



Exploring the influence of external factors on the academic success of students with disabilities at an Eastern Cape university

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates external factors that influence the academic success of students with disabilities (SWDs) at University A in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Using a qualitative phenomenological case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 SWDs across multiple campuses. Findings show that external support systems, particularly family, peers, and faculty, play a vital role in enhancing academic engagement and persistence. However, significant institutional barriers hinder progress, including limited accessibility, inadequate accommodations, and deficiencies within the Disability Support Unit. Participants also reported infrastructural challenges, such as inaccessible buildings and transportation, reflecting broader gaps in inclusive infrastructure. Guided by the Social Model of Disability, the study highlights persistent policy implementation gaps despite existing frameworks, especially in resource-constrained environments. The findings underscore the need to strengthen disability policies, improve faculty training, and invest in accessible campus facilities. Addressing these systemic barriers is essential to ensure equitable learning opportunities and to foster academic success for SWDs in higher education. State the contribution of this study to scholarship.

Keywords: Social Model of Disability, External Support Systems, Institutional Barriers, Inclusive Infrastructure, Policy Implementation Gaps, Students with Disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Despite progress towards advancing accessibility and inclusive higher education, students with disabilities still face external barriers that hinder academic success. Factors such as inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate support services, and negative societal attitudes continue to affect their learning experiences and participation.¹ Furthermore, gaining access to university alone is insufficient, as students must also develop the graduate attributes required for their programmes. Research further

¹ Louise Vincent and Desire Chiwandire, "Funding and Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions for Students with Disabilities," *African Journal of Disability* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1–12; De Los Santos, Stephanie Bain, and Marie-Anne Mundy, "Determining Academic Success in Students with Disabilities in Higher Education," *International Journal of Higher Education* 8, no. 2 (2019): 16–38.

shows that students with disabilities experience higher dropout rates and often take longer to complete their studies compared to their peers.²

There is a gap in research on the external factors that affect the academic success of students with disabilities (SWDs), particularly at University A. This study aims to explore these influences. The South African government is committed to the National Development Plan (Vision 2030), which aims to ensure that 2% of people with disabilities obtain relevant qualifications for employment.³ Efforts include improving accessibility, providing financial support, and addressing social inequality in higher education.⁴ The research goal of this study is to analyse how external factors impact the academic achievement of students with disabilities at University A.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Access to education is a recognised human right for persons with disabilities. Globally, more than one billion people live with disabilities, representing approximately 15% of the world's population, while Africa accounts for an estimated 300 million persons with disabilities.⁵ Despite efforts to include them, students with disabilities continue to face external factors that influence their academic success. Research shows that these factors originate from support systems and environments outside the individual.⁶ Such factors may function as enablers that promote inclusion and achievement or barriers that hinder participation and academic success.⁷

The Positive External Factors for Academic Success

Studies reviewed by Morina and Biagiotti revealed that various stakeholders in the academic lives of students with disabilities play supportive roles in facilitating their progress.⁸ These stakeholders, according to Morina and Biagiotti, include family, various university services, and members of the university community, such as disability offices, staff, faculty, and peers.

The Role of Family and Friends

Support from family and friends plays a significant role in the academic success of students with disabilities.⁹ Globally, research indicates that emotional, social, and practical support from families positively contributes to students' persistence and achievement in higher education.¹⁰ In the United States, students with disabilities often report strong family support, which enhances their ability to succeed academically.¹¹ The Americans with Disabilities Act further emphasises the importance of collaborative support involving educational institutions and families.¹² In developing countries, however, family support may be limited by poverty, cultural beliefs and limited awareness of disability-related educational needs.¹³ Parents may prioritise basic survival needs over educational aspirations, reducing the educational and logistical support available to students with disabilities. Consequently, educational policies should focus not only on institutional support but also on empowering families through awareness and outreach programmes.¹⁴ In South Africa, inclusive education policies have

² J. Rubmann, N Netz, and M Lörz, "Dropout Rates among Students with Disabilities," *Higher Education* 87, no. 2 (2024): 345–62.

³ National Planning Commission, *Your Guide to the National Development Plan 2030*, 2013.

⁴ L. Ntombana, N Mndende, and N Mkuzo, "Decolonizing Religious Education in Institutions of Learning: A Backer for the African" *Traditional Religion*, 2018.

⁵ J. Lammens, E Spinoy, and J Willems, "Disability Statistics in Africa," *African Health Sciences*, 23, no. 4 (2023): 567–85.

⁶ Akinyi Christine Osa, "Differentiated Instruction in Second Language Teaching: Educators' Perspectives, Practices and Challenges in Rwanda" (Unicaf University in Zambia. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 2024).

⁷ F. Famolu, "Negative External Factors as Barriers to Inclusion," *Journal of Inclusive Education* 27, no.3 (2023): 210–28.

⁸ Anabel Morina and Gilda Biagiotti, "Academic Success Factors in University Students with Disabilities: A Systematic Review," *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 37, no. 5 (2022): 729–46.

⁹ Gilda Biagiotti and Anabel Morina, "Why, Where and What to Study? Exploring the University Choices of Italian and Spanish Graduates with Disabilities," *British Journal of Special Education* 52, no. 1 (2025): 49–57.

¹⁰ Y. Zhang et al., "Family and Friend Support across Contexts," *Comparative Education* 61, no. 1 (2025): 67–85.

¹¹ Meqbel M Aliedan et al., "Evaluating the Role of University Disability Service Support, Family Support, and Friends' Support in Predicting the Quality of Life among Disabled Students in Higher Education: Physical Self-Esteem as a Mediator," *Journal of Disability Research* 2, no. 3 (2023): 48–59.

¹² K. Phillippe, "Americans with Disabilities Act and Family Collaboration," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 35, no.1(2024):67–85.

¹³ P. Deku, "Cultural Beliefs and Education of Disabled Children in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Journal of Disability* 13,(2024):1–12.

