Assessment Practices for Students with Disabilities in Colleges and Universities: Experiences of Students with Visual Impairments at the University of Education, Winneba-Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of students with visual impairments regarding assessment of learning at University of Education, Winneba. Data was gathered through focus group discussions from 30 undergraduate students with visual impairments who were purposively sampled from levels 200, 300 and 400. Thematic analysis was employed for the data analysis. Findings of the study suggests that students with visual impairments were fairly satisfied with their experiences regarding learning in the institution. The researchers recommended that more research should be conducted with a larger sample from various higher institutions in Ghana. It is further recommended that faculty members should work collaboratively with staff of the disability desk to improve the learning experiences of students with visual impairments in the university system.

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ABSTRACT

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I. INTRODUCTION

The learning experiences of students with disabilities help the students to transition from school to the world of work. Assessment is an essential part of the teaching and learning process. The teaching and learning process cannot be complete without inputs from the students themselves. Analysis of such experiences reveals whether or not the objectives of a programme of study are achieved. In recent times, where faculty members are urged to employ varied instructional strategies to accommodate students with disabilities in class (Longtin, 2014; Mushome & Monobe, 2013; Zhang, Landmark, Reber, Hsu, Kwok, & Benz, 2010), it is necessary for such variations to be extended to embrace all assessment procedures. Shepherd (2006) indicated that assessment strategies must be integral part of all teaching and learning processes. However, assessment is the most controversial issue in today's higher education (Norton, 2009), as it is reportedly the area where educators have the most divided opinions and the area with which students are least satisfied (Gebrehiwot, 2015). Some faculty members perceive accommodations such as alternative mode of examination, and devotion of a little more time to students with disabilities during tests and examinations as unfair to students without disabilities (Vasek, 2005), while others hold a contrary view concerning the provision of such accommodations to students with disabilities (Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999).

Norton (2007) stated that academic assessment procedures inform students about what they should study in order to be successful in their

studies. These also serve as a means of giving students feedback regarding their academic work. This suggests that teaching, learning and assessment have great influence on students' academic life. Students adopt different approaches to studying based on personal factors and contextual factors such as testing procedures (Fobi, Acheampong, Fobi, & Appau, 2017; Zeeger, 2001). Redpath, Kearney, Nicholl, Mulvenna, Wallace and Martin (2012) reported in their study that many students, especially those with disabilities select courses based on the means of assessment to be utilized.

Craddock and Mathias (2009) stated in their studies that both students with and without disabilities in universities have negative experiences as regards assessment of students with disabilities. These researchers established that students with disabilities are restricted by the modes of assessment employed in colleges and universities. Shepherd (2006) reiterated the need for alternative modes of assessment of students with disabilities, arguing that students with disabilities may have been disadvantaged in some of the activities during the teaching and learning process. Therefore, if the assessment items are also biased towards activities (such as the considerable use of graphics) which favour sighted students, the students with visual impairments would be doubly disadvantaged. Challenges that students with disabilities face in assessment procedures relate to the environment where the assessment takes place, the modes of assessment used and the terminal one-off summative examinations (Hanafin, Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2007). These negative experiences create uneasiness among students with disabilities.

As a way to minimize this uneasiness, Salisbury (2008) pointed out that assessment should be modified to enable students with visual impairments to have full access to the assessment without giving them any unfair advantage. Salisbury also noted that students with visual impairments should solicit the support of others in certain assessment activities which they cannot do independently. For instance, they may require readers and scribes in written examinations; they may also need others' assistance in practical activities such as using equipment, locating materials, drawing and measuring. Again, Salisbury suggested additional time be provided for students with visual impairments to complete their assessments to be decided by the individual instructor based on the purpose and nature of the assessment. Furthermore, Salisbury was of the view that in certain situations where formal methods of assessment may not be appropriate for students with visual impairment, the instructor should assess them using non-formal methods such as class work, portfolios, or oral presentations as alternative method of assessment.

