

# Possibilities of Educating the Physically Disadvantaged; Lessons from Institutions Making a Difference.

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**Abstract:**

*The purpose of this paper is to highlight the teaching methods being used at the Xuhui University for continuing education a branch school of Shanghai Open University sighting pedagogy used and support systems in place in the education of disabled students.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *A qualitative case study conducted through the comparison of working models currently being used successfully.*

**Findings** – *Xuhui University provides education to disabled students successfully through the provision of extended teaching and examination hours, collaboration with industry and providing an academically enabling environment for students with disabilities.*

**Research implications** – *Universities in less Developed Countries like Africa can emulate some of the methods being used so as to encourage children and adults with disabilities to aspire to higher education.*

**Practical implications** – *Can African Universities emulate those in more developed countries to provide a much-needed education for the physically disadvantaged?*

**Originality/value** – *The literature discussed the set up at Xuhui University and how they are making education possible for the disabled and also the challenges faced by disabled students in developing countries. Learning from this can help Universities in developing countries change the way they look at students with disabilities.*

**Keywords:** *Physically disabled, visual impairment, Hearing impairment, education, diversity.*

## Introduction

Students with disabilities are not normally specifically accommodated whether in terms of infrastructure or academically in most Universities in developing countries. Disability is defined by the WHO (2011) as quoted by [4], as “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions”. From the definition we can see that a disability does not say unable to, but that it just causes some limitations. It limits a person from some activities and gives a person some restrictions. Other than that a person is still capable of doing certain things to the best of their ability.

Going through most university sites for developing countries, some have mere policies that say they do not discriminate against persons with disabilities, but they do not have any facilities displayed showing that they academically accommodate students with disabilities. Some have written articles on educating students with disabilities, but nothing to show what facilities a student with disabilities can have access to.

[7] Observed that it was important to be academically inclusive for students with disabilities to enable them make a normal academic transition and social life on campus. Universities need to provide facilities and incentives that can assist physically disadvantaged students the right support to help them with their studies.

The Shanghai Open University has a branch called Xuhui University of Continuing Education which has a department meant to specifically accommodate the academic needs of students with disabilities. These students have various disabilities from visual or hearing impairments to various physical disabilities. In Universities in developed countries such as the UK students with learning disabilities are protected and should not be discriminated by higher learning institutions, [10].

Students at Xuhui University are educated in courses such as Computer studies, business courses or the arts. The students are incorporated into various activities held by the university. Most of their students are able to get jobs in some cases before graduation. They are encouraged to use what they learn to actually come up with their own unique products. It is important to note that this study did not focus on what is currently prevailing in Universities in Africa, but what lessons can be learned from Xuhui University a branch school of Shanghai University of China on how the University has developed an inclusive program for students with disabilities.

## Back Ground of the Study

Educating physically disabled, visually impaired and hearing-impaired students is not common practice in higher education facilities around Africa. Most students who make it to final grade 12 level education do not find themselves going to universities due

to their disabilities which disadvantage them from getting a higher education. This paper looks at the possibilities of providing certain courses for such students based on lessons from Xuhui University of Continuing Education a branch school of the Shanghai Open University of China. The study also includes interview results from an NGO based in Kabwe, Zambia that looks into the education of children and adults with disabilities.

## Literature Review

[7] In their study discussed the provision of adaptive learning environments (ALE) aimed at improving the provision of courses for students with disabilities. They emphasised that the provision of ALEs would ensure that students with disabilities are catered for. We can affirm this statement because the provision of a learning environment for students with disabilities can be enhanced if the students are provided the necessary support needed for them to understand the information, analyse it and be able to practice what they have learnt. However, the emphasis by [7] with regards to the provision of state of the art facilities leaves much to be desired because practically speaking the disabled students of Xuhui University seems to get more hands-on support from lecturers and tutors through extended teaching hours than through state of the art equipment. This can be argued that the extra help they need may have to come from the learning providers themselves with or without the aid of state of the art equipment.

This paper brings to light the lack of understanding in educating students with disabilities in developing countries. Most developing countries in general face a lot of challenges and some developing countries have made significant strides in enhancing gender equality were organizations, having gender policies to help them employ a balanced workforce. When it comes to disabilities this hasn't been the case as most developing countries do not seem to put emphasis on educating people with disabilities, researchers' own observation.