¹⁴ B. Tekola et al., *Logistical Support for Disabled Children's Education*, vol. 23 (BMC Public Health, 2023).

improved since apartheid, yet challenges remain. Research indicates that stronger family engagement can improve academic success, although persistent social inequalities continue to weaken support systems for many students with disabilities.¹⁵

The Role of Disability Support Services

The influence of Disability Support Services (DSS) on the academic success of students with disabilities in higher education institutions varies significantly in developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries. In developed countries, such as in North America and Western Europe, DSS provides a structured framework to facilitate the academic experience of students with disabilities. Research suggests that timely access to accommodations, such as extra time on tests or note-taking assistance, is crucial for enhancing academic outcomes.

Fichten et al. posit that when students use accommodations, their academic retention improves markedly, providing a path for greater integration into the university environment.¹⁶ Additionally, institutional supports that prioritise early intervention are well-documented to enhance college success and retention rates for students with disabilities, reflecting a mature understanding of inclusive education practices in these regions.¹⁷

In contrast, developing countries face substantial challenges that hinder the effectiveness of DSS. Kumi-Yeboah et al. point out that many educational institutions lack the necessary infrastructure and trained personnel to implement effective DSS.¹⁸ As a result, students in these environments are not only deprived of necessary support but also face compounded barriers stemming from societal stigma and a lack of policy frameworks to ensure their academic success.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the situation is further complicated by socio-economic factors and infrastructural deficiencies. Access to technology and adequate learning materials remains a critical barrier, highlighting the digital divide that prevents equitable access to education, particularly for marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities.¹⁹ This context emphasises the urgent need for comprehensive educational reforms and targeted policies that address both infrastructural and attitudinal barriers to improve DSS effectiveness.²⁰

In particular, in the South African context, despite the legal frameworks intended to support students with disabilities, the implementation of these policies often falls short. Research indicates that students with disabilities often encounter significant physical and academic barriers within universities, such as insufficient accessibility features in campus infrastructure and a lack of targeted support services.²¹ Furthermore, studies have shown that the presence of mental health services is also crucial to determining students' academic success. O'Shea et al. advocate for improved campus counselling services that can cater to students with diverse needs.²²

The Role of Staff and Faculty Support

The review of studies by Moriana and Biagiotti on external factors affecting academic success in students with disabilities discovered that faculty members also play a crucial role in this process of inclusion.

The support provided by faculty and staff in higher education institutions plays a crucial role in influencing the academic success of students with disabilities. In developed countries, research indicates that faculty training and institutional commitment to inclusive practices are vital to

¹⁵ M Daly-Cano et al., "Familial Support and Inequities in South African Higher Education," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 17, no. 1 (2024): 78–95.

¹⁶ C. Fichten et al., "Accommodations and Retention of Students with Disabilities," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 52, no. 1 (2022): 34–52.

¹⁷ S Ndlovu and A Woldegiorgis, "Early Intervention Supports in Higher Education," *African Journal of Higher Education* 20, no. 1 (2023): 45–63.

¹⁸ A Kumi-Yeboah, Y. Kim, and R Armah, "Societal Biases and Family Support in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Journal of Educational Development* 98, no. Article 102745 (2023).

¹⁹ A Kumi-Yeboah and Y Kim, "Societal Biases and Family Support in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Journal of Educational Development*, 98, Article 102745, 2023.

²⁰ A Kaur and P Salian, "ICT Interventions for Disability Support," *Technology in Education* 28, no. 1 (2025): 56–74.

²¹ P. Govender, "Physical Barriers in South African Universities," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 35, no.1(2024):45–63.

²² A O'Shea, P Koshy, and C Drane, "Mental Health Services on Campus," *Journal of Student Wellbeing* 12, no. 1 (2021): 56–74.

supporting the academic achievement of these students. In Australia, the enactment of the Disability Standards for Education has required educational providers to implement reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities, thereby fostering a more inclusive environment that improves academic performance.²³

In African countries, support from staff and faculty is multifaceted, often influenced by sociocultural attitudes towards disability and the prevailing educational policies. Many African universities lack well-defined policies for inclusive education, resulting in ineffective support mechanisms for students with disabilities.²⁴ A study conducted on South African universities recommends the need for comprehensive training programmes for faculty to develop their competencies in supporting students with disabilities.²⁵ The recommendation for universal design in learning environments and thorough staff training is highlighted as essential in ensuring equitable access to education for students with disabilities.²⁶

In South Africa, there is an emerging need for universities to establish systematic support structures that facilitate engagement between disabled students and faculty, ensuring that academic staff are adequately equipped to assist students with disabilities.²⁷

The Role of Peer Support

Moriana and Biagotti identified peers as another factor contributing to achievement, both in the academic and social spheres. The influence of peer support on the academic success of students with disabilities in higher education is a multifaceted issue that spans various contexts, from well-developed countries to those in the developing world, including Sub-Saharan African nations. Supportive peer interactions are significantly correlated with the academic achievements of students with disabilities, promoting inclusivity and participation in the learning environment.²⁸ Specifically, the presence of peer mentoring programmes in these institutions has been shown to foster academic support and emotional resilience, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation.²⁹

Negative perceptions of disabilities can create barriers to the formation of supportive peer relationships, which are vital for student academic journeys.³⁰ Conversely, when institutions actively encourage and facilitate peer networking and mentorship among students with disabilities, positive academic outcomes follow, indicating that both institutional advocacy and peer support are vital for academic achievement.³¹

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the need for enhanced peer support systems becomes even more pronounced. The unique challenges faced by students with disabilities, such as societal stigma and infrastructural inadequacies, underscore the importance of peer networks in their educational experience.³²

Research in South Africa highlights that students with disabilities who engage with their peers in structured mentorship initiatives report higher levels of confidence and educational attainment, highlighting that peer interactions can buffer against the psychological impacts of academic stress and improve overall academic achievement.³³ Therefore, while peer support is universally relevant, its

²³ M. Edwards, "Faculty Training for Inclusive Education in Australia," *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 39, no. 1 (2023): 56–74.