Similarly, Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski (2010) suggested that different assessment mechanisms, including self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolio assessment, authentic assessment and workplace-based assessment could be employed to give students greater responsibility for their own learning. In order to assess the full range of learning achieved by students who are visually impaired, attention should be given to other forms of assessment. It is important to note that it would be beneficial to use alternative methods of assessment, especially when there are students without disabilities present in the classroom (Waterfield, West & Parker, 2006).

Also, in a longitudinal study by Hewett, Keil and Douglas (2015), to explore the experiences of blind and partially sighted youth in higher institutions, it was reported among the findings that, majority of the participants were successful in their academic work. Hewett et al, noted that the findings were arrived at because the students with visual impairments were provided accommodations such as additional time ranging from 20% to 100% to complete examinations depending on their condition. Also, they were provided with separate examination rooms and intermittent breaks. However, it was reported that

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some of the participants experienced delays in receiving course and examination materials in accessible formats.

In a descriptive survey to find out the modes of assessing students with visual impairment, and the nature of assessment items and procedures, Madriaga, Hanson, Heaton, Kay, Newitt and Walker (2010) administered questionnaires to 484 students, including 172 students with disabilities. Based on a t-test analysis and transcription of interview responses of the participants, it was found that students with disabilities have greater difficulties than non-disabled students with regards to the amount of time needed to complete coursework and difficulties with literacy. There was however no significant statistical difference between disabled and non-disabled students regarding difficulties with assessed group work. This outcome suggests that when assessment methods are varied, students with disabilities may perform well just as their colleagues without disabilities.

II.   METHOD

This qualitative study employed phenomenology as the research design to explore the experiences of students with visual impairments regarding assessment of learning at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). The population of the study was all students with visual impairments at the UEW. These students were sixty-two (62) in number; comprising 46 males and 16 females. Their age ranges between 21 and 45 years, with an average age of 28 years. They were undergraduate regular students pursuing Special Education, Social Studies Education, Political Science Education, History Education, French Education, English Education and Psychology and Education.

The participants were purposively sampled for the study. The researchers purposefully selected the sample because they have been diagnosed as having visual impairments within the past 15 years and have been in the institution for more than one academic year, hence, were in the best position to provide relevant information relating to their academic experiences. The sample size for the study was thirty (30) students with visual impairments offering 4-year bachelor's degree programmes in the university. This comprised of 16 students with blindness and 14 students with low vision. The sample consisted of 21 males and 9 female students with visual impairments. Seventeen (17) of the participants were second year students, ten (10) were third year students and three (3) were fourth year students.

Focus group discussions was employed to elicit data from the participants for the study. The researchers used focus group interviews because it allowed participants to speak out so that the researchers can learn what the range of views of participants are, in order to come out with all-embracing, rather than individual views of a phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

2.1 Procedure for data collection

The researchers sought permission from the various heads of the departments of the participants and the coordinator of the resource centre for students with special needs. This was done to get their cooperation and assistance. Creswell (2012) maintains that it is important to respect the site where research takes place. This respect, according to Creswell, is shown by gaining permission before entering the research site. Permission to the site was facilitated by an introductory letter the researchers presented to the various departments of students with visual impairments.

A pre-visit was made by the researchers to the Resource Centre for Students with Special Needs (RCSSN) to explain the purpose of the study to participants. Participants were assured of the necessary confidentiality of information to be provided and the need for their consent. Due to the different schedules of participants' academic and social activities, appointments to meet focus group members were scheduled during weekends where participants had some leisure time. Focus

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group discussions involving 5 groups which consist of 6 students with visual impairments in each group was conducted on the sample with discussion items based on the research questions that were raised. The interviews were conducted by the researchers in the presence of at least a staff of the Resource Centre for Students with Special Needs spanning one week. The discussion sessions which lasted between 35 to 45 minutes each, was conducted at the resource room for students with visual impairments.

The participants were given the opportunity to express their feelings and experiences freely. The discussion was tape recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed for analysis. Before analysis of the data, the researcher scheduled another meeting with the focus groups and the transcripts were read to the participants to confirm that the transcripts represented the views they shared.