Universities may need to provide various provisions for structural modifications to classroom teaching methods, [9]. Because of the diversity in disabilities as students can have a whole range of disabilities from physical, or behavioural [9] it is important to note that his study focuses on three types of disabilities, visual, hearing and physical.

[4] In his article discusses the issue of mentoring students with disabilities. He described the possibilities of mentoring students through technology; e-mentoring. This is also a method used by the Xuhui University except that it's not electronic but in person. Xuhui University actually gets people working in the industry to come and motivate students with disabilities, including former students working in industry. The argument with the e-version would be that they cannot provide the facility to all students because of the various impairments; however, the person to person mentoring would be more effective.

## Key Challenges from Literature

Most authors state the need for universities have state of the art equipment and facilities to provide for physically challenged students, [2, 8, and 9]. These findings can be challenged by the evidence in this study.

Some academic authors report that “lack of support staff/specialist skills/resources has moved into first place”, “Mobile Technologies/learning and staff development remain key challenges” and “lecture capture/recording is new to the top five” (Walker *et al.*, 2014, p. 12) as quoted by [7]. So, the lack of equipment doesn't take first place in this case because staff and specialist skills are more important here. It trickles down to enhancing staff skills and the provision of necessary resources.

“The primary aim of education is to nurture students' intellectual, personal and social development to the highest possible degree (Bennett, 1999)” as quoted by [8]. If education does not attain that it becomes pointless. This applies to education in general and not just disabled students. The argument here then is that a student, regardless of their abilities or lack off should be intellectually challenged through education and the provision of it should not be limited to those without disabilities.

“In the labour market, women with disabilities experience gender discrimination as well as disabling barriers” (World Health Organization (WHO), (2011), [4]. People with disabilities face various barriers,

including discrimination. So, in as much as they are discriminated against in the access to higher education, they are also affected by lack of employment due to the disabilities. Xuhui University tries to tackle the challenges of employability by encouraging possible employers to take on students.

Inclusion in the workplace for people with disabilities is something that needs to be stressed. Some organizations are guilty of this trait as noted by [4]. Just because someone has a disability does not mean they should be excluded and made to feel they are not like everyone else. This discrimination is what can make certain people with disabilities lose hope and not bother with finding work, for fear of not being included in day to day activities in the workplace. “The experience of disabled women in employment in Australia, for example, is described by Meekosha (2006) as “one of low pay and menial work as in sheltered workshops and institutions (p. 170)”, as quoted b, [4].

[5] Also noted in his study the need for some women in organizations to conceal a disability or rather pretend it's not actually there. By doing so they want to pretend the disability doesn't actually exist. Could it be that the disability is concealed because someone feels they will fit better if they try to conceal their ability? Helping people with disabilities accept their disability by providing them the education they need to get better jobs and helping them discover their talents and do those things they would actually be good at may help those that feel

concealing a disability is a better option than accepting the situation.

## Methodology

The study took the form of a case study. It drew information from personal accounts from the Principal running Xuhui University, which is a branch of Shanghai Open University of China in conjunction with the heads of departments responsible for running the disability programs. It took on a practical but a qualitative approach of how the University runs programs for students with disabilities. Disabilities that were encountered in the study include visual impairments, hearing impairments and physical disabilities. The case study was done over a period of six months and the data collected was done through a visitation tour by the researcher on the Shanghai Staff exchange program and personal encounters from the University itself. Included was an interview done with a Director of an organization dealing with children and adults with learning disabilities.

## Findings

The findings are actual activities the University has put in place to provide a conducive learning environment for students with disabilities. It discusses the equipment, pedagogical styles and programs allocated to students with disabilities.

## Learning support needed for students with disabilities

Xuhui University provides learning support in the following ways;

1. The students are provided eBooks instead of hard copy books to make it easier for them to read. For the visually impaired students eBooks can be read to them by the tablet and so this makes it easier for them instead of using Braille as noted by [3]. The provision of eBooks on tablets can make this possible, even in developing countries.
2. Academic office is notified in advance about the writing of examinations by disabled students and so the necessary classrooms are prepared in advance and extra time is provided for the students. This enables those students with disabilities feel provided for and become part of the academic system as they are examined just like any other student.
3. At Xuhui University, one of their most important stakeholders is the volunteers who come in to assist students with disabilities, whether its with helping them get to the train station or helping them find a book these play a huge role in making the lives of disability students much easier.
4. To curb the gap between students with disabilities and those without, Lecturers help the disabled students assimilate into the work environment by giving them a practical approach to what would prevail in a real enterprise. Students are given a task and they are made to finish it without the instructor's help. This helps them develop a feel for the real world and gives them the confidence they need to finish various tasks.