²⁴ I Abdullahi, "Inclusive Education Policies in African Universities: Challenges and Prospects," *African Journal of Higher Education* 19, no. 4 (2023): 112–30.

²⁵ C Ndebele and M Gadisi, "Faculty Training for Supporting Students with Disabilities," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 36, no. 4 (2022): 178–95.

²⁶ Ndebele and Gadisi, "Faculty Training for Supporting Students with Disabilities."

²⁷ N Mntambo et al., "Family Support in South African Higher Education," *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no.3(2021):412–30.

²⁸ Y Yao, X Wu, and J Teng, "Peer Mentoring Programmes and Isolation," *Higher Education* 87, no. 4 (2024): 945–62.

²⁹ Marisa Maia, Paula Santos, and Marilyn Espe-Sherwind, "Peer Mentoring Circles in Higher Education: Perceptions of Their Members with and without Disability and Program Proposal," *Frontiers in Education* 9 (May 10, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1362752>.

³⁰ M Popovska et al., "Adapted Study Programmes in South Asia," *Asia Pacific Education Review* 23, no. 3 (2022): 456–73.

³¹ A Cardinot and A Flynn, "Peer Networking and Academic Outcomes for Students with Disabilities," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 23(2), 145–160. (2022).

³² L. Adegbeyega, F Famolu, and A Yusuf, "External Factors Influencing Academic Success of Students with Disabilities," *African Journal of Education* 28, no. 3 (n.d.): 78–95.

³³ H Ibrahim et al., "Peer Interactions and Academic Stress," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 28, no. 3 (2024): 345–62.

manifestations and impacts can vary significantly in different educational contexts and cultural landscapes.

The Role of Provision of Appropriate and Reasonable Academic Accommodations

Institutions of higher learning in well-developed countries often demonstrate a commitment to providing academic accommodations for students with disabilities by integrating inclusive policies within their educational frameworks. These policies are influenced by global best practices and robust legal frameworks that mandate accessibility and equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their disabilities.

In Sub-Saharan countries, higher education institutions are just beginning to navigate the complexities of inclusivity for students with disabilities. In this region, inclusive education practices are often underrepresented, with a significant lack of awareness about disability rights and advocacy in educational settings.³⁴ Moreover, qualitative reviews emphasise the necessity of stakeholder engagement in developing inclusive educational frameworks to ensure that institutions cater to the specific needs of students with disabilities, thereby fostering a more supportive environment.³⁵

In South Africa, despite legislative frameworks such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, the implementation of inclusive policies in higher education remains inconsistent.

The Role of Proper Infrastructure for Accessible Campuses

Providing adequate infrastructure for accessible campuses in institutions of higher learning is a critical factor in the academic achievement of students with disabilities. In developed countries, universities have developed policies designed to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities. Modern classrooms with accessible entrances and seating arrangements are available. The implementation of universal design principles in California aims to ensure that classrooms effectively accommodate all students, thereby reducing barriers to their learning environments. This highlights the crucial role of strategic planning and the design of physical spaces in promoting inclusivity within educational institutions.³⁶

Many examination spaces lack necessary adjustments, such as provisions for extra time or specialised equipment, which can hinder a student's ability to effectively demonstrate their knowledge during assessments.³⁷

Additionally, insufficient air conditioning and other environmental controls in classrooms can detract from the learning experience, especially in hot climates where proper ventilation is crucial.³⁸ These obstacles can contribute to increased absenteeism and reduced academic performance, which ultimately affects retention rates among students with disabilities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the Social Model of Disability, which emphasises that disability is shaped by societal and environmental barriers rather than individual impairments. This contrasts with the Medical Model, which locates disability within the individual. In higher education, barriers such as inaccessible learning environments, inadequate staff training and curriculum misalignment continue to hinder the academic success of students with disabilities, particularly in developing countries where resources are limited.³⁹

³⁴ A Meyer, "Disability Rights Advocacy in Higher Education," *Journal of Human Rights Education* 16, no.1(2024): 67–85.

³⁵ V. Donnelly, "Stakeholder Engagement in Inclusive Education Frameworks," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 28, no. 2 (2024): 145–62.

³⁶ A Sandoval Gomez and M McKee, "Universal Design in California Classrooms," *Journal of Architectural Education* 89, no. 107 (2020): 74–1.

³⁷ S Ndlovu, "Examination Spaces for Students with Disabilities," *Journal of Assessment in Higher Education* 14, no. 2 (2023): 89–107.

³⁸ D Hölscher and V Bozalek, "Environmental Controls in South African Classrooms," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 6 (2020): 210–28.

³⁹ A Riswari et al., "Systemic Changes in Higher Education Inclusion," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 26, no. 7 (2022): 678–95; O. Akande, "Inclusive Practices in Higher Education: A Global Perspective," 2023.

In developed countries, institutions are increasingly adopting inclusive practices aligned with the Social Model of Disability. These include tailored support services, flexible learning opportunities, and stronger academic support systems aimed at improving student success and participation.⁴⁰ In contrast, many developing countries in Africa still face challenges related to limited awareness of disability rights and inadequate institutional support. Consequently, students with disabilities often experience exclusion and marginalisation, negatively affecting their academic achievement and sense of belonging.⁴¹

In South Africa, the Social Model of Disability has increasingly informed inclusive education policies and practices. Research suggests that inclusive programmes not only enhance the academic performance of students with disabilities but also foster social cohesion and community among all students.⁴² However, disparities in implementation remain across institutions due to differences in resources and institutional capacity. Therefore, ongoing research and policy intervention are necessary to strengthen inclusive practices in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which provided a lens for learning about non-quantifiable phenomena, such as people's experiences of disabilities.⁴³ Thus, the world was perceived from the participants' point of view; the fundamental qualitative research theme was a phenomenological one, where the participants' perspective was the empirical point of departure, which was focused on real-life people.⁴⁴

The study used a case study research design that provided an in-depth study of University A in its current context.⁴⁵ A purposive sampling method was employed, consisting of 15 participants selected as follows: 10 females and 5 males, with two males from the Mthatha and Buffalo City sites, and one male from the Komani site. The females are as follows: Two from Mthatha, four from Ibika, and one from the Komani site. The sample sizes are tabulated below.