2.2 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed interpretatively using narrative themes from the interview data recorded and transcribed. Transcripts of the interview data were coded Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, Group 4 and Group 5 for identification of responses from the various groups. Groups 4 and 5 involved students with low vision whereas Groups 1, 2 and 3 involved students who were blind. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) noted that the first step in coding data is to assign identity numbers to every group from whom data has been collected. Colors were further used to code the focused group interview data from the focus groups for categorization to know the themes that emerged from each research question (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Dogbe, 2015). The green, blue, red, yellow, pink, purple, orange, cyan, violet and brown colors were used to highlight and code the categories from the data. The ten colors facilitated the categorization of data from which the themes emerged. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), coding allows for the categories and patterns emerging from data to be decided in advance and facilitates the interpretation of smaller units since the analysis begins with the researcher reading all of the data to gain the sense of the whole. Verbatim expressions of the students were used in reporting the data where necessary.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are very necessary in conducting any type of research with human subjects to protect the welfare and rights of research participants (Kimmel, 1996). To ensure that participants' health, safety, respect, and fidelity are upheld, the researchers sought for verbal consent of participants, that is, students with visual impairments in the university had the opportunity to voluntarily participate in the study. The researcher explained to participants that their names will not be needed in the course of data collection to ensure anonymity. Before the researchers began the interviews, they ensured that the purpose of the study was understood by the participants and also treated the rights of the respondents with utmost care. Again, the researchers sought the permission of participants to use the tape recorder during the interview session in order to capture detailed data while concentrating on listening and prompting of participants.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mode of assessment of students with visual impairments

Analysis of participants' comments revealed that faculty members do not rely on one medium of assessment. The participants indicated that faculty members employed different methods in assessing their learning. These methods according to the participants include individual assignments, group works, presentations, quizzes and end-of-semester examinations. The participants further indicated that in some cases they were given alternative forms of assessment items different from that of the sighted students, depending on prevailing situations. These comments by some of the students attest to the

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fact that students recognized and appreciated the varying means of assessing their knowledge of concepts taught and learnt.

One of the participants opined that:

> There was a case where a lecturer made us do a take-home assignment while the sighted students were asked to answer the questions in class using the open-book approach. It was okay for us because we were wondering how we would do the open book test since the books were not in braille format or large print for us to access the information (A Student in Group 4).

Another participant noted that:

> The lecturers use different methods in assessing us. Out of varying methods of assessment such as individual assignments, group works, presentations and quizzes the lecturers administer one that is appropriate for us or the sighted students or both at a particular point in time. Our continuous assessment mostly comprises of assessment results of individual assignments, group work, presentations and quizzes (A Student in Group 1).

Two other participant had this to say:

> Some of the lecturers usually give us individual assignment instead of a quiz. I remember that on one occasion, a lecturer gave us a group project to present while our sighted colleagues were quizzed (A Student in Group 3)

> Sometimes if a group is to be assessed through oral presentation of assignment, most often they make the sighted read so that we answer most of the questions for individual scores in the group (Verbatim expression by a student in Group 3).

These findings show that the participants were comfortable with the mode of assessment they had from their lecturers. This perhaps is so because they benefited from the variety of methods that are used for them. These outcomes are consistent with that of Waterfield et al. (2006) who found that using alternative methods of assessment benefit all students, including students without disabilities. It is important to note that students with visual impairments, like all other students with disabilities, require specific services that meet their unique needs. Therefore, the use of a variety of assessment methods provide them with the opportunity to work in ways that best suit their unique needs.

Nature of assessment items and procedure for assessing students with visual impairments at UEW.

Results of the study revealed that assessment items presented to students with visual impairments during quizzes and examinations were devoid of mathematical concepts, diagrams and tables which require vision to answer. Participants indicated their satisfaction with the extent to which most faculty members go in ensuring that they prepare different examination items which suit their needs.

