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The social needs and problems of higher education students with impairments

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There has been a huge influx of students with impairments into higher education, mainly as a result of legislation in this regard. In the light of this development, research was undertaken to determine the social needs and problems experienced by a group of higher education students with impairments in South Africa. A survey of 751 students at three universities showed that students with impairments comprised less than 0.5% of the student population. It appears from this survey that the general perception of students with impairments is that people without impairments have little or no understanding of them and/or their circumstances. The majority of students with impairments felt that they were not easily accepted by other students and that they themselves did not find it easy to make friends with other students.

Die sosiale behoeftes en probleme van 'n groep hoëronderwysstudente met gestremdhede

Gedurende die afgelope aantal jare is daar 'n groot toename in die aantal hoër onderwysstudente met gestremdhede. Hierdie toename kan grootliks toegeskryf word aan wetgewing in hierdie verband. In die lig van hierdie ontwikkelinge is navorsing gedoen om te bepaal wat die sosiale behoeftes en probleme van studente met gestremdhede in die hoëronderwys is. Uit 'n ondersoek by drie Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite waarby 751 studente betrokke was, is gevind dat studente met gestremdhede minder as 0.5% van die totale studentegemeenskap uitmaak. Volgens die bevindinge van hierdie ondersoek blyk dit dat studente met gestremdhede van mening is dat niegestremdes min of geen begrip het vir gestremdes of hulle besondere omstandighede nie. Die meerderheid van hierdie studente ervaar dat hulle nie maklik deur niegestremde studente aanvaar word nie, en hulle vind dit moeilik om met niegestremde studente vriende te maak.

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The human dignity of every person, regardless of race, colour, appearance or ability, is generally accepted today. Indeed, the right of every person to equal treatment is protected by many declarations of the United Nations and in the constitutions of most countries. However, this attitude towards people with disabilities did not always exist. The nature of disabilities has been conceptualised in different ways in various communities and various historical periods (Engelbrecht & Green 2001: 3).

1.1 Historical background

In past centuries people with disabilities or impairments were rejected, isolated, ridiculed or even exterminated in accordance with the view of the community at the time. With a few exceptions, the life of such people during the early centuries was difficult and unhappy (Kapp 1991: 4).

At the turn of the eighteenth/nineteenth century, a new period dawned — one in which the first attempts were made to help the disabled in a systematic and scientific manner (Kapp 1991: 6). It was only after such developments as the Renaissance, the Reformation and the French Revolution that the prospects of people with disabilities started to improve. These developments ushered in a period of great change and renewal in social, industrial and scientific endeavour, while great progress was made in fields such as physiology, neurology and physics. The resultant acknowledgement of the inherent value of every individual gave rise to a more scientific approach to the treatment of people with disabilities and paved the way for the first systematic attempts to teach the disabled (Du Toit 1997: 9-10). Many schools, institutions and centres for the care, treatment and teaching of people with disabilities were established throughout Europe and the USA. The successes achieved by these pioneers inspired many more people to become involved, ushering in a period of immense interest in people with impairments.

According to Fulcher (1989: 26-31), there have been four different approaches to disability over the years. She refers to these as the lay, charity, medical, and rights discourses. The lay discourse is characterised by prejudice, pity, ignorance, misplaced patronage and even

resentment. The charity discourse defines people with disabilities as in need of help and as objects of pity who are permanently dependent on assistance from others. The medical discourse considers disability to be an abnormal and irremediable condition.

The problem of dealing with people with disabilities was historically regarded as predominantly a health and welfare issue. The medical model perceives "disabled people" as "objects" to be "treated" and "changed" in accordance with standards commonly accepted by society. All interventions are based on assessment, diagnosis and labelling (Office of the Deputy President 1997: 9). Failure to change became primarily the problem of the people with impairments themselves (Ash *et al* 1997: 606).