Table 1: Samples in this Study

Name of Campus	Gender of Participant	Type of disability
Buffalo City	Participant One = Male	Visual impairment
	Participant Two = Male	Physical impairment: one arm has no hand; the arm that has the hand also has a broken shoulder, and the hand only has 3 fingers; has a chronic illness of fatigue
Butterworth	Participant One = Female	Visual impairment; Multiple chronic illnesses: heart problem, irregular heartbeat leading to insomnia, anaemia, and momentary fatigue
	Participant Two = Female	Physical disability: One leg is shorter, leading to serious limping
	Participant Three = Female	Physical impairment: wheelchair bound; muscular dystrophy; chronic illness of muscular stiffness and pain; myasthenia gravis that affects the spine and breathing rhythm, leading to asthma

⁴⁰ A Muzakki, F Rohman, and E Rosyidah, "Tailored Support Services in Inclusive Higher Education," *Journal of Inclusive Education* 28, no. 4 (2024): 567–85.

⁴¹ A Shutaleva et al., "Culture of Non-Inclusion in Higher Education," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 5 (2023): 489.

⁴² N Mantlow et al., "Enablers for Academic Success," *Higher Education* 89, no. 1 (2025): 112–30.

⁴³ T Surawy-Stepney et al., "Qualitative Approaches to Non-Quantifiable Phenomena," *British Journal of Health Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2023): 345–62.

⁴⁴ I Sholokhova, E Vdovina, and S Kirsanova, "Phenomenological Approach in Qualitative Research: Understanding Participants' Lived Experiences," *Qualitative Research in Education* 11, no. 3 (2022): 210–28.

⁴⁵ Arya Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research: Key Attributes and Navigating the Conundrums in Its Application," *Sociological Bulletin* 70, no. 1 (January 19, 2021): 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920970318>.

	Participant Four = Female	Physical impairment: Distal femur fracture that led to chronic knee problems and crooked legs, leading to difficulty in walking for much longer
Komani	Participant One = Female	Visual impairment; Albinism.
	Participant Two = Male	Visual impairment
	Participant Three = Female	Visual impairment; Chronic illness: diabetes and chronic fatigue
	Participant Four = Female	Visual impairment, Physical impairment; legs not the same height, leading to limping; chronic depression
	Participant Five = Female	Ptosis visual impairment
Mthatha NMD	Participant One = Male	Visual impairment, Mental illness: short-term concentration span.
	Participant Two = Male	Hearing impairment
Mthatha Zamukulungisa	Participant One = Female	Visual impairment
	Participant Two = Female	Visual impairment: speech defect that is impaired by audibility caused by a seriously blocked nasal cavity

Source: Prepared by the researchers

This study used a semi-structured interview guide to collect data. The guide was developed well in advance of commencing data collection.⁴⁶ These interviews aimed to explore the experiences, understandings, opinions, and motivations of the research participants. Data analysis involved organising the data into categories, patterns, and trends.⁴⁷

The researchers used an interpretive data analysis technique and made inferences based on the data obtained.⁴⁸ Upon analysing the data and assessing the findings, the final report for the study was drafted. The researchers obtained ethical approval from Walter Sisulu University before starting this project because it involved humans. (Ethical Clearance Number: FEDFRECEC 2437).

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The objective of this study is to examine the external factors that influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A. The responses to this objective were obtained through semi-structured interviews with a sample of 15 students. The following are the data analysed for the study objectives.

Theme 1: Family support

The first theme is family support. The question asked was “*What role do you think social support, like family, plays in your academic success?*” The results are shown below.

Table 2: Themes for Family Support

Main Question	Selection of Statements (Verbatim)	Key Words	Codes	Theme

⁴⁶ T Roberts, “Developing Interview Guides for Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Research Methods* 9, no.3(2020):210–28.

⁴⁷ A Nevedal et al., “Data Analysis in Qualitative Research,” *Implementation Science Communications* 2, no. 1 (2021): 108.

⁴⁸ G Wiltshire and N Ronkainen, “Inferences in Interpretive Analysis,” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13, no. 3 (2021): 456–73.

What role do you think social support, i.e. family, plays in your academic success?	Family supportive (B, C, D, E, H, I, J, K, L, N, O)	Social support: Family	Good support system	External Factors
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Source: Prepared by the researchers

Theme 1 above discussed the role that social support from family plays in the academic success of students with disabilities at University A. From the data above, most participants (B, C, D, E, H, I, J, K, L, N, O) indicated that they have a sound social support system. Therefore, external factors of family support under this theme are well placed.

Theme 2: Disability Services Unit

The second theme is the Disability Services Unit. The questions asked were “*What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?*” “*Are there any external organisations/committees that support your academic journey?*” The results are presented below.

Table 3: Themes for Disability Services Unit

Main Question	Selection of Statements (Verbatim)	Key Words	Codes	Theme
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“There’s only one DSU office, at Main Campus, none on other campuses.” (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O)	Limited DSU access	No inclusion	Benchmarking; DSU offices on each campus desired
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“There should be residences specifically for disabled students.” (B, D, G, H, M, N, O)	Accommodation for disabled students	No inclusion	Representation desired
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“No guidelines about disabilities.” (A, B, D, G, M, J, K, L, M, N, O)	Lack of disability guidelines	No inclusion	Guidelines about disabilities required
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“No seat for disabled students at SRC.” (B, D, G, H, J, M, N, O)	Lack of representation	No inclusion	Representation desired
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“During inductions, there is no mention of disability.” (O)	Disability excluded in orientation	No inclusion	Guidelines about disabilities are required
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“People are stereotyped to think that only blacks have disabilities.” (F)	Disability stereotypes	No inclusion	Representation and awareness required
What role is played by the DSU in your university life experience?	“Universities should have a national disability structure coming down from campus structures.” (H)	National disability structures	No inclusion	Benchmarking and institutional support required
Are there any external organisations/committees that provide for your academic journey?	“Not attached to any disability organisation or NGO.” (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, O)	No disability organisation support	Not attached to any disability organisation	Disability organisations & NGOs required

Are there any external organisations/committees that provide for your academic journey?	“Around WSU there are no disability organisations we can align ourselves with.” (I)	Lack of disability organisations	Not attached to any disability organisation	Disability organisations & NGOs required
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Source: Prepared by the researchers

All the participants (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O) indicated that there is only one Disability Services Unit office based at Mthatha Campus; other campuses do not have DSU offices. Most participants (A, B, D, G, J, K, L, M, N, O) noted that there are no guidelines regarding disabilities at University A. Some participants (B, D, G, H, M, N, O) expressed a desire for residences specifically meant for students with disabilities. Other participants (B, D, G, H, J, M, N, O) noted that students with disabilities do not have a seat in the university Student Representative Council.

