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An Evaluation of the University of Ghana’s Disability Policy from Staff and Student Perspectives

Évaluer la politique d'inclusion des personnes handicapées de l'Université du Ghana du point de vue des membres du personnel et des étudiantes et étudiants

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Abstract

While the majority of disability literature focuses on the Global North, many individuals with long-term or recurrent disabilities that significantly affect their prospects of being admitted to Ghanaian postsecondary (called tertiary) schools face restrictions on their options, discrimination, or exploitation. This study examines the University of Ghana’s 2019 Disability Inclusion Strategy Policy in relation to inclusive education, culture, and health. In order to establish the foundation for sustained and paradigm-shifting advancement on disability inclusion at the University of Ghana, this study aims to critically evaluate the obstacles, impacts, and efficacy of the university’s disability policy. The aim of the study was to determine the extent to which the policy has been implemented and to pinpoint the elements that either facilitate or impede its effective execution. Key findings show a high participation rate in higher education in Ghana, but also misrecognition, constraints, frustration, and exclusion of students’ agency, advocacy, and attainment in university education.

Keywords

Disability Policy, University of Ghana, Disability Strategies, Inclusive Education

Résumé

Alors que la majorité de la littérature sur le handicap porte sur les pays du Nord, de nombreuses personnes ayant des handicaps de longue durée ou récurrents, qui affectent fortement leurs chances d’être admises dans les établissements postsecondaires (dits tertiaires) au Ghana, se heurtent à des restrictions dans leurs options, à de la discrimination ou à de l’exploitation. Cette étude analyse la politique stratégique d’inclusion des personnes handicapées adoptée en 2019 par l’Université du Ghana, en lien avec l’éducation inclusive, la culture et la santé. Afin de jeter les bases d’un progrès durable et d’un changement de paradigme en matière d’inclusion des personnes handicapées à l’Université du Ghana, l’étude vise à évaluer de manière critique les

obstacles auxquels cette politique fait face, ainsi que ses effets et son efficacité. L’objectif était de déterminer le degré de mise en œuvre de la politique et d’identifier les facteurs qui en facilitent ou en entravent l’application. Les principaux résultats révèlent un taux élevé de participation à l’enseignement supérieur au Ghana, mais aussi des formes de méconnaissance, de contraintes, de frustration et d’exclusion de l’agentivité, de la mobilisation et de la réussite des étudiantes et étudiants dans leur parcours universitaire.

Mots-clés

Politique en matière de handicap, Université du Ghana, stratégies en matière de handicap, éducation inclusive

Introduction

Education is an internationally recognized human right, and a prerequisite for the enjoyment of other rights, but due to structural and other social barriers, persons with disabilities have limited access to education in Africa. Their challenges with the built environment are evident at the higher education level in African nations such as Botswana, Uganda, Tanzania, and Ghana. To guarantee that persons with disabilities have equitable, inclusive, and non-discriminatory access to education, accessible built environments must be provided. It is imperative to provide appropriate accommodations to fulfill the unique requirements of people with disabilities in settings where their accessibility is clearly compromised. While persons with disabilities' broad needs are the focus of accessibility standards, the individual's unique and pertinent needs require reasonable accommodation measures.

The 1992 Ghanaian Constitution provides for the protection, inclusion, and involvement of people with disabilities in the country's sociocultural and economic activities (Article 29(1)–8). Ghana's adherence to inclusive education was strengthened in 1994 when it signed the Salamanca Declaration, a pledge that came after multiple earlier, haphazard initiatives to address the various needs of people with disabilities, such as granting them access to general education classrooms. Then the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, along with its Optional Protocol, was adopted by the Ghanaian Parliament in 2012 (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Recommendations were given to Ghana in the 2012 cycle to implement efficient policy measures, to build the required infrastructure to address concerns pertaining to the rights of individuals with disabilities,

and to update its domestic legal system to better protect the rights of people with disabilities (Asante & Sasu, 2015).