## **Hardware Facilities required for teaching students with disabilities**

At Xuhui University a variety of hardware is used to assist in the teaching of students with disabilities. The following are some of the instruments used;

- “The classrooms are fitted with a vertical drum that acts as a bell that assists instructors keeps students' attention as they are instructed.
- Each classroom has a translation teacher who is provided with a footboard so that each student can see the teachers' translations clearly.
- Software operation courses are projected on a double screen, including general screen projection and object projected on the teachers' platform so that students can see the teachers' operating mode clearly”.

## **Teaching pedagogy**

The instructors at the Xuhui University in order to provide a motivating environment for students with disabilities the following is provided for the students;

Interpreters play a great role in the teaching pedagogy as they do not just provide sign language interpretation but also act as teaching assistants. “The classroom of students with disabilities focuses on spoken language teaching and is supported by sign language interpretation, so it creates a new teaching mode based on professional teacher + sign language interpreting + multimedia courseware”.

Students notes are also uploaded to a network and students are encouraged to do self study after class to help them enhance their knowledge. Most Universities in Africa now have access to platforms such as Moodle, which can give students access to the much-needed resources outside classroom hours.

The students are also provided with after class tutoring through various platforms and they are placed in groups or teams to enhance Interactiveness amongst the students and their tutors.

Due to the students' various limitations and difference in terms of assimilation of academic materials, students are given extra time in classes so as to give them time to understand the subject matter. Students with disabilities take longer to understand because they learn differently and so it is only fair to award them the extra time to be able to assimilate the information given.

Demonstrations that can be done in one go for disabled students; it is done on an individual basis. This gives them a sense of personal care as they are able to learn at their own pace as their disabilities are different and so their learning rates also vary.

## **Providing an Industry demand curriculum**

Xuhui University tries to provide training needs based on what is needed and prevailing in the market. For example, the need for e-commerce has enabled the school

to partner with another University (called Taobao University) which was formed by the company Taobao which runs an e-commerce site known as TAOBAO. The University launched what they call the silent classroom. This method of training encourages the students to work in teams on projects. The school gets senior executives from industry from a diverse pool that come in to mentor the students in various courses such as “Visual Marketing, E-commerce, Art Design, Product Photography, Professional Integration, Workplace Etiquette and We Chat Marketing”.

This clearly shows that by working with industry professionals, especially in sectors such as ICT that need constant new software’s and improvements in systems the educating of students with disabilities can help create a pool of much needed talent and professionals. The educating of students with disabilities can help them become less of a burden to society by giving them the tools to earn an income which in turn can assist them in becoming progressive and independent members of society.

### Type of Courses taught to students with Disabilities at Xuhui University

Xuhui University offers its students a wide variety of programs based on the type of disability below are some of the courses offered. It can be observed from the courses below that the institution is conscious about the courses it offers students with various disabilities but it gives them a variety of options to choose from. This ensures that the students have choices and are not forced into

one program, whether they have an interest or not. It is interesting that courses are tailored to also suit the students' capabilities by offering them programs that may be suitable based on the type of disability.

### Programs offered

<i>Courses</i>	<i>Deaf</i>	<i>Blind</i>	<i>Physically disabled</i>
Animation design & Production	√		
Artistic Design of Decoration	√		
Photography & Cinematography	√		
Drawing	√		
Business Administration		√	√
Advertising Design			√
Social Work		√	√
Urban Public Safety Management		√	√
Vocal Performances			√

a. Table showing courses taken by a specific type of student with a specific disability

## Challenges faced by students with disabilities in a developing country

Students with disabilities in developing countries face a number of challenges before they even finish high school. An interview with the Director of ZACALD an organization dealing with children and adults with learning disabilities yielded the following as the difficulties faced by students in a developing country such as Zambia. The following are some of those challenges:

1. Students in rural areas do not have access to nearby schools; hence this limits their access to primary and secondary school education.
2. Some students experience stigma from family members who sometimes believe they cannot go to school and get an education and so they are kept at home, sometimes it's a fear that their child can get discriminated upon and so they opt not to further their education.
3. Sometimes children drop out of school due to stigmatization in the school environment and this makes it hard for them to further their education.
4. In some instances, the situation cannot be helped as some families may not have the resources to educate and provide what is needed for their disabled children to get an education especially at higher institutions of learning.
5. Sometimes schools lack the extra funding to enable them accommodate students with disabilities and this makes it difficult for them to provide the necessary environment for disabled students whether

its suitable accommodation or appropriate sanitary facilities.