One participant (O) argued that there is no mention of students with disabilities during the induction of first-year entering students. The other participant (F) noted that there is some stereotype thinking that only Blacks have disabilities. One participant (H) expressed a desire for universities to have a national disability structure, and for each campus at University A to align with that structure.

Almost all participants (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, O) reported that they are not affiliated with any disability organisations or NGOs. One participant (I) argued that there are no disability organisations to which they can be attached around the university. It is clear from the deliberations of participants that University A still requires further improvement in the delivery of services related to the Disability Services Unit.

Theme 3: Staff and faculty support

The third theme is about staff and faculty support. The question asked was: *How does University A support the interaction with peers, i.e., tutors and faculty, in terms of promoting an inclusive and accessible learning environment?* The findings are seen below.

Table 4: Themes for Staff and Faculty Support

Main Question	Selection of Statements (Verbatim)	Key Words	Codes	Theme
How does University A support the interaction with peers, tutors & faculty in terms of promoting an inclusive & accessible learning environment?	“Lecturers supportive.” (A, C, E, G, I) “Lecturers not understanding.” (J, K, L)	Social support – lecturers	Good support system; Insufficient support and lack of understanding; Lack of leadership development	External Factors
How does University A support the interaction with peers, tutors & faculty in terms of promoting an inclusive & accessible learning environment?	“Faculty supportive.” (A, B, C, E, G, I) “Encounter difficulties on continuous assessments.” (G, O) “Applications for tutorship were turned down, although students had passed with distinctions.” (O, I) “No support from faculty, I didn’t disclose.” (D, H, N)	Social support – faculty	Good support system; Poor lecturer support and lack of understanding	External Factors

How does University A support the interaction with peers, tutors & faculty in terms of promoting an inclusive & accessible learning environment?	“During my first year, my mentor introduced me to disability, which I had no idea of.” (A, G)	Social support – tutors	Good mentorship and guidance	External Factors
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Source: Prepared by the researcher

There were some differences in the findings of Theme 3, specifically regarding staff and faculty support. Some participants (A, B, C, E, G, I) reported receiving support from some lecturers, while a few participants (J, K, L) reported that their lecturers did not understand how to deal with them as students with disabilities.

Two participants (G, O) reported difficulties with their continuous assessments. Three participants (D, H, N) indicated that the faculty did not support them since they did not disclose their disabilities. Two other participants (A, G) reported that they were referred to the Disability Services Unit by the mentors to whom they were attached during their first year and received tremendous support.

The other two participants (O, I) disclosed that their applications for tutorship were turned down several times, despite having obtained distinctions and even better results than their counterparts who were appointed as tutors.

The argument from participants regarding faculty and staff support suggests that, although participants are somewhat receiving the support they need, more could be done to explore the needs for support related to the academic achievement of students with disabilities. A greater understanding of how lecturers can assist students with disabilities is of paramount importance.

Theme 4: Peer Social Support

The fourth theme is peer social support. The question asked was, “*What role do you think social support from peers plays in your academic success?*” The results are presented below.

Table 5: Themes for Peer Social Support

Main Question	Selection of Statements (Verbatim)	Key Words	Codes	Themes
What role do you think social support from peers plays in your academic success?	“Peers were supportive and tolerant.” (A, B, C, D, E, G, I, J, L, M, N, O)	Social support from peers	Good support system	External Factors
What role do you think social support from peers plays in your academic success?	“Disability not visible, they didn’t recognize.” (K)	Invisible disability	Lack of recognition	External Factors
What role do you think social support from peers plays in your academic success?	“Never disclosed.” (H)	Non-disclosure	Concealed disability identity	External Factors

Source: Prepared by the researcher

Most participants (A, B, C, D, E, G, I, J, L, M, N, O) reflected that peers were supportive and tolerant. However, one participant (K) noted that peers did not recognise her disability because it was not visible, and she therefore was not supported by peers. The participant (H) also did not receive peer support because he never disclosed. The conducive environment of peer support is proving to be influential for the academic success of students with disabilities.

Theme 5: Appropriate Academic Accommodations

The fifth theme is about appropriate academic accommodations. The question asked was “*Are there any services or accommodations you think are missing or inadequate?*” This section presents findings related to extra time for assessments, personal assistance, and interpreters. The results for this theme are presented below.

Table 6: Themes for Appropriate Academic Accommodations

Main Question	Selection of Statements (Verbatim)	Key Words	Codes	Themes
Are there any services or accommodations you think are missing or inadequate?	“They denied me extra time for examinations, although I applied.” (G, O)	Accommodation for assessments	No allowance for extra time	Missing/Inadequate Support Services
Are there any services or accommodations you think are missing or inadequate?	“I was never assisted with my writing, although my hand would get tired at times.” (O)	Accommodation of an interpreter and extra time for assessments	No personal assistant	Missing/Inadequate Support Services
Are there any services or accommodations you think are missing or inadequate?	Implied lack of support services for learners with disabilities	Interpreter support	No interpreters	Missing/Inadequate Support Services

Source: Prepared by the researcher

Two participants (G, O) reported being denied extra time to complete their exams, despite having applied for it. One participant (O) was not provided with a writing assistant, despite the challenge he faced with his hand, which would tire while he was writing. He also did not have an interpreter, which he so desperately needed. The external factors provided by University A under academic accommodations are not yet conducive to the academic success of students with disabilities.

