

CHAPTER 6

RETHINKING THE SUPPORT PROGRAMMES FOR THE MARGINALISED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Shuti Steph Khumalo

ABSTRACT

Student support in higher education (HE) is a matter that has received, and is still receiving, rigorous attention in the research environment. HE faces challenges related to the throughput rates nationally and internationally and, as a result of that, most African countries have prioritised support in HE institutions, particularly universities. Amongst the groups of students targeted to receive student support are the marginalised students,¹ particularly students with visual impairments (SWVI). Developed countries have tirelessly attempted to ensure that SWVI are supported through aggressive policy positions and technological interventions. This chapter seeks to provide insights on the support programmes for SWVI in HE institutions in Africa. The chapter follows a qualitative approach and uses the social justice theory (Rawls, 1971) as a conceptual lens. Drawing on this theory, it can be argued that the support programmes and services provided to SWVI in Africa limit their participation in HE and constrain effective learning and, ultimately, perpetuate social injustice.

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INTRODUCTION

In Africa, which is not as developed as other parts of the world, particularly Europe, students' throughput is very low as compared to the developed world (Sondlo, 2013). Attempts have been made in countries like the United Kingdom where the UK equality Act has been passed with an intention to ensure that all educational institutions are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable learners who are disable to participate (Hewett, Douglas, McLinden, & Keil, 2017). HE in Africa experiences challenges related to underdevelopment (Sondlo, 2013) which by implications affects the provision of resources, which are very critical in the success of the students. Students with visual impairments (SWVI) face challenges on two fronts: first in relation to access and second in relation to support services. Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela (2004, p. 15) confirm that higher education (HE) institutions have been 'encouraged to broaden their selection processes, and governments have developed affirmative action programs to widen participation and people with disabilities have been somewhat belatedly included in this process'.

This chapter argues that despite the technological advances employed to mediate pedagogical practices in HE in Africa, not enough has been done to provide support for SWVI. As Osborne (2003) argues, the HE system should be designed so that it is well integrated and unified and should introduce highly equitable processes and procedures from which all students, irrespective of their personal backgrounds, can benefit. The argument in this chapter centres on the assumption that even though that current technology-driven support programmes are assisting SWVI,² more could be done to help them. Tebo (n.d.) is of the view that SWVI not only need to be able to access text information across all curricular areas, but also to participate fully in instruction that is often rich with visual content. In this chapter, it is argued that the current limited technological student support services in HE, specifically in Africa, perpetuate discrimination and highly favour mainstream students, since these services disadvantage the marginalised, particularly those who have visual challenges. As Shevlin et al. (2004) contend, HE has to address the critical issues of physical access and curriculum delivery, which directly has a bearing on the technological mediated support services that can help ease barriers to learning for SWVI.

This chapter contributes to current discussions on rethinking support programmes for the marginalised students through the lens of social justice. Social justice and HE have a symbiotic relationship. Whilst social justice, as fairness, is concentrated on the rights of the individual, it could be argued that it contributes to the issue of widening participation in HE. Promoting social justice in HE in

Africa has the propensity to improve the academic lives of SWVIs. Contemporary HE in Africa faces challenges that seem insurmountable, unprecedented and unparalleled. [Dent, Lane, and Strike \(2017\)](#) postulate that the complexity and the sophistication of the problems that HE faces nationally and internationally have grown. HE continues to experience a number of challenges, ranging from financing, access for success, which implies that more students should access HE with an intention of supporting them to succeed in their studies, quality, student support and the use of technology. According to [Kigotho \(2014\)](#), unequal access to HE persists in most countries, such as the UK ([Frank, 2017](#)) despite intensive attempts to expand opportunities by 2030.

Neglecting the marginalised through inadequate student support programmes constitutes the politics of deliberate academic neglect and exclusion from wider participation in educational opportunities for SWVI in HE. HE policy perspectives designed for students also have to adequately address the challenges faced by SWVI. Embarking on developing aggressive and progressive policies that would attempt to ensure that technological pedagogical practices support SWVI could assist in the resolution of this challenge. Drawing heavily on [Rawls's \(1971\)](#) theory of social justice and an in-depth analysis of extant relevant literature on HE student support programmes, this chapter argues that the support programmes and services available for SWVI limit their access, success and participation. Finally, the chapter concludes that such practices are unfair and unjust, and promote social injustice because according to [Rawls \(1971\)](#), state institutions are duty-bound to distribute basic rights (such as the right to HE) and duties fairly and justly. HE institutions are not only obliged to dismantle barriers to HE, but also have to provide assistive technologies that will make tuition for SWVI effective and productive. Failure by HE institutions to provide opportunities for wider access and participation for the marginalised, particularly SWVI, perpetuates social injustice.

