Enhancing social inclusion for students with mobility impairment: A case study of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana

Michael Kumah, and Elizabeth Koomson-Yalley

Michael Kumah, Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, kumahm@gmail.com

Elizabeth Koomson-Yalley, Dr, Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

Abstract

The enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education is on the rise, necessitating institutions to understand and address their unique needs for better support and retention. However, there remains a gap in research regarding the specific social inclusion challenges faced by students with mobility impairments within university contexts. This study investigates the social inclusion of students with mobility impairments at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), focusing on their participation in social activities, interpersonal relationships, and institutional support. Qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews (face-to-face and telephone interviews) with students and administrative staff, were employed to gather data. Findings reveal barriers such as inaccessible venues and insufficient assistive technology, resulting in limited participation in social activities. Participation positively impacts health and well-being, while interpersonal relationships are crucial for emotional well-being and a sense of belonging. The study highlights the need for the implementation of inclusive disability policies and practices within higher educational institutions to address these challenges and recommends strategies such as disability orientation, in-service training, and prioritizing institutional support for sports and social activities. Addressing barriers to participation and fostering a supportive learning environment are proposed to promote effective social inclusion practices within the university. Additionally, investing in accessible infrastructure, such as wheelchair ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, is crucial to creating a learning environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all university community members.

Key words

disability policy, higher education, mobility impairment, social inclusion

Key points

1. The study explored the specific obstacles to social inclusion faced by students with mobility impairments in Ghanaian universities.
2. The physical infrastructure of many campuses in Ghanaian universities often presents barriers to accessibility and participation for students with mobility impairment.
3. Societal attitudes and perceptions towards disability can further exacerbate the challenges faced by students with mobility impairments in Ghanaian universities.
4. The findings of the study revealed that the development of interpersonal bonds between students with mobility impairments and their peers, both with and without disabilities, is crucial to their university experience.
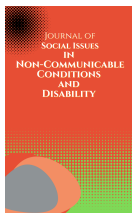
Introduction

The inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education has become a prominent issue globally, with universities striving to create environments that cater to diverse needs (Mappong et al., 2023). However, despite progress in this area, there remains a lack of focused research on the social inclusion experiences of students with mobility impairments. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the social inclusion of students with mobility impairments at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). By exploring their participation in social activities, interpersonal relationships, and the support provided by the institution, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by these students and propose recommendations for fostering their social inclusion.

Background

Globally, social inclusion (SI) as a multi-faceted construct has received attention in scholarly literature in debates on activity participation and limitations for all persons. However, it has most commonly been used to refer to inclusion in life's social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions (Abdulkadir et al., 2022) and very rarely studied to understand the inclusion of persons with disability in this spectrum of life. A United Nations (UN) report on the World Social Situation, for example, defined social inclusion as the 'process of improving participation in society, particularly for disadvantaged people, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights' (UN, 2016) without looking at persons with disability whose voice and rights have not formed the usual concerns in studies. However, a key group that often faces disadvantages in discussions in terms of poverty, negative attitudes, and exclusion from society is people with disabilities (Abdulkadir et al., 2022).

Globally, there are one billion people with disabilities, 80% of whom live in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) (WHO, 2011). People with disabilities are among the most marginalized in society. In addition to experiencing stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors from people without disabilities, family members, and society at large, they often experience self-stigma (for example, a feeling of worthlessness) due to their conditions of disability. (Bond Disability and Development Group, 2017). Negative and inaccurate perceptions and beliefs can be widespread in society, often leading to exclusion, exploitation, abuse, violence, and feelings of shame (Uchem & Ngwa, 2014). Moreover, stigmatizing attitudes, coupled with inaccessible environments and systems and institutional barriers (for example, lack of wheelchair-accessible ramps and inclusive legislation), may result in discrimination against people with disabilities so that they are not able to enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others (DFID, 2018). Yet, disability discrimination, disparity, exclusion, or restriction that prevents people with disabilities from accessing their rights (Manku, 2018), has still not seen any significant studies.