Theme 6: Accessible Campuses and Transportation

The sixth theme is accessible campuses. The question asked was “How well do you think University A addresses the issues related to physical accessibility on campus, i.e., buildings, transportation, etc.?” This section presents findings related to residence accommodations, campus infrastructure, and transportation. In this theme, the results are tabulated below.

Table 7: Accessible Campuses and Transportation

Main Questions	Selection of Statements (Verbatim)	Key Words	Codes	Themes
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“The classrooms and residence accommodations are not conducive.” (B, D, E, H, J, L, M, N, O)	Campus infrastructure	Poor infrastructure	External Factors Affecting Academic Success

How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“Residences are not conducive for wheelchair-bound students. Only one toilet and bathroom are meant for us, but it ends up being used by everyone.” (J, K, M)	Campus infrastructure	Lack of accommodation for assessment periods	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“No issues with infrastructure.” (C)	Campus infrastructure	No issues with infrastructure	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“Buses not conducive for physically disabled students.” (A, B, C, D)	Transport accessibility	Poor transport facilities	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“No problem with transport.” (B, E)	Transport accessibility	Adequate transport access	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“Transport is not very conducive. It does not cater for all of us.” (H, I, J, L, N)	Transport accessibility	Transport not conducive	External Factors Affecting Academic Success

How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“We are not prioritised for residence allocation.” (A, C, D, L, N, O)	Physical accessibility on campus	Poor infrastructure	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“Lecture halls are not easily accessible for us.” (L, N, O)	Physical accessibility on campus	Inaccessible lecture halls	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“There is concession on the R&C buses for us to get into the bus first before everybody else, but those are the only ones.” (F, G)	Transport accessibility	Limited transport accommodation	External Factors Affecting Academic Success
How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A? How well do you think University A addresses issues related to physical accessibility on campus (buildings, transportation, etc.)?	“Libraries and some lecture halls are not accommodating to physically disabled students, hard-of-hearing, and visually impaired students.” (A, F, H, I, K, L, N, O)	Library accessibility	Poor libraries	External Factors Affecting Academic Success

Source: Prepared by the researcher

Most participants (B, D, E, H, J, L, M, N, O) reported that both classes and residence accommodations are not conducive to learning for students with disabilities. Most participants (A, F, H, I, K, L, N, O) argued that lecture halls and libraries are not easily accessible to them. Some participants (J, K, L, M) indicated that residences are not conducive to wheelchair-bound students. They also mentioned that there is only one toilet and bathroom meant for students with disabilities, and even those facilities end up being used by students without disabilities. Some participants (A, C, D, L, N, O) argued that students with disabilities are not prioritised for residence allocation. Only one participant (C) mentioned that she did not have infrastructure issues.

Most participants (A, B, C, D, H, I, J, L, N) noted that the transport is not conducive for students with disabilities as it does not cater to all of them. Only two participants (B, E) indicated that they do

not have transportation problems. Two other participants (F, G) reported that there is a concession on the R&C buses for students with disabilities to be prioritized as the first ones to get on the bus, but they were quick to indicate that those are the only ones who have that concession.

Based on reports from students with disabilities about accessible campuses and infrastructure, the university still has a milestone to reach to accommodate their needs, which will support their academic success.

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Family support

The question asked was, “What role do you think social support plays in your academic success?” This theme revealed findings related to family support. Theme 1 explored the impact of family support on the academic success of students with disabilities at University A, showing that most participants have a strong social support system.

Students with disabilities value support from family and friends.⁴⁹ Higher education, globally, must explore how the support of family and friends affects the academic achievement of students with disabilities. In industrialised nations, institutions recognise the importance of family and social support structures for the academic performance of students with disabilities. Studies in the USA have shown that disabled kids with significant family support are more likely to achieve academically.⁵⁰ The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) emphasises the importance of family and educational organisations working together to help these students succeed academically.⁵¹

In developing countries, cultural ideas about disability education may cause family members to prioritize sustenance over educational objectives, affecting their support and resources.⁵² This demonstrates that parents in these places may not understand their impaired children's educational requirements, limiting their emotional and logistical assistance.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, due to social prejudices regarding people with disabilities, many families prioritise their education less.⁵³ Family views strongly influence disabled kids' expectations, and unfavourable impressions might hinder their academic success and social acceptability.⁵⁴ Thus, Sub-Saharan African schools must address these prejudices and offer focused interventions to strengthen family and community support.

Therefore, the opinions of family and friends regarding the academic achievement of children with disabilities differ depending on the situation. In wealthier nations, strong family participation helps students succeed. To improve disability assistance, higher education institutions must use varied techniques customised to their situations.

Theme 2: Disability services

In this study, the second theme was disability services. The question asked was “*What role does WSU play in your university life experience?*”

Participants reported no affiliation with disability organisations, limited disability units on the Mthatha campus, and a lack of guidelines for students with disabilities. They also noted that disabled students were not mentioned during the induction.

Disability services coordinate teaching and learning, mediating between students and professors.⁵⁵ Disability Support Services (DSS) affect higher education students with impairments differently in developed, developing, and Sub-Saharan African nations. In North America and Western Europe, DSS helps students with disabilities succeed academically. Research indicates that the timely

⁴⁹ M. Gow, K. Mostert, and L. Dreyer, “Family and Friend Support for Students with Disabilities,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 5 (2020): 178–95.

⁵⁰ Aliedan et al., “Evaluating the Role of University Disability Service Support, Family Support, and Friends’ Support in Predicting the Quality of Life among Disabled Students in Higher Education: Physical Self-Esteem as a Mediator.”

⁵¹ Phillippe, “Americans with Disabilities Act and Family Collaboration.”