This conceptual chapter follows a qualitative, constructivist and interpretivist approach, which is grounded on critical analysis and evaluation of critical literature on HE student support programmes. This chapter consists of the following sections: the first section focusses on widening participation as a policy imperative. This section deals with the need for policy shift in various HE sectors to ensure not only participation of the marginalised students particularly those with vision impairment, but also address rigorous and effective support services. The following section explores the need for technology in expanding participation in HE. This section clearly indicates the fundamental importance of technology in assisting SWVI. The next section includes discussions on HE student support programmes and services. In this section, the description of student support services is provided and a detailed discussion of fit for purpose student support services is also given. "Social Justice Conceptualised" section provides insights on social justice and the description of social justice as fairness is explored, largely with reference to the ideas of John [Rawls \(1971\)](#), who is considered the pioneer of social justice. The section dealing with social justice as a widening participation strategy reemphasises the fundamental value of supporting students who experience vision challenges.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION AS A POLICY IMPERATIVE

Although existing literature on HE participation indicates a dramatic expansion of students' participation over the last century, inequality of access to universities disadvantages not only socio-economically (Palmadessa, 2017) disadvantaged students (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2012), but also SWVI. The drive towards wider participation of students (including SWVI) in HE remains a dream for many countries (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2005) and attempts through policies have been made to address such exclusions. Campbell and McKendrick (2017) argue that widening participation through policies has been at the forefront of recent HE strategies. There is a dire need for institutions of HE and governments in Africa to develop policies that are skewed towards disabled students. Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson (2004) accept that whilst there has been registered progress in enlarging participation in HE regarding disabled students, studies reveal that significant challenges facing disabled students include gaining wider access to the curriculum, teaching and learning.

The following questions as posed by Dent et al. (2017) are pertinent and can help in the designing of policies that can address the injustices in HE institutions: Firstly, how do we increase the participation of under-represented groups in HE such as those who are visually impaired? Secondly, how do we ensure that we are supporting not only access, but also fair participation once students arrive, which positively affects outcomes and progression? Not only should bold policies be developed, but these policies should also be pliable and implementable. The policies should focus on the variety of factors that serve as barriers to broadening participation in HE. Barriers to wider participation range from factors such as distance, social circumstances, family relationships and responsibilities, economic and physical disabilities. These policy propositions are critical in guaranteeing that participation is widened.

One of the resolutions adopted at the [World Conference on Higher Education \(1998\)](#) held in Paris organised by UNESCO was that access to HE should be made available to all qualified students regardless of the background or personal characteristics of such individuals. Aggressive policy positions aimed at addressing the marginalisation of blind students should be treated as an imperative by HE institutions. Support services should cover a variety of issues. [Alhammadi \(2014\)](#) maintains the view that legislation intending to widen participation should focus on access to buildings and information, exam accommodation, classroom accommodation and support for teaching staff.

Supporting disabled students particularly SWVI is a key pillar of inclusive education which is now an accepted concept in the corridors of HE institutions worldwide. Inclusive education forms part of the widening participation strategies that HE institutions use to include students with disabilities. [Moriña \(2017, p. 3\)](#) defines inclusive education as an 'educational philosophy and practice that aims to improve the learning and active participation of all the students in a common educational context'. Inclusive education is considered a basic human right and a basis for a fair and equitable society ([Moriña, 2017](#)). Inclusive

education policies are intended to ensure students' access, participation and success. The reason for the need to pronounce policies that cater for students with disabilities is that the number of such students is exponentially increasing in HE.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in education curriculums and classrooms has been a goal of educational reformists for many years (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010). This inclusive education stance resulted in the promulgation of inclusive regulations that prioritised students faced with barriers to learning. Even though the development of policy on widening participation has had a positive impact on participation in HE, there is still underrepresentation in certain groups, and this remains a policy concern (Chowdry et al., 2012). In designing access and support policies, affordability, access and accountability should also be at the top of the policy agenda of HE institutions (Heller, 2001).