Disadvantages of persons with disability occur in various contexts. In the context of Ghanaian universities, the issue of social inclusion for students with mobility impairments is particularly
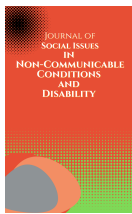
salient. While universities strive to create an inclusive environment that fosters diversity and equal opportunities for all students, the physical infrastructure of many campuses often presents barriers to accessibility (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016). Rampart architectural barriers, such as a lack of wheelchair ramps, inaccessible restrooms, and narrow doorways, hinder the mobility and independence of students with disabilities, impeding their full participation in academic and social activities (Auma Obura, 2021). Although scholarship has revealed these barriers, the question as to how persons with disabilities navigate their environment, such as the mobility impaired has not received scholarly answers. The participation of students with disabilities in extra-curricular activities such as sports, trips, and fanfare are key to the understanding of social inclusion.

Moreover, societal attitudes and perceptions towards disability can further exacerbate the challenges faced by students with mobility impairments (Mantey, 2014). Deep-rooted stigmas and misconceptions may lead to social exclusion, discrimination, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement within the university community (Agbenyega, 2003). Studies that look at how these barriers affect the academic success and personal development of students with disabilities (Agbenyega, 2003) cannot leave out the university campuses and how the barriers perpetuate systemic inequalities within higher education.

Addressing the issue of social inclusion for students with mobility impairments in Ghanaian universities requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses policy reforms, infrastructure improvements, and cultural shifts (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015). This study seeks to inform policy initiatives at the national and institutional levels. An understanding of institutional support for students with disabilities is essential to ensure that legislative frameworks prioritize disability rights and mandate the provision of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. Additionally, investing in accessible infrastructure, such as wheelchair ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, is crucial to creating a physical environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all university community members (Mosia, 2017). Yet, there are limited studies that highlight institutional investments in students with disabilities.

Furthermore, raising awareness and fostering a culture of inclusivity among students, faculty, and staff is paramount to challenging stereotypes and promoting positive attitudes towards disability (Ali et al., 2014). Studies must delve into how educational campaigns, sensitivity training, and disability awareness programs can help dismantle barriers to social inclusion and create a more supportive and inclusive campus environment (Uchem & Ngwa, 2014). Moreover, practitioners have been fostering partnerships with disability advocacy organizations such as the Ghana Federation of Disability Organizations (GFD) and engaging students with disabilities in decision-making processes (for example, students representative council-SRC). Despite these efforts, research into the programs can ensure that their voices are heard (Gadagbui, 2010) to have their needs adequately addressed.

Research that examines social inclusion for students with mobility impairments in Ghanaian universities (KNUST) can create a more equitable and inclusive higher education landscape and empower all students, including persons with disabilities, to thrive academically, socially, and personally (Ndlovu, 2021). Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to

accessibility and inclusivity, research can promote building a society where disability is not a barrier to education but rather a valued aspect of diversity and inclusion (Kochung, 2011).

Literature review

This section presents a review of literature related to social inclusion, looking at the participation of students with mobility impairment in social activities in the university, and interpersonal relationships of students with mobility impairment.

Secondary data supporting this approach came from the resources evaluated to get knowledge about scholarly works on social inclusion in higher education.

During our search, we came across many journal articles, conference papers, and other types of works, which we assessed to determine which ones should be prioritized for social inclusion in this paper's literature review. The most relevant papers and those that best address the current concerns about the role of higher education in promoting social inclusion have been compiled after a thorough reading process. We evaluated a wide range of journal articles, conference papers, and other sorts of works that we found throughout our search to decide which ones should be given priority for social inclusion in the literature review of this study. After a careful reading process, the most pertinent papers have been selected, along with those that most effectively address the present issues regarding the role of higher education in fostering social inclusion.