Although this approach may have some relevance in the natural world, it misconceives the social world. The ordinary educational needs of children with impairments were not taken into account. In many cases such children were removed from society and kept in institutions. The dependency created by these drastic measures disempowered people with impairments, isolated them from the mainstream of society and denied them access to fundamental social, political and economic rights (Office of the Deputy President 1997: 9). It was only much later that educationists realised their responsibility in this regard and became involved in the teaching of people with disabilities.

1.2 Recent developments

Since the beginning of the 1980s, organisations of and for disabled people all over the world have worked to reposition disability as a human rights issue. This development has given rise to a school of thought in philosophy which has been reflected in education in the form of critical pedagogics (Du Toit 1997: 20). In terms of this approach, disability is caused by barriers to learning and development which occur as a result of societal injustices inflicted on people with impairments. Disability can thus be seen as a particular form of social oppression.

This has resulted in a social model of disability which is based on the premise that if society cannot cater for people with impairments, it is society which must change, rather than the person concerned.

Individuals who have impairments become disabled by virtue of social and cultural norms which reflect a preoccupation with "normality" (Ash *et al* 1997: 606). The disability rights movement believes, therefore, that the "cure" to the "problem" of disability lies in the restructuring of society. An understanding of disability as a human rights and development issue leads to the recognition and acknowledgement that people with impairments have full citizenship and should therefore enjoy equal rights and responsibilities (Office of the Deputy President 1997: 10-1). This approach coincides with the view of Fulcher (1989: 30) on the rights discourse, which emphasises self-reliance, independence and consumer wants rather than needs. In this approach the focus is on equality and full citizenship.

Any society includes individuals of diverse cultures, languages, races, genders, abilities and temperaments. Indeed, it is normal for a society to comprise diverse individuals. In reality, a society which excludes certain individuals is not "normal" because it does not fully reflect its diversity (cf Burden 1995: 45; Jenkins & Sileo 1994: 16; Rankin *et al* 1994: 237). Each person must be viewed as an individual with his or her own needs. Therefore, as far as education is concerned, curricula, assignments and teaching methods must be adapted to each person, and not only to learners with special educational needs. The concepts "education for all" and "inclusion", which emphasised this idea, gave rise to the notion and practice of inclusive education.

Engelbrecht & Green (2001: 4) describe inclusive education as educational policies and practices that uphold the right of learners with disabilities to belong and to learn in mainstream education. Inclusive education assumes that local mainstream schools and classrooms are generally the most appropriate settings for all learners. This does not necessarily mean that all learners with disabilities have to be in mainstream classrooms all the time. It does, however, mean that the rights of such learners to belong in school and in society be recognised by planners and educators.

However, a commitment to inclusive education can become reality only when a culture of learning is cultivated for all children, irrespective of their origin, background or circumstances (Donald *et al* 1997: 22).

1.3 The situation in South Africa

Due to the general transformation of South Africa, as reflected in the Constitution, the rights of all people in the country, irrespective of race, gender, ethnic or social descent, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, faith, culture, language, etc are protected. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution specifically mentions the issue of disability as one of the criteria on which the principle of equality must be based (Office of the Deputy President 1997: 17). Therefore, not only schools but all institutions of education (including higher education) should take government policy as well as the diversity of the community into account when designing and implementing their education and training programmes.

However, due to the inequalities of the past, this is fraught with difficulty in respect of disability. According to Donald *et al* (1997: 237) South Africa has an inadequate and divided system for meeting the needs of children with individual disabilities or difficulties in learning. In the past, departments which catered for the special educational needs of whites, coloureds and Indians were quite well developed. On the other hand, services for black children with impairments had hardly been developed at all. In this sector, there have been two main results. In most cases, children with impairments have simply not been able to attend school at all. The other possibility, for those who have been able to attend school, has been a form of "mainstreaming". However, this should be seen as negative because the necessary facilities, resources and specialised help have not been provided. Such "mainstreaming" is therefore contrary to the principles of inclusive education.