In this context, postsecondary (also called tertiary) institutions were encouraged to open centres in schools and to publish policies that will help to incorporate and accommodate individuals with disabilities (Gavu et al., 2015). Even if developing nations have adopted the inclusive education tenet, there is sometimes insufficient money, assistance, or expertise to implement an effective system-wide inclusive approach for all students. In 2019, the University of Ghana decided to take the initiative, published the Disability Inclusion Strategy Policy, and set up an office specifically for employees and students with disabilities. At the University of Ghana, students with disabilities encompass those with physical, mental, or sensory impairments, which include visual, hearing, and mild speech disabilities. This paper outlines the contents of the university’s 2019 disability policy and will examine the background of the mandated special office responsible for the welfare of students with disabilities. This paper further evaluates the extent to which the policy has been successful in meeting the needs of both staff and students.

Study Aims and Significance

The phase of the policy cycle known as “policy implementation” is when the players involved carry out key the expectations set in policy in order to address a recognized issue. Actors such as administrative officials and public servants are predominantly involved in this stage because they implement policy programs. One key plank to the implementation of the University of Ghana’s 2019 Disability Inclusion Strategy Policy, the establishment of

disability offices on college campuses does not imply that these institutions are carrying out the goals of the national policy. The University of Ghana's 2019 disability policy must be critically examined in order to determine the extent to which institutional arrangements, policies, and practices have addressed disability issues in order to promote equity, ensure accessibility, and facilitate the provision of high-quality education for people with disabilities.

To address this problem, the aims of this study are as follows:

1. To determine if the 2019 Disability Policy of the University of Ghana is being implemented in a way that complies with its goals and how this translates into the services and supports provided for people with disabilities.
2. To determine the strength of institutional provisions by investigating how participants perceive these institutional arrangements’ influence on higher education accessibility and participation levels for people with disabilities.
3. To investigate the contents of the University of Ghana’s disability policy and to evaluate its efficacy.

The research activity aims to promote the agenda for inclusive higher education for individuals with disabilities in African universities, with a focus on Ghana. The study and its results will enable this endeavour. In order to comply with social justice standards for access and everyone’s full participation in educational matters, it will also offer legislators and higher education institutions pertinent data and analysis. Additionally, the work will educate faculty on best practices for curricula, pedagogy, assessment, attitudes, and ways to handle issues pertaining to students with disabilities. It will inform university leadership about the importance of designing institutional policies aimed at creating enabling institutions and conducive learning environments for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, by promoting discussions and conversations about ways to increase

disability-inclusive higher education access and participation, this work may have a positive effect on the university community's attitude toward people with disabilities. Lastly, it will serve as a valuable resource for future researchers who wish to push the boundaries of disability research in higher education.

Methodology

A qualitative document analysis approach was used in this study because it is within the field of phenomenology, which is related to the study of lived experience. This approach is particularly suitable for the present research, as it will enable a more profound understanding of personal experiences, viewpoints, and emotions. By concentrating on the lived experiences and subjective views of participants, this methodology will yield rich, nuanced insights into the complexities of disability policy.

I used a snowball sampling technique for selecting interviewees, utilizing referrals from initial interviewees to broaden my network of participants. Overall, I included in this paper interview and questionnaire insights from five staff and six students (including 200-, 300-, and 400-level Bachelor of Arts students). I examined the data collected from student surveys, carried out interviews, and reviewed student complaints to gather essential information about the effectiveness of the University of Ghana's disability policy. This approach enabled me to analyze datasets in ways that highlighted the overall significance of the information and offered practical insights, accurate predictions, and informed decision-making related to the policy. Discussions and analysis of the gathered data were closely tied to information on policy evaluation at the University of Ghana.

An exploratory and descriptive research design was expressly selected for the investigation to ensure comprehensive replies from participants. The study’s information came from both primary and secondary sources. Websites, published studies, articles, and the university’s 2019 disability policy were the sources of secondary data. To supplement the current literature, in-person interviews were conducted with university students with disabilities and additional resource staff from the Office of the Students with Special Needs (OSSN). The primary research instrument was a questionnaire, while in-person methods and interview guides were also employed. The delivery of the questionnaire and the method of gathering data were agreed upon for a period of three weeks, during which time each respondent was expected to finish the questionnaire.