One participant expressed the following view:

> Our quizzes and end-of-semester examination items are mostly devoid of tables and diagrams. I can only remember that we had a diagram in one of our exams questions in the course Communication and Study Skills but the lecturer came to the examination hall quickly and asked us to describe the diagram instead of drawing and labeling it. In cases where there are diagrams they usually give us alternative questions which asks us to describe something (A Student in Group 2)

Another participant stated that:

> Mostly our assessment items are without tables and diagrams. On a few occasions where there were tables, and charts or diagrams, they were printed big and bold enough for those of us with low vision to see and describe (A Student in Group 4)

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One participant had this to say:

> *As for the nature of examination items I don't have any problem with it. The questions are usually without pictures, tables and diagrams which is okay for us as students with visual impairment* (Verbatim expression by a student in Group 5)

It is clear from the data that the nature of assessment items is suitable for students with visual impairments. This is so because lecturers recognize and consider the needs of these students, and thereby provide alternative formats of assessment, or different instructions to follow to provide feedback to such assessment items.

Also, it must be noted that assessment is one area of the teaching and learning process where students with disabilities face difficulties. Madriaga, et al. (2010) found that, students with disabilities had greater difficulties than non-disabled students regarding the amount of time required to complete coursework. This was somehow confirmed in this study. Although the participants noted that they were given extra time to complete quizzes and examinations, they indicated that occasionally additionally time was not enough to complete their quizzes and examinations. However, in doing take home assignments, participants revealed that they were not given extra time to submit their work. It was also found that students with visual impairments take their quizzes and examinations in a separate room, at the Resource Centre. These comments of the participants affirm these findings. One of them mentioned that:

> *We are given extra time during quizzes and examinations but in doing take home assignment, most of the lecturers do not give us extra time to submit our work even though we have to finish and send it to the Resource Centre to be transcribed before we submit them. So it means we actually have to do the work hurriedly at a reduced time period which is not comfortable at all* (A Student in Group 3)

Another participant noted that:

> *We always receive extra time when writing quizzes and examinations at the Resource Centre. Even in cases where we write the examinations together with the sighted students, the lecturers consider and give us extra time to complete the work. Just that it is always 50% of the time allowed for both the blind and the low vision which is sometimes not sufficient* (A Student in Group 4).

One other participant noted that:

> *Giving half of the time allotted for the paper as extra time for all of us is not fair. This treats us as persons with the same need but it is not so. A student who is blind will need more time that a student who is low vision.* (A Student in Group 5).

Notwithstanding these fairly positive experiences regarding the nature of assessment items and receipt of extra time to complete assessment questions, the participants revealed that they sometimes went through frustrating times when writing examinations. They reported delays in receiving quiz and examination questions from the lecturers and examinations officers respectively. The students noted that, the delays in receiving examination questions cause anxiety and tension in them when writing examinations. The participants indicated that the delay subsequently causes further delays since the staff of the Resource Centre also need some time to convert the questions in accessible format after the delayed receipt of the examination questions. These findings are partly consistent with the observation by Hewett, Keil and Douglas (2015) who reported that participants were given some extra time to complete examinations, depending on their conditions. Participants were also given separate examination room. Also, it was reported that some of the participants experience delays in receiving course and examination materials in accessible formats.

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IV. CONCLUSION

Assessment of learning is one area where students with visual impairment have concerns. Yet, the present findings show that students with visual impairments at University of Education, Winneba were fairly satisfied with their experiences in assessment of learning. Students with visual impairments were assessed through different means such as individual work, group work, presentations, quizzes and end-of-semester examinations. Participants took their quizzes and examinations in a separate room from that of the sighted students and were given extra time to complete quizzes and examinations, although the extra time is not always enough as reported by the participants. It should be noted that the findings in the present study cannot be generalized to all students with visual impairment in Ghana. There is the need to explore the experiences of students with visual impairments in other universities in Ghana.

In future studies, researchers could consider involving larger sample drawn from various higher institutions, to know the prevailing experiences of students with visual impairments in Ghanaian universities. The study recommended that faculty members should deepen or enhance their contact and relationship with disability support staff, and students with visual impairments, to improve the assessment experiences of these students.

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