6. The provision for students with disabilities seems to be emphasised at college/ technical skill level and this doesn't help students with disabilities want to go further than that or to do more academic studies.

7. The insistence by some parents of disabled children prefer to send their children to special education schools and not to mainstream schools, this limits the children's abilities as it limits what they learn in special education schools.

It is important to understand the challenges students face even before they finish high school. These could be some of the biggest reasons as to why there are very few students going for higher education in most developing countries facing similar problems.

## Discussion of Findings

The study was performed to access the possibilities of Universities in developing countries, enhancing the education of students with disabilities. The fact that most Universities have very few students with disabilities goes to show that most Universities either do not attract students with disabilities or they do not have the extra facilities to cater for disabled students. These lessons learned from Xuhui University go to show that a University does not need a state of the art classroom to be able to teach students with disabilities. The use of tablets has proved to be a success story in other studies too [1].

The burden most countries have with looking after the disabled is nothing to be proud of. Not having an education makes life very hard for them as they are unable to fend for themselves and in some cases, fend for their families as well. Giving them a trade or a profession will not condemn them to a life of poverty, but will give them access to the much-needed income every single person needs to survive.

Xuhui University is a great example of a University that has not set limits for its students. They have set the bar very high for Universities all over the world. Their students have shown them and given them a reason to keep doing what they are doing as a higher institution of learning. Other Universities should emulate this as there are no limits to what disabled students can or cannot achieve if only they are given a chance. [6] Staff training is key in ensuring the success of such programs.

Most developing countries lack ground support to enable students with disabilities to venture into higher education. The enrolling of students with disabilities in mainstream schools should be encouraged where a school is able to facilitate and accommodate the students academically so that they are able to learn with others in a normal environment, hence enhancing their potential [6]. The results show us that there is potential in the education of students with disabilities and the excuse some institutions may give of lack of equipment is defined by the case study. The provision of an enabling environment is more important than the provision of equipment in this case.

## Recommendations

Each and every University in the developing world should offer a full scholarship to at least one disabled student in every academic year. This can help tap into talent that is untapped due to lack of financial support. The onus is on universities to provide such initiatives to help disabled students get higher education. This can also be done by having companies sponsor certain equipment, e.g. hearing aids, technological equipment or motorized wheelchairs to assist disabled students have a comfortable University life.

Most developing countries have policies that emphasis inclusiveness, but how many universities actually take the time to visit institutions with disabled children to talk about the possibilities of these children getting a higher education. This is something Universities can do as a part of community engagement. Community engagement shouldn't be limited to able physically enabled students, but should be inclusive.

In most developing countries University students are not able to work, they can however be allowed to volunteer in such programs and give them references at the end of their programs to assist them when looking for employment. An alternative would be to allow unemployed youths to be part of the volunteer program to keep them busy.

Budgeting and planning for equipment necessary for educating disabled students

should be allocated and planned for to allow Universities be ready to educate students with disabilities when they do enroll.

However, I would highly recommend that all Universities take the time to teach at least three lecturers assistants in sign language so as to assist students with disabilities if at all they are ever enrolled on campus. This can encourage students with disabilities to enroll in institutions of higher learning as they will know that if they did enroll, they would be catered for. The possibilities for students with disabilities are many. Universities should ensure they have on hand teachers who can interpret sign language at all times or better still employ volunteers who can use sign language in order to assist students with disabilities even if it's on a part time basis.

## **Conclusion**

From the study, we can see from what Xuhui University is doing to maximize inclusiveness in its education of disabled students of Shanghai. Students with disabilities should not be left out of a higher education because there are no teachers or facilities to provide them a service. Universities should be in the forefront providing the much-needed infrastructure materially and academically to encourage diversity at all times.

In following some of the methods highlighted institutions of higher learning can learn from Xuhui University to become inclusive and provide the much-needed support in order to educate learners with

disabilities in order for them to attain degrees, master's degrees and even doctorate degrees. The possibilities are limitless. We can therefore conclude from the case that disabled learners do not need fancy, expensive equipment to be educated by higher learning institutions but more commitment from institutions and industry.

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