⁵² Deku, “Cultural Beliefs and Education of Disabled Children in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁵³ Deku, “Cultural Beliefs and Education of Disabled Children in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁵⁴ Deku, “Cultural Beliefs and Education of Disabled Children in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁵⁵ B. Hazan-Liran and O. Walter, “Role of Disability Services in Teaching and Learning,” *Journal of Higher Education Policy* 46, no. 1 (2024): 78–95.

availability of accommodations, such as exam extensions and note-taking, helps improve academic performance. Fichten et al. show that accommodations promote academic retention and university integration.⁵⁶ Institutional early intervention assistance has been shown to improve college achievement and retention for students with impairments, demonstrating a mature knowledge of inclusive education methods in these locations.

DSS is less successful in poor nations due to several obstacles. The lack of resources and knowledge often leads to inadequate support networks for disabled students. According to Kumi-Yeboah et al., many educational institutions lack the necessary infrastructure and skilled staff to implement a successful DSS.⁵⁷

In South Africa, legislative frameworks to protect students with disabilities are often not effectively implemented. According to Mitchell et al., students with disabilities commonly face physical and intellectual challenges at universities, such as limited access to campus infrastructure and a lack of tailored support services.⁵⁸

Theme 3: Staff and Faculty Support

The third theme was about staff and faculty support. This part released findings related to support from the faculty, tutors, and lecturers. The question asked was: *How does University A support the interaction with peers and faculty in terms of promoting an inclusive and accessible learning environment?*

Participants at University A expressed a desire for ongoing awareness programmes and campaigns for students with disabilities but noted limited programmes and a lack of necessary services.

Moriña and Biagiotti found that faculty members play a vital role in the process of inclusion for students with impairments, based on their study of external variables that impact academic progress.⁵⁹ Students' academic achievement depends on the faculty and staff of the higher education institution. Research shows that teacher training and institutional commitment to inclusive policies help these kids succeed academically in industrialised nations. Studies show that universities in developed countries have made significant progress in creating support systems that meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities, with faculty actively participating in the development and implementation of personalised support plans.⁶⁰

The situation differs in underdeveloped countries, where infrastructure and resources are inadequate to support disabled students. Research indicates that, although the enrolment of students with disabilities is increasing in these countries, support remains scarce, resulting in lower academic achievement.⁶¹ The lack of appropriate study programmes and professional development for academic staff contributes to this issue. Faculty often lack training in inclusive education, which hampers their ability to support students and negatively impacts academic performance.⁶² Societal attitudes toward disability and education practices further hinder the assistance of staff and faculty in Sub-Saharan and African countries. The inadequacy of disability support in many African colleges stems from the absence of inclusive education policies.⁶³ A survey of South African institutions found that staff require extensive training to accommodate students with disabilities.⁶⁴

Theme 4: Peer Social Support

The fourth theme is peer social support. The question asked was, *“What role do you think social support from peers plays in your academic success?”*

⁵⁶ Fichten et al., “Accommodations and Retention of Students with Disabilities.”

⁵⁷ Kumi-Yeboah, Kim, and Armah, “Societal Biases and Family Support in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁵⁸ D Mitchell et al., “Implementation Gaps in South African Disability Policy,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 39, no. 1 (2025): 89–107.

⁵⁹ Moriña and Biagiotti, “Academic Success Factors in University Students with Disabilities: A Systematic Review.”

⁶⁰ Edwards, “Faculty Training for Inclusive Education in Australia.”

⁶¹ Popovska et al., “Adapted Study Programmes in South Asia.”

⁶² Popovska et al., “Adapted Study Programmes in South Asia.”

⁶³ Abdullahi, “Inclusive Education Policies in African Universities: Challenges and Prospects.”

⁶⁴ Ndebele and Gadisi, “Faculty Training for Supporting Students with Disabilities.”

The study found that most participants felt their peers were supportive and tolerant, but some did not recognise their disability due to its invisibility. The study suggests that external factors, such as peer support, are crucial for the academic success of students with disabilities. According to Moriña and Biagiotti, peers play a crucial role in academic and social success.⁶⁵ Studies show that social support can foster an inclusive college experience for students with disabilities if it helps them learn. Building relationships with peers, participating in campus activities, and having access to organised social events would help disabled students succeed. The impact of peer support on the academic success of students with disabilities in higher education is complex and varies by country, including Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa. External factors, such as peer relationships, enhance academic success for students with disabilities. According to Maia and Yao, supportive peer interactions improve academic performance in students with disabilities, fostering inclusivity and participation in the classroom.⁶⁶ Peer mentoring programmes in these institutions enhance academic support and emotional resilience, thereby reducing feelings of isolation.⁶⁷

Institutional support and attitudes toward disability vary in developing nations, further complicating the situation. Although peer support is crucial, stigma and a lack of resources can hinder its effectiveness in promoting academic success.⁶⁸ According to Popovska et al., negative perceptions of disabilities can obstruct students' academic success by preventing them from forming supportive peer relationships.⁶⁹ When institutions actively encourage peer networking and mentorship among students with disabilities, academic outcomes improve, demonstrating that institutional advocacy and peer support are essential for academic success.

Theme 5: Appropriate Academic Accommodations

The fifth theme is about appropriate academic accommodations. The question asked was, “*Are there any services or accommodations you think are missing or inadequate?*” This section presents findings related to extra time for assessments, personal assistance, and interpreters.

The findings indicate that participants with disabilities were denied extra time, writing assistants, and interpreters, highlighting the inadequacy of external factors in academic accommodations to promote their educational success.

Inclusion policies at well-established universities demonstrate a commitment to providing academic accommodations for students with disabilities. These policies reflect global best practices and robust legal frameworks that ensure accessibility and equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their disability. In countries such as the US and Canada, well-defined legal requirements mandate that institutions provide support services to help students with disabilities succeed in higher education.

In developing countries with limited institutional resources, this commitment may differ. Research indicates that while an increasing number of students with disabilities are being admitted to universities, many still lack adequate academic support, which negatively impacts their performance. Many students face barriers to academic success due to a lack of recognition of disabilities in education. This systemic issue reflects inadequate policy frameworks for equitable education in developing nations.