TECHNOLOGY AS A WIDENING PARTICIPATION STRATEGY IN HE IN AFRICA

The advent of technological advances changed the landscape and the context in which learning takes place, forcing HE institutions to rethink the way in which the business of teaching and learning is conducted. Barr and Miller (2013, p. 2) contest that:

the emergence of modern technology has allowed students at all levels, young and mature, the opportunity to participate in advancing their education in an environment that is diversified, rich in best practices, yet progressive enough to allow students to proceed in a self-paced manner.

Tait (2014, p. 6) further contends that:

it is important to place the changes for learning driven by the digital revolution in a longer term perspective, and then more specifically to link these to the student support dimensions of distance and e-learning.

Wiazowski (2009, p. 1) maintains that 'assistive technology should be given to students who are blind or have low vision support in all academic areas as well as in expanded core curriculum'. This chapter does not dispute the fact that there has been advances in providing SWVI with support, but argues for adequate provision of more advanced technological interventions necessary for the marginalised group of students. HE institutions also should ensure that well-built, targeted technological interventions are developed to assist SWVI access HE.

This chapter does not intend to prescribe the type of technological interventions for SWVI, but to start a debate on the need for more advanced tailor made technological support platforms for the SWVI. The shortage of adaptive educational materials and supportive technologies remain amongst the top challenges facing SWVI (Zezelew, 2016). Providing technology-driven educational opportunities to SWVI requires a willingness from HE leadership to dedicate adequate budgets to research in Information and Communication Technology. The Virginia Department of Education (2010) argues that taking correct decisions about the

development and implementation of programmes and services for SWVI requires a clear understanding of their unique learning needs and the interventions necessary to develop successful transition goals for adult independence. Amongst other interventions that could be of great value as suggested by Zelelew (2016) are technology friendly devices that promote accessing support services to SWVI, modifying or adapting curriculum, adapting the instructional methodologies, adapting the assessment mechanisms and accessing resources. SWVI have distinctive learning desires that HE institutions have to attend to if they are to access the total academic education core curriculum and become independent and productive citizens (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This complete education curriculum can only be achieved through ground breaking technology-driven teaching and learning modes that cater for SWVI.

According to Tebo (n.d.), assistive technology that can be valuable to the education of SWVI comprises a range of tools and devices (e.g. electronic worksheets, phonetic spelling software, talking calculators, variable speed recorders and videotaped social skills) that will enable them to accomplish tasks that they would otherwise be unable to do or would have difficulty accomplishing effectively. The Virginia Department of Education (2010, p. 1) argues that to develop

alternative skills of the students with impaired vision, technological advances such as instruction in reading and writing through Braille, using optical devices with standard print, using auditory materials for learning, and reading tactual graphics, should be made available so that students who are blind or visually impaired have access to the general curriculum.

Wiazowski (2009) maintains that to assist SWVI, computer-operated technologies such as Braille, Narrator PC and Voice-Over (Mac), which comes with built-in voice output applications, should be incorporated in teaching. Abdo (2009) posits that assistive technology comprises technological tools designed to help people who are visually impaired to be more independent at work, in the educational environment and at home. They are intended to assist people in accessing printed materials, using computers with ease and performing other tasks smoothly. Because these tools are sophisticated and expensive, not all institutions of HE in Africa provide these resources to the SWVI.

Abdo (2009, p. 6) indicates that assistive technology incorporates the following high-tech methods:

- Magnification: software that creates large-type displays, and closed-circuit television monitors that magnify printed matter on video screens.
- Voice output: software and hardware that can read text aloud.
- Alternative input: devices that provide alternatives to the standard keyboard and mouse configuration, such as speech recognition, large keys, keyboards, pointing devices and switches that accept wink control.
- Word processing aid: software that can learn a user's vocabulary and anticipated letters and words.

It can further be argued that even though some institutions in developed countries provide fit-for-purpose and adequate technology-mediated students support

services, there are still those that are lagging (particularly HE in Africa) far behind and the problems are compounded by affordability and skills to operate such tools. In African countries like Ethiopia, SWVI faces various kinds of challenges (Zezelew, 2016) whereas countries like the UK, there have been great strides in trying to ensure that educational institutions provide mechanisms that help mediate these challenges that SWVI face (Frank, 2017). The aim of this chapter was not to discredit the contributions made by the devices such as classical Braille and others in teaching SWVI in HE. The intention was to argue for a rethink of support services for marginalised students, particularly SWVI. In addition to the inadequate provision of such technological inventions, there is a lack of properly trained academic staff members who can apply or administer these instruments effectively (Hewett et al., 2017). These limitations constrain support to SWVI and by implication, constitute unfairness and injustice. In supporting the views above, Kirkup and Kirkwood (2007) conclude that the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies by HE institutions since the mid-1990s has failed to produce the radical changes in learning and teaching that many anticipated.