In general, the analysis of the chosen literature about the contribution of higher education to social inclusion found that previous research has highlighted the importance of social inclusion for students with disabilities in higher education (Wiles & Bondi, 2011). Studies indicate that participation in social activities and the development of interpersonal relationships are critical factors influencing these students' overall well-being and academic success (Moriña, 2017). However, there is limited research specifically addressing the social inclusion needs of students with mobility impairments. Barriers such as inaccessible environments, lack of assistive technology, and social stigma contribute to their exclusion from various social activities within university settings (Mobily & Johnson, 2021). Additionally, the absence and implementation of comprehensive disability policies exacerbate these challenges, hindering efforts to promote social inclusion effectively.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods in undertaking the research. Maxwell, J. A. (2022) describes qualitative research as a multifaceted research method involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to subject matter. The multifaceted nature of qualitative research enables researchers to develop a holistic picture of the issue in question. In general, this study used qualitative interviewing to emphasize the importance of investigating the experiences and perspectives of students with mobility impairment in universities in Ghana to develop a better understanding of their social reality (Stubbs et al. 2008).
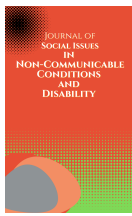
Students with mobility impairments who are currently admitted and studying at KNUST were directly involved as participants in this study and selected university staff were involved. The goal of the study is to uncover the students with mobility impairments reality and experience of social inclusion through the lens of participation and interpersonal relationships in universities.

In this study, however, a total of twelve (12) students with mobility impairment and four (4) administrative staff were purposively selected. A purposive sampling strategy allowed us to find only a defined group (students with mobility impairment) for whom the research problem was relevant and of personal significance. Purposive sampling was adopted based on the participants ability to provide necessary data (Molina et al., 2016).

The primary sources of data for the study were telephone and 'face-to-face' interviews. For this study, qualitative interviews were the primary method of data collection because qualitative interviewing is appropriately used when "studying people's understanding of the meaning in their lived world" (Molina et al., 2016) as it is in the case of this study to explore the experiences of students with mobility impairment regarding social inclusion in KNUST.

After receiving consent from the students who had mobility disabilities and a subset of the administrative staff, the researcher interviewed the participants about their experiences with social inclusion. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The identity of the participants was removed from the transcripts to maintain their confidentiality and pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their identity while providing information relating to the research.

Findings

Participation

The findings of the study highlight several challenges faced by students with mobility impairments in achieving social inclusion at KNUST. These challenges include limited participation in social activities such as sports, student politics, and educational trips due to barriers such as inaccessible venues and insufficient assistive technology. Despite these challenges, participation in social activities as found in the study is not only a fundamental aspect of the educational experience of students with mobility impairment but also a key component of personal development for students with mobility impairment. The study, therefore, found that ensuring the participation of students with mobility impairment in social activities at the university (KNUST) is essential for promoting institutional diversity, enhancing the overall well-being of students with mobility impairment, and building social inclusion.

Interpersonal relationship

The study further found that students with mobility impairments frequently have difficulties while forming and sustaining relationships with their peers with and without disabilities in the setting of university life. As identified in the study, students without disability's interpersonal relationships with students who have mobility impairment can vary and be influenced by

several circumstances. This means that it is critical to acknowledge that students with mobility impairment have distinct experiences and that connections between them can be influenced by accessibility, personal attitudes, and societal attitudes.

Institutional support

The findings of the study identified that the university provides some level of support to students with mobility impairment in several ways. The support services mentioned by the participants of the study included transportation support for students with disabilities, counseling support, academic support, financial support, and accommodation support.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing the social inclusion needs of students with mobility impairments in higher education settings. The identified barriers, including inaccessible environments and lack of assistive technology, highlight the need for institutional interventions to create more inclusive campus environments (Moriña, 2017). Comprehensive disability policies aligned with national frameworks are essential for guiding these interventions and ensuring that the needs of students with mobility impairments are adequately addressed. Additionally, efforts to promote disability awareness and positive attitudes among students and staff are crucial for fostering a more inclusive university community (Mobily & Johnson, 2021).

