Assisting students with disabilities: a partnership between the Disability Unit of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and its libraries

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Introduction

Disability is a worldwide challenge affecting various aspects of social and economic interaction among various population groups. People with disabilities are typically faced with enormous challenges that impede their day to day activities. Often they also have limited access to resources that could improve their situation. In order to curb the potentially devastating effects of this situation, the international community has established legislative interventions which seek to entrench the rights of individuals with disabilities. In education, legislation addresses a variety of issues, ranging from the right of every individual to be educated to the promotion of inclusive/enabling schools, as well as broad-based strategies for ensuring that the basic learning needs of every child, youth and adult are met.¹

In alignment with the values enshrined in its Constitution² and international developments, South Africa has developed policies regulating schooling and higher education. In higher education, legislation recognises the need for progressive access for students who were previously disadvantaged, including students with disabilities. As articulated in South Africa’s National Plan for Higher Education (2001), the moral and educational responsibility rests with individual institutions to ensure effective access for all students to the institution’s physical environment (buildings, lecture halls, etc.), as well as to programmes that address their teaching and learning needs.

As far as libraries are concerned, the American Library Association formally released a “Services to persons with disabilities” interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights. It states that “a person’s right to use the library should not be denied or abridged because of disabilities” (Booth, 2012:5). In South African libraries, this includes

university library spaces. The access to information is seen in the same light. The LIS transformation charter (2009) clearly stated that supporting people with disabilities should be one of the key focus areas of libraries. “Nothing about us without us” should be the focus of libraries based on the principle of inclusiveness. (LIS transformation charter 2009: 35).

Why a partnership?

In line with the above, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), which is situated in the Western Cape province of South Africa, has been seeking ways of ensuring increased access for and the success of all students, including those with disabilities. However, a number of deficiencies still remain that need to be addressed. For example, the physical environment needs to be improved to increase access for students with disabilities. It is also imperative to actively seek ways to broaden access for these students by the implementation of inclusive educational modes in the academic and social environment (Cf. South Africa’s Higher Education Act(1997) and UNESCO: 1999; 2003). This includes, for example, the use of e-learning and specialised assistive devices.

Although libraries might not all have the experience and knowledge to support students with different disabilities in the library environment, for example, by means of specialised hardware and software programmes, it seemed clear that they could nevertheless make a substantial contribution. Hence the establishment of a partnership between the library and the Disability Unit (hence Unit) at CPUT seemed important for the success of students’ academic achievements at the university.

Some of the challenges that CPUT faces in this regard is to transform its learning environment in such a way as to enable students with disabilities to experience a meaningful and rich academic life, to fully integrate them into the student community, and to address prevailing misconceptions regarding disabilities. It seemed that the envisaged partnership between the Unit and the libraries could play an important role in this regard.

Unfolding and functioning of the partnership
The Unit was established first on CPUT’s Bellville campus in October 2008. A well-equipped workstation with specialised hardware and software programmes was installed to support the (at the time) small number of students with disabilities.

During the launch of the Unit, the library already played an important role in creating disability awareness amongst students and visitors with an outstanding exhibition on ways of support to students with disabilities.

In January 2009, the support services rendered by the Unit were extended to the Cape Town campus, as well as to the five satellite campuses. The partnership between the Unit and the libraries also took on a more concrete form, and during the last four years the Unit and the library have been working hand in hand to improve the academic experience of students with disabilities.

The following are some examples of how the partnership functioned in practice: The library on the Cape Town campus offered a training room space for the set-up of the Disability Unit. The Unit provided the libraries on the five satellite campuses with the same specialised hard- and software as those installed in the Unit’s offices on the
two main campuses. Library staff were also trained on the specialised software programmes. Table 1 shows the hard- and software programmes that were installed in the libraries.

Table 1: Hard- and software programmes installed in libraries to support students with disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HARDWARE</th>
<th>TYPE OF DISABILITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big screens</td>
<td>Partially sighted/ learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapted fingerboards</td>
<td>Partially sighted/ physical disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanners</td>
<td>All disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPECIALISED SOFTWARE PROGRAMMES</strong></td>
<td><strong>DISABILITY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoom Text</td>
<td>Partially sighted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaws</td>
<td>Blindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claro Read</td>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claro Lighting</td>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wynn</td>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon Natural Speaking</td>
<td>Physical/learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 2008-2012, the number of students with disabilities increased rapidly, and library staff had to be continuously informed by the Unit about the presence and needs of these students on their campuses. A variety of disabilities occurred on the campuses, namely physical, sensory and learning disabilities. Table 2 indicates the numbers of students with disabilities on the various campuses, as well as the different types of disabilities as captured in 2012. These students were able to make use of the hard- and specialised software mentioned in Table 1.