The views of Donald *et al*, above, are emphasised by the following figures released by the Department of Education (2001: 13). During 2001 there were 64 603 learners with impairments in special schools in South Africa. However, it is estimated that 280 000 learners with impairments under the age of 18 are unaccounted for (Department of Education 2001: 9). This means that less than 20% of the disabled school population has been accommodated in special schools, leaving more than 80% of children with impairments outside the school system.

In the light of the large number of children with impairments thus excluded from the primary and/or secondary school system, the current situation of higher education, too, calls for investigation.

1.4 The situation of higher education

Over the past two to three decades there has been a huge influx of students with impairments into institutions of higher education worldwide. According to studies done in the USA (Malakpa 1997: 14; West *et al* 1993: 457; Hartman 1993: 9), students with impairments form 7 to 10.5% of the higher education population. This increase can be attributed to non-discriminatory legislation and to the fact that many students with impairments now receive better secondary-school preparation and aspire to enter professions or occupations that require post-secondary education (Hitchings *et al* 1998: 23).

With the passage and implementation of non-discriminatory legislation, there have been many changes in higher education. However, despite these changes, students with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Malakpa 1997: 14). Thus, it is clear that the transition of these students into higher education is not problem-free. As can be expected, the increasing number of higher education students with impairments and the problems they encounter have triggered a sharp increase in research on the topic (Malakpa 1997: 13).

In their study on the experience of disabled students, Ash *et al* (1997: 605) found that staff and non-disabled students were unaware of the various issues facing higher education students with impairments. The following aspects are relevant to the current survey (Ash *et al* 1997: 619):

- Staff were seen as helpful, but not always well-informed about disability issues.
- There was considerable ignorance among other students concerning the circumstances of students with disabilities.
- Social contact between disabled and non-disabled students was not extensive.

According to Malakpa (1997: 14), the problems faced by higher education students with disabilities fall into five categories:

- half-hearted involvement on the part of administration;
- accessibility;
- support services;
- the attitude of faculty members and the rest of the university community, and
- other general problems.

Malakpa (1997: 17) also indicated that numerous myths, misconceptions, stereotypes and faulty generalisations serve to impede the social inclusion, full participation and academic success of higher education students with impairments. These cause attitudinal barriers which are more difficult to eliminate than physical barriers and lead to the isolation of such students. In this regard Boxer (1990: 276) mentions that attitude is more of a barrier to access than subject matter.

In their research on the attitude of faculty toward students with learning disabilities, Vogel *et al* (1999: 174) summarised the findings of a number of studies as follows:

- Gender — female faculty members expressed more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities than male faculty members.
- Knowledge — faculty members who were more knowledgeable about disabilities had more positive attitudes than those who were less knowledgeable.
- Academic field — faculty in education were found to have more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities than faculty in business or the social sciences.
- Experience — faculty members who had more contact and teaching experience with students with disabilities had more positive attitudes and were more willing to allow for accommodation than those with less experience.

Against this background, the following question is raised: What progress has South Africa made in meeting the needs of higher education students with impairments during the past decade, with special reference to social integration?

2. Explanation of concepts

The meaning attached to the concept of "disability" is changing. It is now accepted that disability stems from barriers to learning caused by a community's attitude towards people with physical and/or phy-

siological impairments. According to Du Toit *et al* (2000: 5-6) the official definition accepted by the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons in the Office of the Presidency is based on a socio-political perspective on disability and states that disability is localised in the environment. Therefore disability is seen as the social restrictions and constraints imposed on people with impairments in their pursuit of full and equal participation. This means that a person with a physical and/or physiological impairment is not necessarily disabled. An impaired person in a wheelchair is disabled only when he/she does not have access to a building.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study and in the rest of this report the concept of "students with impairments" will be used. The terms "disabled" or "disability/ies" will only appear in quotations of other authors or respondents.

3. Methodology

Four institutions of higher education were approached for permission to undertake this survey on their campuses. They were selected on the basis of size and type. The largest distance institution, two large residential universities and the largest technikon in the country were included in the request. However, the technikon did not respond and was therefore not included in the survey.