Academic accommodations vary widely in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many colleges are just starting to address disability inclusivity. South Africa, a representative African nation, has progressive policies and significant issues. Despite laws such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, the inclusive policies of higher education institutions are inconsistent. Studies show that socioeconomic factors, resource constraints, and disability stigmas limit access to academic accommodations, despite some institutions having implemented policy changes.

Thus, the support institutions offer to students with disabilities vary greatly. Overall, well-developed countries have robust frameworks for accommodating students with

⁶⁵ Moriña and Biagiotti, “Academic Success Factors in University Students with Disabilities: A Systematic Review.”

⁶⁶ Maia, Santos, and Espe-Sherwind, “Peer Mentoring Circles in Higher Education: Perceptions of Their Members with and without Disability and Program Proposal.”

⁶⁷ Yao, Wu, and Teng, “Peer Mentoring Programmes and Isolation.”

⁶⁸ Cardinot and Flynn, “Peer Networking and Academic Outcomes for Students with Disabilities.”

⁶⁹ Popovska et al., “Adapted Study Programmes in South Asia.”

disabilities in higher education, but developing countries, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa, face significant challenges.

Theme 6: Accessible Campuses and Transportation

The sixth theme was accessible campuses. In this section, two questions were asked. The question asked was “How do external factors influence the academic success of students with disabilities at University A?”

Participants reported that classes and accommodations are not conducive to learning for students with disabilities, with lecture halls, libraries, residences, and toilets not being accessible. Transportation is also not suitable, and the university still needs to prioritise accommodating these needs for academic success.

Students with disabilities need an accessible campus infrastructure in higher education to succeed. University policies in developed countries address the needs of students with disabilities. Modern classrooms typically have accessible entrances and seating arrangements. In states like California, universal design principles aim to make classrooms accessible to all students, reducing learning barriers. This shows how strategic space planning and design improve educational inclusivity.

Institutions in developing nations, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, face greater accessibility challenges. Many universities have outdated infrastructure that does not meet the needs of disabled students. Ramps, lifts, and accessible toilets are often lacking.⁷⁰ Electronic resources, including library services, are not universally accessible, further limiting the educational engagement of students with disabilities. South African researchers have found that legal frameworks for such facilities are often not followed.⁷¹ This suggests the need for policy enforcement and inclusivity in the higher education institutions of these regions.

South African higher education students with disabilities face inadequate exam rooms. Many examination spaces do not allow for extra time or specialised equipment, which can hinder students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge during assessments. In hot climates where ventilation is essential, classrooms with poor air conditioning and other environmental controls can hinder learning.⁷² These issues highlight educational inequalities because disabled students are disadvantaged by both their disabilities and the infrastructure.

Accessibility includes campus housing, transportation, classrooms, and exams. South Africa struggles to provide adequate student housing and accessible transport. Students with disabilities face mobility problems due to a lack of parking and wheelchair-accessible pathways.⁷³ Problems such as absenteeism and poor academic performance can lower retention rates of students with disabilities. Numerous studies recommend that higher education facilities incorporate accessibility into their planning and management strategies, as these factors significantly impact student success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To advance the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in South African higher education institutions (HEIs), evidence-based recommendations are proposed. These align with the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) *Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training System*, the National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2023), and international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4.

⁷⁰ Meghan Cosier, Audri Sandoval-Gomez, and Donald N Cardinal, “Placement of Students with Extensive Support Needs in California School Districts: The State of Inclusion and Exclusion,” *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 12, no. 3 (2020): 249–55.

⁷¹ Samia Chasi and Orla Quinlan, “Inclusion in Times of Covid-19: The Case of International Students in South Africa,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 9, no. 1 (2021): 205–22.

⁷² Hölscher and Bozalek, “Environmental Controls in South African Classrooms.”

⁷³ Ofentse H Mokwena Ofentse H and Mark Zuidgeest, “Identifying Transport Policy Gaps in Student Travel Demand Management in South Africa,” *Journal of Transport and Supply Chain Management* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the real-life external forces shaping the academic journeys of students with disabilities (SWDs) at University A, revealing a world where supportive relationships and systemic gaps coexist. Anchored in the Social Model of Disability, our findings make it clear: success is not just about personal grit; the structures around students deeply shape it. Warm family encouragement, understanding peers, and the occasional responsive lecturers act as essential anchors, helping students stay the course and feel connected despite challenges. However, gaps in disability services, missing accommodations, inaccessible campuses, and weak accountability create real hurdles, driving higher dropout risks and dimming fair outcomes.

These stories resonate with South Africa's national goals, including the DHET's *Strategic Policy Framework on Disability* and the National Development Plan 2030, as well as global promises under the CRPD and SDG 4. At University A, a single, centralised Disability Services Unit, with no campus-level guidelines and physical barriers, exposes a troubling gap between policy and practice, echoing struggles across Sub-Saharan Africa. Still, the voices of participants point to hope: simple, targeted changes, such as peer mentoring, universal design in teaching, and improved funding, can help close these divides, enabling students not just to survive but to truly thrive.

True inclusion calls for a shift from patching problems to building equity from the ground up. The recommendations outline stronger governance, inclusive curriculum design, better tools and support, campus-wide awareness, data tracking, and real accountability, offering a clear path forward for University A and beyond. By embracing these steps, South African higher education can move beyond mere access, creating spaces where SWDs belong, succeed, and contribute fully.

Future Research

The topic of this study focuses on one university in the Eastern Cape. Future research could focus on a comparative analysis of several universities in the Eastern Cape Province. The study used a qualitative research approach. Future research could employ a mixed-methods approach to leverage the best aspects of both approaches. Employing a mixed-methods approach and comparing multiple institutions will be crucial in testing and refining these ideas over time, ultimately transforming commitment into lasting change. In this way, the sector can live up to Vision 2030, building a fairer, stronger future for every student.

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Nobuhle Tuntulwana, Deputy Director in the Student Affairs Department within the Student Life and Co-curricular Unit, conducted research examining the experiences and educational needs of Students

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