Table 2: Numbers of students and types of disabilities per campus (2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disabilities on campuses</th>
<th>Athlone</th>
<th>Bellville</th>
<th>Cape Town</th>
<th>Granger Bay</th>
<th>Mowbray</th>
<th>Tygerberg</th>
<th>Wellington</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immobility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1 (CP)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Licences for software programmes were provided by the Disability Unit.
4 The number of students with disabilities increased from 8 in 2008 to 212 in 2012.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(2CP)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paraplegic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadruplegic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard of hearing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deafness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially sighted</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADHD/ADD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other examples of the successful working relationship between the Unit and the libraries include involvement by the libraries in disability awareness weeks, exhibitions in libraries, DVDs on disability issues played on library screens, information pamphlets on different types of disabilities, audio files and active participation by the libraries in Casual Day.

Pictures 2: Disability awareness exhibitions

The collection development at CPUT has also changed over the last few years to include more e-books and back copies of key journals. This is actively marketed to all departments and faculties. The collection development focus of the library thus helps strategically to support students with learning disabilities (which constitutes the
majority of disabilities) to access e-material that works well with the adaptive technologies that are available in the Libraries.

The libraries on all the campuses listed in Table 2 are also open till 22:00, in comparison with the Unit, which closes at 16:30. This gives students with disabilities access to after-hour support.

Although CPUT has eleven libraries, Table 2 shows that there are students that have been identified as needing special support on seven of the campuses. Unfortunately not all students know about the support offered by the Disability Unit and the library because of the reluctant of some students to declare their disability. The result is that no accurate figures are available for strategic planning purposes for all students with disabilities.

Survey and results
A survey was done amongst 30 students with disabilities on different campuses regarding the use of the specialised equipment in the libraries, as well as the support services rendered to them by the libraries. The data collection included a questionnaire and individual interviews, as well as focus group discussions. Figure 1 shows a summary of the positive elements identified by students with regard to academic support in CPUT libraries.

Figure 1: Positive elements identified by students with regard to academic support in CPUT libraries.
Students especially appreciated the access to research and learning material in the libraries through the use of the specialised software provided by the Unit, as well as the assistance of librarians. There are quite a number of success stories of students with disabilities who previously struggled to get access to learning material. Five of the seven libraries are also accessible to students with physical disabilities.

The survey has also shown that assistive technology in libraries dramatically improves the quality of education, creates equal opportunities and promotes inclusive education. Application of the principles of Universal Design for Learning empowers students and creates self-confidence.

Despite these successes, the data analysis also showed the challenges that students with disabilities still experience in CPUT libraries. This is indicated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Challenges experienced by students with disabilities in CPUT libraries**

Universal Access is a challenge in existing buildings at CPUT, and the institution is working towards designing all the new buildings within the framework of Universal
Access principles. Unfortunately, the library spaces on all the campuses are in older buildings and access for students with physical or mobility disabilities is not up to standard. At some of the library entrances of the campuses listed in Table 2, students with physical, mobility and sight problems could experience problems in accessing the library. The 3M gates at the entrances are turnstiles at some Libraries can be some biggest obstacles that these students will face. There are only two libraries with lifts: Bellville and Cape Town. These lifts do not always work and students might need support. At the Mowbray campus, which has a set of stairs at the entrance of the library, students find it difficult to get into the library. The workspace for students with disabilities is also not designed to support students with mobility disabilities.

**Picture 3: Mowbray disability workspace**

![Picture 3](image)

Picture 3 shows the workspace for students with disabilities in the Mowbray library. A student in a wheelchair will find it very difficult to work at this workstation. The height of the workspace is also not adjustable in any of these libraries listed in Table 2.

Some other challenges are the following:

(i) The installed computer hardware is also used by students without disabilities because of a lack of clear signage for equipment that is reserved for students with disabilities. Specialised equipment is expensive and has to be secured.

(ii) The specialised programme “Speech to Text” needs an isolated working space that is not available in the libraries.

(iii) No personal information of students with disabilities may be forwarded to librarians for support purposes without the consent of the student.
(iv) Financial issues will always be a challenge.

Conclusion and the way forward
The partnership between the libraries and the Unit over the last 4 years has been a positive relationship. Students have benefitted from this partnership, particularly on campuses where the Unit itself has no specialised student facility and staff. The partnership is, however, also a process that is still unfolding, and should have clear strategic planning for the future. The following seem relevant in this regard:

- A library space/ faculty audit needs to take place focusing on the improvement of spaces in the libraries that have equipment to support students with disabilities. From a quality perspective, a thorough Universal Access audit is needed for future planning.
- Library staff need ongoing specialised training to support students with disabilities, which could vary from year to year. Booth mentions that librarians in America “lack actionable knowledge of accessibility best practice and standards” (2012:5).
- Suitable equipment needs to be installed according to the needs of students with disabilities. This equipment has to be secured and should always be in proper working condition.
- New appropriate CPUT approved signage needs to be set up in all spaces that have equipment for students with disabilities. Only one library (Bellville) has some form of signage currently. Students are often not aware of the services offered.
- Librarians that are support students in faculties need to have a more proactive approach. One-on-one training sessions or even personalised e-mails with information on the types of special support that the Library offers, would be of value to these students.
- One of the key aspects that have to be remembered in this partnership is that all partners have a role to play in commitment to awareness issues with regard to people with disabilities.

Together we can do more!

Bibliography