After a literature review, a questionnaire consisting of 74 items was compiled. Both quantitative data (through closed-form items) and qualitative data (through open questions) were obtained. The last four questions on the questionnaire were open, allowing respondents to express in their own words the influence of their impairment on their studies, their need to be academically successful, and recommendations for more effectively assisting higher education students with impairments.

Before the questionnaire was finalised, it was scrutinised by two lecturers in Special Needs Education. In addition, a student with impairments was requested to respond to the questionnaire. Obscurities were removed and a number of questions were reformulated. The questionnaire was also recorded on audiotape to accommodate students

with visual or physical impairments who might find it difficult to respond in writing.

The questionnaires that were returned were analysed, with descriptive statistics being used to determine frequencies and percentages. In addition, cross tables and *chi*-square analysis were employed to establish whether significant differences existed between students from distance and residential institutions.

The questionnaires and audiotapes were distributed to 751 students with impairments whose names and addresses had been provided by the institutions. Of these, 704 were enrolled at the institution for distance education and the rest (47) at the two residential universities. After three weeks, follow-up questionnaires were mailed to the same students.

4. Discussion of results

The compilation of the sample in terms of number, gender, race, academic level and nature of impairment is reflected in Tables 1 to 4. Respondents who did not answer a particular item are indicated as "missing" in the tables below. They were also excluded from the sample and therefore percentages are not always based on N = 265.

Table 1: Number and percentage of students with impairments at selected institutions

University	Total number of students	Number of students with impairments	% of total student population
Distance	118 168	704	0.59
Residential 1	28 093	17	0.06
Residential 2	22 713	30	0.13
Total	168 974	751	0.44

According to the census-return of 1996 (Dept of Statistics 1996) approximately 6.6% of the total population of South Africa (or 2 657 714 people) are impaired in some way. As can be seen from Table 1, students with disabilities represented only 0.44% of the total student population at the selected institutions. Although it would be unrealistic to expect the number of higher education students with impairments to reflect the proportion in the total population, the percentage seems far lower than could be expected.

Table 2: Number and percentage of students with impairments in the sample

University	Number of students with impairments in sample	% of students with impairments in sample
Distance	247	93.2
Residential 1	10	3.8
Residential 2	8	3
Total	265	100

Of the 751 questionnaires that were sent out, a total of 265 were returned. This represents a total response rate of 35.28%. Of these, 18 were students from the two residential universities, which represents a return rate of 38.29%. For the purposes of this survey the data of the students from the two residential universities will be combined. 247 distance education students returned their questionnaires, representing a return rate of 35.08%.

Table 3: Gender, race and academic level of students with impairments

	Residential		Distance		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Gender						
Male	8	44.4	121	49.0	129	48.7
Female	10	55.6	121	49.0	131	49.4
Missing	0	0	5	2.0	5	1.9
Total	18	100	247	100	265	100
Race						
Asian	0	0	26	10.5	26	9.8
Black	1	5.6	78	31.6	79	29.8
Coloured	1	5.6	6	2.4	7	2.7
White	16	88.8	134	54.3	150	56.6
Missing	0	0	3	1.2	3	1.1
Total	18	100	247	100	265	100
Academic level						
Undergraduate	13	72.2	180	72.9	193	72.8
Postgraduate	5	27.8	63	25.5	68	25.7
Missing	0	0	4	1.6	4	1.5
Total	18	100	247	100	265	100

According to Table 3 there was an almost even distribution of men (48.7%) and women (49.4%) in the sample, with the majority of students being white (56.6%) and the distribution of undergraduate and postgraduate students being almost the same in contact and distance education (approximately 73% undergraduate and 27% postgraduate).