Moreover, the findings of this study underscore the importance of cultivating strong interpersonal interactions between students with mobility impairment and their peers with or without disabilities. This entails reducing stereotypes and social stigma, promoting social cohesion, encouraging empathy and communication among students, establishing an inclusive setting, raising awareness, and making sure the university (KNUST) environment is accessible (Mappong et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the social inclusion experiences of students with mobility impairments at KNUST and highlights the challenges they face in participating in social activities and forming interpersonal relationships within the university context. The findings underscore the importance of comprehensive disability policies, institutional support, and awareness-raising initiatives to promote social inclusion for students with mobility impairments in higher education. By implementing the recommendations proposed in this study, universities can create more inclusive environments that support the holistic development and well-being of all students, regardless of their abilities.

References

Abdulkadir, A., Saidu, A., Abdullahi, A., & Abdulkadir, F. (2022). *The Challenges of Sustainable Development in Nigeria Amidst the Global Pandemic (COVID-19). Journal of Law and Sustainable Development,* 10(1), e0206–e0206.

Adu-Gyamfi, S., Donkoh, W. J., & Addo, A. A. (2016). Educational reforms in Ghana: Past and present. *Journal of Education and Human Development,* 5(3), 158-172.

Agbenyega, J. (2003). *The power of labelling discourse in the construction of disability in Ghana.* Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Newcastle.

Ali, D. B., Tomek, M., & Lisk, D. R. (2014). *The effects of epilepsy on child education in Sierra Leone.* Epilepsy & Behavior, 37, 236–240.

Ametepee, L. K., & Anastasiou (2015). *Special and inclusive education in Ghana.* Status and progress, challenges and implications*. International Journal of Educational Development* 41, 143-152*.*

Auma Obura, G. (2021). UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office Sign Language for Deaf Children's Education and Guidance on its Use in Accessible Digital Teaching & Learning Materials.

Gadagbui, G. Y. (2010). *Inclusive education in Ghana: Practices, challenges and the future implications for all stakeholders.* Accra, Ghana: UNESCO.

Kochung, E. J. (2011). Role of higher education in promoting inclusive education: Kenyan perspective. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies,* 2(3), 144–149.

Manku, K. (2018). *Supporting Persons with Disabilities in Somalia*

Mantey, E. E. (2017). *Discrimination against children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Southern Ghana*: *Challenges and perspectives from stakeholders. International Journal of Educational Development,* 54, 18-25.

Mappong, Z., Yusran, A., & Takwin, M. (2023). Full Day School: Review in Human Rights Perspective. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development,* 11(1).

Maxwell, J. A. (2022). *Interactive Approaches to Qualitative Research Design*. The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design, 41.

Mobily, K., & Johnson, A. (2021). *Disability, belonging, and inclusive leisure*. Loisir et Société/Society and Leisure, 44(2), 144-154.

Molina, V. M., Perera Rodríguez, V. H., Melero Aguilar, N., Cotán Fernández, A., & Moriña, A. (2016). *The role of lecturers and inclusive education. Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs,* 16, 1046–1049.

Moriña, A. (2017). La educación inclusiva en la educación superior: desafíos y oportunidades. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(1), 3–17.

Mosia, P. A. (2017). *Access to higher education for students with disabilities in Lesotho* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa).

Ndlovu, S. *Provision of assistive technology for students with disabilities in South African higher education*. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health **2021**, 18, 3892.

Stubbs, S., & Education, I. (2008). *Where there are few resources.* Ingrid Lewis Updated and Revised Version.–September.
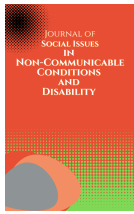
Uchem, R. N., & Ngwa, E. S. (2014). *Journal of Education and Practice* www.iiste.org ISSN.
In Online) 5(36). www.iiste.org

Wiles, J. W., & Bondi, J. (2011). *Curriculum development: A guide to practice.* Prentice Hall.