Background Literature

Spurred by a global upsurge in disability rights research, Magnus Mfoafo-M’Carthy et al. (2020) claim that Ghana has not been an outlier in Africa, with Ghanaian academics having generated a substantial body of work on disability issues, particularly after 2006. Their extensive literature review found that “many Ghanaian persons with disabilities actively resist oppression and marginalization, which continues to be a major issue in Ghanaian society, in important and unique ways” (p. 2). They identify barriers to education that include gender discrimination, financial difficulties, families regarding education of children with disabilities as a “waste of resources” (p. 4), and inaccessible educational infrastructure.

Mawutor Avoke (2001) chronicles the evolution of special education in Ghana historically (note that the term special education continues to be a common term used in Ghana, to refer to a strategy for educating persons with disabilities distinct from inclusive education). Avoke argues that the British disability rights movement has influenced Ghana’s early development, but the practice of institutionalizing individuals with disabilities (itself attributable to British imperialism) hampers progress toward inclusive education. In a related vein, Lawrence Kofi Ametepée and Dimitris Anastasiou (2015) evaluated special and inclusive education in Ghana, finding that “Ghana’s special and inclusive education system is limited within a marginally developing national education system” (p. 149). They cite as the main problem a “lack of funds for the implementation of educational plans” (p. 150). They also identify cultural barriers: parents pulling their able-bodied children from classrooms that include persons with disabilities, and spirituality-based fear of association with persons with disabilities.

University History According to Staff

The University of Ghana began admitting students with disabilities in the 1990s when the country’s education system took up a commitment to inclusive education, according to the University of Ghana Committee on Facilities for Disabled Students’ Report (University of Ghana, 1993). The study also reports that there was no clear policy or plan in place for management to take care of their requirements. Nonetheless, the university administration started the process of enhancing services for students with disabilities as a result of the steady rise in the number of these students.

At the University of Ghana's (located in Legon), Balme Library's *Braille Library* served as the original home of the Office of Students with Special Needs. Balme was originally established in 1948 at Achimota and relocated to Legon in August of 1959, taking up residence in structures intended to house 350 readers without disabilities. The needs of students with different disabilities, and especially visually impaired students, were not taken into consideration when building the various libraries, according to research on the provision of library and information services to visually impaired students in public universities. However, recent developments in admitting students with various disabilities have forced Balme to create a Braille section (Staff Interview 4, 2024).

The Braille Library was first designed with blind students in mind, but over time, other pupils with a variety of disabilities had to be the main emphasis, including one deaf student and one hard of hearing student who were both admitted in the 2001-2002 academic year (Staff Interview 5, 2024). University administration was hesitant to admit these two students since there were no facilities available for them. In order to support the two students, the Director of the Special Education Division at the University of Ghana stepped in to provide resource personnel. The Special Education Division sent four resource staff members after the university approved this plan (Staff Interview, 2, 2024).

Resource Office, Legon was the name given to the office at the time. These extracurricular instructors served as notetakers and interpreters for the hearing-impaired students in addition to two Braille transcribers already working with visually impaired students. During that period, the office offered resource assistance to individuals who were visually or hearing impaired. Because they could not participate in special education

programs, students with physical or mobility limitations were seen as social welfare issues (Staff Interview 5, 2024).

The space was renamed the Office of Students with Disability in 2005, and responsibilities expanded to personnel reading aloud to students or recording audio to play back on cassettes. Because of the nature of their writing tools and their entitlement to 50% of the allotted paper length, visually impaired students took exams in the Balme Library (Staff Interview 4, 2024). In a similar vein, the resource staff assigned to students with hearing impairments provided them with access to information as sign language interpreters and notetakers present for lecture sessions. Dr. Kwabena Adu Poku was designated by the Vice Chancellor to oversee the matters of university-admitted students with disabilities during the 2006–2007 academic year where previously a librarian oversaw accommodations (Staff Interview 5, 2024). The 2008–2009 academic year saw the office relocate to a single space in the Students Union Building, staffed by five resource administrators. The university purchased computers and a braille embosser so that student handouts and other pertinent information could be brailled. On March 25, 2009, the office was renamed the Office of Students with Special Needs (OSSN) (Staff Interview 4, 2024).