Table 4: Nature of impairment

	Residential		Distance		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Nature of impairment						
Blind	1	5.6	14	5.7	15	5.7
Partially sighted	6	33.3	48	19.4	54	20.4
Deaf	0	0	6	2.4	6	2.3
Partially hearing	1	5.6	7	2.8	8	3.0
Epilepsy	2	11.1	15	6.1	17	6.4
Cerebral palsy	3	16.6	19	7.7	22	8.3
Physical impairment	4	22.2	81	32.8	85	32.0
Chronic illness	1	5.6	39	15.8	40	15.1
Other	0	0	11	4.5	11	4.2
Missing	0	0	7	2.8	7	2.6
Total	18	100	247	100	265	100

Despite the fact that there are almost twice as many people with visual impairments in South Africa than people with physical impairments (Dept of Statistics 1996), there are more students with physical impairments (32%) in higher education than with visual impairments than people with physical impairments (26.1%). In this regard Boxer (1990: 275) has pointed out that tutors of "academic" subjects encounter more problems with a blind student than with a student in a wheelchair. This could indicate that there are more barriers to entrance for higher education students with visual impairments or that there is insufficient provision for their needs, while students with physical impairments can cope fairly well.

The number of students with aural impairments (deaf and partially hearing) was surprisingly low (5.3%) in comparison with the figure for the population at large (14.4%) (Dept of Statistics 1996).

The 11 students (4.2%) who indicated "Other" as an option specified the following impairments: stammering/stuttering (4), dyslexia (4), mood disorder (2) and mental illness (1). Chronic illnesses were mostly identified as diabetes or asthma.

4.1 Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings from the questionnaire, focusing on the social situation of students with impairments, are summarised in Tables 5 to 7. The option chosen by most students appears in the following tables. However, in some cases more than one option is indicated in order to give additional information and obtain a fuller picture of the students' perceptions.

Table 5: Relationship with lecturers

Relationship with lecturers	f	%
All my lecturers are considerate as far as my disability is concerned (50.9%) Some of my lecturers are considerate (26.4%) None of my lecturers are considerate (22.7%)	112	50.9
Lecturers' knowledge of disabilities is limited	150	67.3
My lecturers treat me like any other student	224	90.0
Lecturers fully accept me	182	77.4

From Table 5 it is evident that most of the students with impairments (77.4%) felt fully accepted and that their lecturers treated them like any other student (90.0%). In a survey done by Vogel *et al* (1999: 183) it was also found that faculty attitudes were very positive in terms of willingness to accommodate students with impairments, in respect of both teaching and examining, but that they were most willing to accommodate students in the ways which were least time-consuming. Despite this positive perception, it is quite alarming that 67.3% of respondents felt that their lecturers' knowledge of disabilities was limited and that only 50.9% experienced all their lecturers as considerate. The latter implies that 49.1% perceived some (26.4%) or none (22.7%) of their lecturers to be considerate as far as their impairments were concerned. This finding coincides with that of Ash *et al* (1997: 614 & 618), namely that, in general, staff were seen as helpful, although not always well-informed about issues of disability

and that they not necessarily have the necessary knowledge, experience and awareness of issues relating to disability. In this regard Malakpa (1997: 15) also mentioned that one of the greatest problems facing higher education students with impairments is a lack of full commitment and a lack of knowledge concerning the type and extent of services to be provided by administration and faculty.

Table 6: Relationship with friends

Relationship with friends	f	%

I spend most of my time:
    with family (54.5%)
    with friends (24.2%)
    alone (21.2%)
	144	54.5

I have:
    many friends (44.3%)
    a few friends (45.8%)
    no friends (9.8%)
	121	45.8

Most of my friends are not students	198	75.9
My friends are mostly people without disabilities	235	90.7

I have made:
    no new friends since I have registered (47.9%)
    a few new friends since I have registered (42.9%)
    many new friends since I have registered (9.3%)
	124	47.9

Students with disabilities do not easily make friends with other students	157	62.1
Students with disabilities are not easily accepted by other students	172	67.5
My friends at the university are not my friends at home	202	79.8

From Table 6 it appears that most students with impairments had sufficient social relationships. Almost 80% indicated that they spent most of their time with family (54.5%) or friends (24.2%) and more than 90% indicated that they had either a few (45.8%) or many friends (44.3%). More importantly, 67.5% of students with impairments felt that they were not easily accepted by other students and 62.1% did not find it easy to make friends with fellow students. It is particularly disturbing that 21.2% indicated that they spent most of their time alone and 9.8% that they did not have any friends at all.

