but failed academically'.*

- *Some lecturers are rude when asked for a soft copy, they refuse'.*

- *Sometimes, people park their cars and block the pathways for students with disabilities such as the entrance to classrooms or the study centre becomes a problem.*

Some lecturers who took part in the survey indicated that lecturers need to be informed about students with disabilities and taught how to deal with students with these students.

**Recommendations**

Below are some of the recommendations:

- When UNAM is building, the university should consider students with different disabilities.

- UNAM should provide transport for students with disabilities to move around campus because not everybody can afford a wheel chair.

- One lecturer recommended that students with disabilities need counselling and life skills in relation to their impairments

Olivier's Social Model of disability (1996 & 2004) assumes that disability is a condition that is created socially. Features of the social environment, people's negative attitude and an un-supportive physical environment cause the barriers of access for people with disabilities. Furthermore, the UN Convention on

People with Disabilities requires member states to develop an inclusive education system at all levels by providing reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements to ensure that persons with disabilities are provided with effective individualized support measures to maximize their academic and social development.

## Conclusion

Improving access to information and services for students with disabilities is a moral obligation of the university in order to ensure quality and inclusive education in Namibia, which leads to achievement of national development goals.

Provision of relevant materials, specialized services, and friendly buildings for students with disabilities is a fundamental human right. UNAM has worked hard to provide some facilities for students with special requirements but more needs to be done to achieve quality and inclusive education in Namibia.

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