Regarding any issue pertaining to the interests, rights, and obligations of students with disabilities, the OSSN provides university departments with information, assistance, resources, counsel, and knowledge. For instance, OSSN consults with general and academic staff, offering guidance on how to best address each unique requirement of a student with disabilities. Eventually, the university purchased four more embossers: two to

complement the one in the office and one for the Academic Affairs Directorate’s examination printing and braille unit. The institution has yet to put into practice a draft policy on facilities for students with disabilities that was brought about by Dr. Kwabena Adu Poku's proposal (Staff Interview 4, 2024). Dr. Kwabena Adu Poku left the office during the 2012–2013 academic year, and Professor Isaac Asante was chosen as the new coordinator to oversee the office’s operations to this day. The office has been relocated from the Student Union Building to a larger location behind the College of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences thanks to his initiative.

The University of Ghana’s 2019 Disability Policy

The University of Ghana responded to the increasing demand for inclusive education in higher education by publishing a disability education policy for staff and students with disabilities in 2019 – the Disability Inclusion Strategy Policy. The institution sought to provide an environment where students with disabilities could participate fully in university life and was committed to maintaining equal opportunity for all staff and students. Key policy principles included the following: first, freedom from harassment and discrimination; second, facilities and services for staff and students with special needs; third, the establishment of an office for students with special needs; fourth, information and communications technology (ICT) for staff and students with special needs; fifth, the removal of obstacles related to infrastructure, accommodations, and accessibility; and, finally, the monitoring and evaluation of staff and students with special needs as part of the harassment and nondiscrimination clauses.

The university’s mission statement, which formed the basis of the plan to boost participation in a range of fields, including those involving disabilities, states that everyone who has the potential to gain from attending the university should have the chance to do so (Staff Interview 4, 2024). This regulation applied to everyone who was a member of the university community: students, faculty, staff, and others who served as the university’s representatives or operated under the university’s supervision. Every employee at the university was expected to understand this policy and the laws that regulated it, and to treat staff members or students with disabilities with respect and decency.

By establishing accommodations for employees and students with disabilities, additional support requirements were put into place in terms of facilities and services. They were regarded as a crucial part of the university administration’s responsibility. University regulation stated unequivocally that changes could not affect academic standards or work products. The University of Ghana also used instructional tactics to promote access and to make sure that staff and students understand their rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, if a complaint regarding denial of service was submitted, the university committed to diligently supporting appropriate and swift measures through relevant informal and/or formal conciliation processes. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor’s Office formed an Advisory Committee dedicated to Students and Staff with Special Needs that assessed, reviewed, and proposed recommendations for educational and administrative policies to cater to the requirements of these individuals.

Policy Evaluation According to Students

In terms of the effectiveness of the policy, the University of Ghana has made some progress since 2019 in providing inclusive education. Since 2019, the university has been able to register, admit, and maintain records of students with disabilities. Over time, the number of students with disabilities participating in education has decreased, and their exclusion from the educational system has increased (Staff Interview 2, 2024). Individuals with disabilities enrolled in the university have also been provided with assistance to access the general education system, including personalized assistance initiatives: housing on campus, accessible reading materials, transcribed lecture notes (Staff Interview 4, 2024).

In order to address concerns about the protection of disabled people's rights and obligations on campus, the university has also taken practical actions. Issues impacting individuals with disabilities are promptly reported to the OSSN, and potential resolutions are pursued, according to OSSN staff (e.g., Staff Interview 5, 2024). Students also report that the university fulfilled its commitment to equal assistance for all students by utilizing computers, peer-to-peer cooperation, and a dedicated physical location designed to meet their individual needs and increase their chances of success when they are online (Student Interview 1, 2024).

Despite the opportunities listed above, a few unsettling incidents limited the policy. People with disabilities are more vulnerable in a variety of ways, so it is critical to fully comprehend the difficulties and obstacles they face while seeking to provide interventions that are specifically tailored to their needs. Challenges include issues with education,

stigma, and prejudice (Student Interview 2, 2024). Students with learning disabilities face unique obstacles regarding in-school use of extremely sophisticated or difficult terminology, inconsistent navigation, and an abundance of academic material. Students report that lecturers occasionally ignore these challenges and only skim the material. Students report experiencing social isolation and emotional stress as a consequence. Students with psychiatric diagnoses especially may experience significant fatigue, low energy, or trouble sleeping when facing obstacles in school.