These findings are supported and, to an extent, explained by those of Ash *et al* (1997: 612): that non-disabled students feel uncertain

about how to behave towards students with impairments. People without impairments experience feelings of embarrassment, guilt and confusion because they do not know what to do or how to help people.

Table 7: Relationship with other people

Relationship with other people	f	%

People without disabilities:
    have little understanding of disabled people (60.3%)
    have no understanding of disabled people (16.4%)
    understand disabled people (23.3%)
	158	60.3

I find it easy to ask for help (49%) I find it difficult to ask for help (37.3%) I do not need help (13.7%)	129	49
When I am in a situation where I need help, I prefer to ask for it	189	73.3
When people offer help I have not asked for, I feel thankful	199	76.8

I have:
    little contact with other disabled people (41.2%)
    no contact with other disabled people (39.7%)
    a lot of contact with other disabled people (19.1%)
	108	41.2

Students with disabilities should not be grouped together	215	83.7
Universities should not have a separate student room/lounge for disabled students	205	79.5
I do not need more contact with other students with disabilities	136	51.3

The general perception (76.7%) among the students with impairments was that people without disabilities had little (60.3%) or no (16.4%) understanding of their situation. In a situation where they need help, 73.3% thus prefer to ask for it, but only 49.0% find this easy, while 37.3% find it difficult. This is supported by the findings of Ash *et al* (1997: 615): that students with impairments dislike having to ask peers for help in situations where their needs have not been anticipated.

Despite the above-mentioned, the majority (83.7%) of the students with impairments felt that they should not be grouped together. This implies that they want to be part of mainstream education and the general student population. This is further emphasised by the fact that 79.5% indicated that they did not want facilities such as rooms or lounges just for them.

4.2 Qualitative findings

4.2.1 Relationship with lecturers

From the quantitative findings it is clear that many of the students believed lecturers' knowledge of impairments to be limited and that people without impairments have little or no understanding of those with impairments. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of these students suggested that "staff should be trained to deal with disabled students", that there should be "workshops/awareness campaigns on disability for non-disabled students and lecturers … so that they can accept disabled people as 'normal' people" and that "posters, briefings and/or audio-visual means to educate non-sufferers to help make life easier for sufferers" should be provided.

The majority of these students preferred not to notify their lecturers of their impairment. The reason for this may be found in the following statement by one student:

> Personally, I would prefer for my lecturers not to be made aware of my disability since I feel it would prejudice them in terms of assessing my ability. However, in the unlikely event of an episode recurring, I would like the opportunity to state my case to a qualified, empathetic, accommodating ear.

4.2.2 Relationship with other students

It appears that there is a need for more contact with other students and that some students with impairments would prefer to be assisted by other students. Examples of such responses included a request for: "study groups where students can work together and where able students can help disabled students" and "please identify normal graduate students who are willing to assist students with disabilities". A large number of students with impairments requested

> … that the names of students with impairments be distributed to other students with the same or similar impairments so that they can form academic and social support groups to encourage one another.

Students with impairments felt very strongly that they must be treated equally and that there should be no discrimination against them on the basis of their impairment. Examples included: "Treat me

like everyone else"; "my greatest desire is social acceptance and not being under-estimated"; " we do not require 'special' treatment, just understanding and compassion", and "empathy, not sympathy".

Students with impairments also expressed a need for integration into student life at large and on the organisational level. For example: "do not separate normal and disabled students"; "there should be a forum for disabled students where we can meet and support each other"; "sport facilities should be provided for disabled students", and "students with disabilities should have representation on the SRC".

