INTRODUCTION

Government of Botswana intends to increase access to higher education (HE) from 11.4% (2007/8) to a minimum of 17% by 2016 and then to a maximum of 25% by 2026. However, the policy is silent on widening access, equity and participation for students with disabilities (SWDs) in HE (Republic of Botswana, 2006). Analysis of this policy indicates that it does not address critical issues such as barrier-free HE environment and academic development of faculty members to ensure equal participation of students with diverse disabilities in the process of learning and teaching. Despite increased diversity in student population in Botswana institutions of higher education, there is no disability policy that could widen access and participation of SWDs in HE (Musambo, 2016). As a result, SWDs are underrepresented in HE.

Current issue

- Limited research evidence on access and participation of students with disabilities in Botswana with disabilities in higher education.
- Undocumented experiences of students with disabilities in higher education to understand how these students experience higher education.
- Students with disabilities might experience challenges in access and participation in higher education.

Purpose

The aim of this study was to examine opportunities and challenges for students with disabilities in access and participate in higher education from four critical dimensions, a) rights, b) empowerment, c) policy and d) access and participation.

RESULTS

Access and participation: Access and participation of SWDs in HE structural a critical area for consideration and addresses itself to availability of accessible campus physical structure such as classrooms, halls of residence and recreation facilities; library and wider campus spaces. Experiences of SWDs are discussed under two major subthemes; a) positive and b) negative experiences.

Positive experiences

Participants reported positive experiences as a result of interacting with a barrier-free HE space. Symbolic markers of inclusivity were access attributes such as: ramps, double doors, walkways, space marked as reserved parking, and accessible buildings with lifts signify embracing diversity and access. These experiences were reported by students with mobility limitations where most of the new buildings were generally accessible. The nature of a barrier-free HE learning environment spaces resulted in positive experiences of SWDs, instanced by enhanced quality of learning experiences and success in their studies.

Negative experiences

Negative experiences that emanated from students’ interaction with HE spaces that were devoid of ramps, ramps with rails, double doors, walkways, reserved parking spaces, assisted bathrooms and rest rooms. Structural barriers affected students with mobility limitations who use wheelchairs and those who used walking canes. Another group of participants that reported negative experiences were students with total blindness who required training in safe travel and independent mobility. The interaction of students with total blindness with physical spaces such as washrooms, elevated toilets with activated lifts and open trenches and obstacles on walkways limited the extent to which this group of students could access and participate in activities that took place in these spaces. When giving meaning to their experience all these groups of students described space as marked and defined for the ‘perfect’ and ‘normal body’ with no regard for diversity.

Interaction with these spaces rendered students with mobility limitations powerless, not welcome in these areas and crystallized into negative experiences. In fact, students avoided these spaces resulting in what was viewed as: disappearing bodies of students with mobility limitations. The design features of these spaces seemed to be socially and culturally marked to sustain a cultural values of ‘ideal perfect bodies’. Social divisions revealed amongst students mostly in these spaces where students with mobility limitations were constantly reminded that ‘you don’t belong here’ when interacting with spaces and having to endure circuitous routes to navigate access in these spaces. Clearly these spaces were indicative of the fact that disability is spatially constructed. Missing lessons as a result of design principles of spaces for ‘ideal students’ was a recurring theme at these institutions.

Rights

The majority participants indicated that they did not know their rights. The few who indicated that they knew their rights attributed their rights consciousness to student agency, direct involvement in Disabled People’s Movement, program of study that covered issues of social justice as well as the advantages of upper social class status. One of the female student with mobility limitation illustrates knowledge about her rights in this manner, ‘Since I joined the disability support group, now I know how to stand up for my rights. If someone tries to stop me on my way to classes, I tell them no, shut up! These students could rely on institutional power that empowered them. Although some students indicated that they knew about their rights, in many cases they were not able to translate this into being empowered. Institutional context factors such as lack of empowerment, little confidence and the integrity of institutional power hierarchy that results in the perpetuation of this group of SWDs from engaging and power-sensitive communication with faculty to assert their rights. All these factors were further compounded by lack of empowerment programmes in the four HEs as well as low social class status of these students which did not equip the with requisite cultural capital to succeed in HE.

The study identified internal factors such as, lack of negotiation skills, communication skills, power imbalances and low self-esteem as factors deterred students from requesting accommodations. These trend to overlap with socio-cultural factors such as stigma, stereotypic beliefs and assumptions that faculty overlapped with internal factors to further marginalize these students to succeed in their studies. SWDs indicated a constant struggle to self-advocate as barriers to self- advocacy were tied to power and power relations in institutional contexts that is clearly visible in their responses: “If I don’t believe that I have the right to be in society, and that it’s not supposed to do, they are going to look at you like you are not even talking to what I’m supposed to do, even when it’s written that this is what you are supposed to do to cater for me. Where do I get the ego to do that?” We get crushed easily.

Only a small number of participants could engage in a dialogue with faculty in power sensitive conversations to request reasonable accommodations. Factors such as; upper social class status, being exposed to human rights and social justice during their course of engagement with the study, involvement in disability movement and agency ensured these students were knowledgeable about socio-cultural factors and negotiations skills that helped them to engage in fruitful dialogue with faculty.

Policy

Analysis of HEs policy documents grossly underprivileged ‘fragmented’, ‘disability forgotten texts’, ‘nothing about disability’ and ‘disability needs not catered for’. A few analysis of the documents affirmed that there was a convergence point on the issue of policy concerns as expressed by SWDs. When discussing issues of policy and disability, a mate student with mobility limitations states: “If there was any policy we couldn’t be saying… don’t have access to the library, lectures they ignore us, but now that there is nothing much we can say on policy, it is not there now.” At macro level, it is quite evident that none of the policies clearly spelled out policy concept intervention aimed at promoting access and participation in Botswana HEIs. Addressing this policy challenge was often explained in economics of scale left to when resources permit. To be succinct these policy documents did not have an equity clause that addressed itself to promoting access and participation of SWDs. Without clear policy provision on how to promote access and participation of SWDs in HE the four HEs remained an act of benevolence on the part of faculty and HEIs.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Policy

Tertiary Education policy has not provided equally credible as an alternative reform agenda to promote access and participation of SWDs in HE. HEs are marked by initial silence on disability issues. At macro and micro levels disability is an issue that is not viewed as human rights instead it is viewed as an economic activity. Students who were alienated from mainstream economy remain silent on the issue of policy concerns as expressed by SWDs. When discussing issues of policy and disability, a male student with mobility limitations states: ‘If there was any policy we couldn’t be saying… don’t have access to the library, lectures they ignore us, but now that there is nothing much we can say on policy, it is not there now.’

At a macro level, it is quite evident that none of the policies clearly spelled out policy concept intervention aimed at promoting access and participation of SWDs. Without clear policy provision on how to promote access and participation of SWDs the four HEs remained an act of benevolence on the part of faculty and HEIs.

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN BOTSWANA INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

----- Emmanuel Moswela, PhD & Sourav Mukhopadhyay, PhD University of Botswana -----

Westin Boston Waterfront – Boston, Massachusetts

METHODS

A qualitative research approach was utilized to gain insights into the experiences of students with disabilities in four HE. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used. Multiple methods data collection strategies such as; solicited diaries, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and photo voice were employed to get a holistic picture of students’ experiences in HE.

Eighteen students with varying disability conditions were recruited for the study. Data collected through various strategies we analyzed in hermeneutic unit of ATLAS.TI Version 7.5. Data were analyzed using four key themes emerged from the study namely, a) access and participation of b) rights, c) empowerment d) policy.