HE SUPPORT PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES

Holdsworth (2004) states that mainstream education is inappropriate for the needs of at least some young people and fit-for-purpose support services for SWVI may play a direct or intermediary role in activating or enabling the risks of failing in HE. Riele (2007) is of the view that all young people have the capacity to learn and gain school credentials as long as the educational environment is right. ‘Student support services are a cluster of facilities and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting for the learner’ (Kaur, 2016). Kaur (2016) further postulates that there is a positive relationship between students’ performance and the support they receive from institutions of HE. Tait (2003), on the other hand, describes student support as a range of services both for individuals and for students in groups that complements the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners. Tait (2003) adds that student support includes a myriad of academic support activities and covers aspects such as the characteristics of students, the demands of academic programmes and courses, the technological infrastructure, the scale of a programme and the requirements of management. According to Netanda, Mamabolo, and Themane (2017, p. 4),

support interventions for students are academic interactions which take place between academic institutions and their students and involve pre-admissions, recruitment, promotion, registration, orientations, career counselling, emotional support, library support, academic support, financial support and degree and academic records.

HE institutions in Africa face challenges that are of a substantial nature, and operate in rapidly changing contexts. Targeted and fit-for-purpose interventions are required to assist all students in achieving outcomes in HE institutions (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2017). These targeted interventions should address

specific educational problems and should, in this case, be aimed at providing support to SWVI. HE institutions should not only provide support to SWVI, but also measure the effectiveness of the support provided. These intervention strategies should be aimed at assisting SWVI in making their learning effective. The intention for doing this is to ensure that SWVI, who experience unique challenges in HE environments, can benefit from HE educational services despite their physical incapacities. Promoting the phenomenon of equal provision of educational opportunities to both disabled and able-bodied students constitutes social justice. HE institutions should be aware of the fact that SWVI have to be appropriately and consistently provided with support and aid just like other students to help them cope in their tertiary studies.

Inadequate and inappropriate student aid or support programmes for SWVI present barriers to establishing HE environments that are more inclusive. Therefore, a rethinking of student support for marginalised students, particularly those with visual impairments, is imperative. [Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon \(2011\)](#) maintain that when students are provided with proper support, educational outcomes are achieved. Student support constitutes the powerful means of providing students with opportunities to succeed in their studies. [Engstrom and Tinto \(2008\)](#) argue that access without support is no opportunity at all. They hold the view that it is pointless to provide wider participation and access for all with inadequate support services. [Alhammadi \(2014, p. i\)](#) argues that ‘the history of the education of students with vision impairments has globally shown a long and difficult struggle’. [Ludeman, Osfield, Hidalgo, Oste, and Wang \(2009\)](#) believe that for the HE enterprise to be applied consistently and to be of top quality, it must be grounded in a set of principles and values that take into consideration the expressed needs of the people it serves: that is, students. HE institutions should, therefore, provide valuable resources such as classrooms, libraries and technology that are easily accessible for SWVI.

SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCEPTUALISED

This chapter is concerned with how social justice could be used in HE to achieve fairness and justice for all students ([Brennan & Naidoo, 2008](#)) including SWVI. [Brennan and Naidoo \(2008\)](#) maintain that participation in HE should be made socially just and equitable. Creating enabling, supportive and inclusive educational spaces promotes social justice, since no students can be denied access on the basis of physical disability or limitation (Tait, 2013). Providing appropriate student support programmes and services promotes inclusive education, which constitutes social justice ([Lalvani, 2013](#)). The concept of social justice has received considerable attention within HE policy in recent years ([Brennan & Naidoo, 2008](#)). Researchers present differing views when dealing with the construct of social justice. [Liasidou \(2013\)](#) contends that social justice is an unclear and contested term. According to [Furman \(2012\)](#), social justice presents major concerns for many current scholars and practitioners, and it is loaded with a range of terms such as equity, equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action and, most

recently, diversity. Social justice theorists argue that in educational contexts, education systems reproduce social inequalities in the broader society by reinforcing the status quo (Gabriel, 2017). Social justice theorists further hold the view that HE institutions should create democratic spaces for students (Giroux, 2017). In attempting to describe and contextualise the meaning of the concept of social justice, the following question by Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust (2006), cited by Brennan and Naidoo (2008) remains critical in this chapter: how can we contribute to the creation of a more equitable, respectful and just society for everyone? Relating this question to HE contexts, access and student support should also be extended to SWVI.