The university's architecture is one of the oldest existing problems for campus community members with disabilities. Inaccessible buildings on campus are frequently brought up as troubling concerns that continue to underline the prejudice against students with disabilities, despite the desire for equitable access to areas. In actuality, not every location at the University of Ghana has the technology that people with disabilities need to carry out their tasks in the manner of their choice. In fact, several lecture halls have shown that physical accessibility is still a major obstacle to education for those with physical disabilities (Student Interview 1, 2024). For example, many departments including Sociology, History, and Linguistics do not offer appropriate guidance or accessibility for students with disabilities. While there are accessible walkways for people with disabilities at locations like the English department and the Blame Library, comparable walkways should be installed in the university's main building (Student Interview 3, 2024). Also, while the university's Careers and Counseling Centre is making a contribution to assist students with disabilities, updates from the centre regarding its initiatives (such as professional

internship) are infrequent. Nor do students receive information about programs managed by the International Programs Office (Student Interview 4, 2024).

In the case of these students who would need additional support to benefit from the online learning environment, the issues described above could be made worse online. This is concerning because, in the majority of cases involving online learning in higher education, the information and communication technology infrastructure that is readily available – most notably the internet – is the only source from which teaching is delivered. The implementation of web-based learning typically encounters a number of obstacles, including insufficient training for instructors and students, the high cost of technology, and inadequate information technology (IT) infrastructure (Student Interview 5, 2024). Further obstacles in the way of online learning include a lack of knowledgeable advice on how to get the most of the e-learning material, a failure to connect the material to the user's actual experience, and a lack of knowledge of learning disabilities.

Insufficient funding conditions, restricted opportunities for social network expansion, and barriers to accessing education and learning are some of the remaining overall challenges at the university (Student Interview 6, 2024). Ultimately, these issues highlight the need for additional funding to support persons with disabilities if individual preferred standards are necessary for the policy to remain in place.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study showed that there are still cases where the university's disability policy was not being implemented properly. Even where the policy was put into effect, there are still

important factors that significantly reduce its effectiveness. Despite the school staff's best efforts, there are individuals with disabilities who are still not accepted into the University of Ghana, and many more students who are left out of the disability program or the implementation process. A thorough evaluation of the current policy is required to promote inclusivity and address implementation challenges.

In order for disability policy to be fully realized for its promise in improving disability rights, a great deal of research is required on how to get past the specific and unique barriers and obstacles that students with disabilities now experience on campus. However, this study has shown that since the University of Ghana's development of policy, the university's disability movement has advanced significantly thanks to the persistent efforts of resource staff, coordinators, and researchers, as well as a growing willingness to involve persons with disabilities in decisions about policy that impact their well-being. The progression of disability rights at the university will keep going in an inclusive direction if this is maintained. The university's community has demonstrated the willingness to commit to meaningful inclusion, and demonstrated progress, even where there remain obstacles.

It is therefore advised that the attitudes that prevent people with disabilities from fully engaging in public and civic life as well as in society at large be made known. Finding appropriate hostels for students on campus and making spaces more accessible and secure should be priorities overall. It should be simple and accessible to get to and from lecture halls. In order to make the workplace more accessible and inclusive, jobs on campus should also be made available to those with disabilities. Disability history should

be incorporated into university curricula, and athletes with disabilities should be able to apply for university scholarships. To bring the university’s 2019 policy into compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it is advised that the policy be revised or updated to account for contemporary issues like technology. It is worth noting that the policy was updated with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy in 2024, after this study concluded, but evaluation of the 2019 policy makes clear that work is needed to monitor implementation of existing policy.

To ensure that students with disabilities have access to education, the university needs to do more to provide the resources for the inclusive education policy to be fully implemented. Put simply, institutional reform and restructuring are long-term requirements for ensuring that education is accessible to persons with disabilities in Ghana. Reforms could address what kind of assistance should be provided by higher education institutions, what kind of help students would receive and where they could get it quickly, how student data related to impairments should be managed, and lastly, consistent and dependable financing agreements for support services and special education needs. Through the inclusion of social, cultural, historical, legal, and political viewpoints as well as the relationships between disability and other identities, this disability study will instruct an advance understanding of postsecondary disability inclusion.

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