4.3 Differences between students from different types of universities

Due to different contexts of study, differences of opinion among students from different types of universities are to be expected. Cross tables and *chi*-square analysis were employed to determine these differences. As far as their social situation was concerned, significant differences among students from different types of universities were determined in the following instances.

4.3.1 Perceptions regarding lecturers' expectations of students

Significantly more ($p < 0.05$) residential students (22.2%) than students in distance education (6.1%) felt that their lecturers underestimated their potential. This is probably due to the fact that residential students have much more direct contact with their lecturers than students in distance education.

4.3.2 The way students spend their time

As expected, significantly more ($p < 0.01$) residential students (61.1%) than students in distance education (21.6%) indicated that they spent more time with friends. Significantly more students in distance education (57.2%) than residential students (22.2%) indicated that they spent more time with their families.

4.3.3 Contact with other people with impairments

As far as contact with other people with impairments was concerned, significantly more ($p < 0.05$) students in distance education (41.6%) than residential students (11.1%) appeared to have no contact with

other people with impairments. Significantly more residential students (33.3%) than students in distance education (18.1%) had a great deal of contact with other people with impairments.

4.3.4   Type of friends

As expected, significantly more (p < 0.01) residential students (66.7%) than students in distance education (6.1%) had other students as friends.

4.3.5   The number of new friends they have made since registration

Since residential students with impairments are in more frequent contact with other students, they also have many more opportunities to make new friends. Hence, it is understandable that significantly more (p < 0.01) of them (50.0%) indicated that they had made many new friends since registration, while only 5.8% of students in distance education could say the same.

5.   Recommendations

The purpose of this survey was to give students with impairments the opportunity to "speak for themselves". The following is a summary of the recommendations made by the students themselves on improving their social situation.

5.1 Lecturing staff

The general perception among students with impairments was that people without impairments have little or no understanding of people with impairments and/or their circumstances. The following recommendations were made:

• There should be awareness campaigns for "normal" students and staff members to make them aware of the specific needs of students with impairments.

• A brochure on impairments should be distributed to all staff members and students.

5.2 Other students/friends

The majority of students with impairments felt that they were not easily accepted by other students and that they did not find it easy to make friends with other students. The following recommendations were made:

• Identify "normal" graduate students who are willing to assist students with impairments and form study groups where students can work together and where "able" students can help students with impairments.

• Facilitate more interaction between students with impairments and "able" students. Distribute the names of these students to other students with the same or similar impairments so that they can form academic and social support groups to encourage each other.

• Do not separate students. Students with impairments feel very strongly that they should not be grouped together. They do not want separate facilities such as a separate lounge.

• Create a forum for students with impairments where they can meet other students and support each other. Sports facilities should be provided and they should have representation on the Student Representative Council.

6.   Conclusion

Findings reported here cannot be generalised as the survey was conducted at only three higher education institutions in South Africa. The fact that only three universities and no technikons or colleges were included should be seen as a limitation. The sample cannot be seen as representative of the situation at higher education institutions in South Africa in general. Therefore, further research at all institutions of higher education is needed to determine the specific needs and problems of students with impairments at a particular institution. In addition, the findings must be cautiously interpreted because the return rate was only 35%. The needs and problems experienced by the other 65% of the total population (the non-respondents) are not reflected.

However, the purpose of this research project was to determine the needs and problems of South African higher education students with impairments. In the past, many studies were done and recommendations made on behalf of students with impairments without consulting them or including their views. Therefore, this survey specifically attempted to give students with impairments the opportunity to express their views on their circumstances, their needs and their problems.

Improving the academic context of students with impairments is a moral obligation. In the words of the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal (Dept of Education 2001: 4):

> Let us work together to nurture our people with disabilities so that they also experience the full excitement and joy of learning, and to provide them, and our nation, with a solid foundation for lifelong learning and development.

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