Rawls views pedagogical practices that do not effectively assist SWVI as an injustice. He further claims that social justice is the way in which the major social institutions such as HE institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties. Taking the views of Rawls into consideration, the theory of social justice is apposite to HE. Rawls (1971), as a proponent of egalitarianism, believed in equal opportunity for every citizen and the inclusion of SWVI in accessing and being adequately supported perpetuate this view. Rawls (1971) argued that for individuals to enjoy equality and fairness of opportunity, an institution should create an enabling environment where the liberties of individuals are easily exercised without inhibition. Rawls regarded social justice as the first virtue of social institutions. HE institutions as social systems have the responsibility of ensuring that quality education and support programmes are provided to all students irrespective of impairment or incapacity and, in particular, SWVI. In agreeing with Rawls, Theoharis (2007) postulates that social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition and empathy. According to Goldfarb and Grinberg in Theoharis (2007), social justice is the exercise of changing the institutional and organisational arrangements by actively engaging in recovering, appropriating, sustaining and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality and fairness in social, economic, educational and personal dimensions. HE settings as social systems have to ensure that their services are distributed fairly and justly. Failure to distribute such services amounts to unfairness and does not promote the culture of wider access and participation to all categories of the HE student community.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A WIDENING PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

Villalobos, Treviño, Wyman, and Scheele (2017) hold the view that the debate regarding the role of education systems in the promotion of social justice is intense and long-standing. In as much as HE institutions of many countries prioritised mass participation in HE, the foundational principles of social justice were eroded. Özoğlu, Gür, and Gümüs (2016) contend that the expansion agenda behind the massification of HE resulted in overcrowded classrooms, poor maintenance and insufficient research facilities such as laboratories and libraries, particularly in HE institutions in Africa. In view of the challenges related to

basic educational infrastructure, one can claim that rolling out technology intervention strategies for SWVI still remains a pipedream for most HE institutions in most parts of Africa and perpetuates social injustice. Providing appropriate technology-driven support programmes promotes access and success in HE, particularly for SWVI (UNESCO, 2011). This also supports the views of Rawls on the main function of state institutions, namely, ensuring that fair and equitable basic rights are distributed.

The Rawlsian perception of social justice is premised on the idea that marginalised students have to be provided with opportunities for support, excellence and success in HE. Griffiths (2003) also maintains that exclusion and non-recognition constitute additional components of social injustice. Equal opportunity is considered a primary value in institutions of higher learning in Africa, therefore, SWVI should be afforded such equal opportunities for all despite people's physical defects (Allen, 2017; Harvey et al., 2010). The ability to attend HE institutions should not be a privilege of the few, particularly those who are financially and physically capable, but should be extended to SWVI. Liasidou (2013, p. 303) contends that:

notwithstanding the varied ways in which social justice is understood and acted upon, there is overwhelming evidence documenting the ways in which particular groups of students experience inequities and discrimination at a number of levels.

Expansion and broader access and admission to HE for all students, including SWVI, promotes fairness and justice. HE plays a critical role in making sure that it serves the public good, and should avoid putting more emphasis on revenue generation and individual benefits (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2015). The theory of social justice is founded on the principles of care, empathy, support, respect, recognition (Lalvani, 2013; Gerwitz in Theoharis, 2007) fairness, opportunity and democracy. HE institutions are social systems and, therefore, expected to distribute their educational services based on these principles.

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a synoptic analysis of and reflections on rethinking student support programmes and services in HE, with specific reference to SWVIs. In this chapter, it was argued that the student support programmes and services provided by HE institutions do not adequately cater for marginalised students, especially those with impaired vision. Building on extant relevant literature and drawing heavily on the Rawlsian perspective of social justice, it was argued that there is inadequate support services for SWVI in HE in Africa and this constitutes social injustice. The following themes were discussed: widening participation as a policy imperative, technology as a widening participation strategy in HE in Africa, rethinking of student support for marginalised students was problematised HE support programmes and services, social justice conceptualised and social justice as a widening participation strategy.

NOTES

1. Marginalised students in the text refers to students who do not fully participate in HE as result of disablement due to their visual impairment

2. Visual impairment could be merely defined as an eye defect, which hampers the educational performance of an individual such that the individual needs some adaptation and modification in different academic areas (Abdo, 2009, p. 4).

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