

Rethinking Quality of Workspace Provision for Employees with Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Covid-19 has redirected focus to the quality of workspaces that universities provide to employees with disabilities (EwDs). Little is known about the experiences that EwDs have of their workspaces, despite sophisticated policies that purport to promote social justice and equity, strategic plans, funding initiatives, and quality assurance in some institutions. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of policy goals on the "lived experience" of accessible and appropriate workspaces for EwDs at higher education institutions. The article discusses the alignment between policy and the quality of workspaces provided for EwDs, based on a case study in a South African open and distance learning institution. The researchers investigated the experiences of EwDs during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the barriers or factors that enhance or hinder the provision of quality workspaces. Semi-structured interviews with five consenting academic and professional support EwDs were used to generate qualitative data. The findings revealed the diverse experiences of EwDs, emphasising the need to rethink the quality of workspace provision for EwDs in higher education. It is suggested that by highlighting the lived experiences of EwDs as a significant quality domain, a more comprehensive and holistic approach to disability management in higher education settings will be encouraged. Furthermore, it is envisaged that a more proactive, inclusive and scientifically grounded adoption of effective workspace provision will improve both individual and institutional performance of EwDs in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Employees with disabilities (EwDs), quality promotion, quality assurance, workspace provision, lived experience.

Introduction

Covid-19, a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) experience, has redirected focus to the quality of workspaces that universities provide to Employees with Disabilities (EwDs). Although some institutions have comprehensive policies, strategic plans, funding initiatives, and quality management systems (QMS) in place for provision of quality workspaces, little is known about how EwDs experience the effectiveness of such policies and practices amidst a VUCA situation such as Covid-19. It cannot be disputed that the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the day-to-day operations of educational institutions and made it difficult for most of them to continue to actuate “their business as usual.” While some aspects of the disruptions caused by the pandemic to workplace are empirically tested, some aspects remain under explored. Moreover, issues relating to the effectiveness of policy goals for workplace provisions for EwDs in higher education institutions. Referring to the case of academic work, Adenipekun et al. (2019) noted that the effectiveness of staff performance depends on the quality of workplace environment that the institution provides. Quality workspace in this case, considers the conditions of not only the physical environment of where work is performed, but also the social, psychological, and technical aspects that are required for comfort and satisfaction. This includes the nature and content of policies that regulate the spatial practices in university spaces, which is more relevant to EwDs who do not only need quality workspaces and policies, but also considerate and humane ones. In particular, employers’ changing perspectives around issues of upholding human rights, prompting them to do away with primitive (restrictive) labour laws in favour of liberal labour reforms, in particular the promotion of “work-life balance” initiatives (Bam & Ronnie, 2020; Conradie, 2013) More importantly, EwDs want to be actively involved in decision-making about how their disability is disclosed to co-workers and how their induction into the organisation is managed (Bam & Ronnie, 2020). It is therefore concerning to note that, while research on the quality of university workspaces is increasing (e.g. Adenipekun et al., 2021; Motalebi et al., 2021), not much of it pays attention to EwDs. The status quo is far from ideal, mainly because despite promulgation of liberal labour laws/legislations promoting diversity and equity in the ecologies of contemporary workplaces, EwDs continue to experience discrimination (Bonaccio et al., 2020). To understand the causation of the research problem, the following question was adopted to underpin the inquiry into the lived experiences of EwDs during the VUCA (of Covid-19): Have the lived experiences of employees with disabilities during the VUCA (of Covid-19) influenced the way open and distance learning higher education institutions view the quality of workspaces provision?

Literature Review

Models of Disability

The definition of disability is important to policymakers and disability analysts because it affects eligibility for public services, the scope of the legislation, and how disability prevalence is quantified (Mitra, 2006). Three basic definitions or models of disability were considered for the purpose of this study. First, the Medical (or biological) Model of Disability that states that a person's disability is a problem that is directly related to an illness, injury, or other health issue that necessitated medical

attention in the form of treatment and rehabilitation (Pfeiffer, 2001; WHO, 2001). Second, the Social Model of Disability that views disability as created by the social context and societal oppression that excluded disabled people from full participation in society (Oliver, 1990; 1996; Pfeiffer, 2001). Lastly, the ICF (International Classification of Functioning) Model which is a synthesis and integration of the medical and social models (WHO, 2001) and includes performance as a measure of people's actual life experiences in the setting in which they live (Altman, 1995). Most importantly, the ICF model is like a definition of disability that may be found in the capability approach (Mitra, 2006) and ableism.

Defining Quality

Defining quality in higher education continues to be difficult, with some asserting that it is an elusive term for which there is a wide range of interpretations depending on the views of different stakeholders, while others claim that quality is subjective and dependent on individual perspectives (Lowenthal et al., 2021; Newton, 2010; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007; Welzant et al., 2015). Quality assurance in higher education institutions refers, among others, to having effective policies, procedures and plans in place for continuous improvement of the academic project (CHE, 2021; COL, 2009; Houston, 2008; Nicholson, 2011; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004). According to Welzant et al (2015), conceptual model of quality, a multifaceted approach requiring different stakeholder perspectives is needed to develop a broad conceptualisation of quality and to accurately select specific indicators to measure that conceptualisation of quality. Furthermore, a multidisciplinary approach to quality should be adopted when addressing the needs of EwDs, and that the coordination and communication between the management and the person with a disability is essential to enhancing the quality of their lived experience. For this study, therefore, the authors used the definition of quality as stated in the University of South Africa's (Unisa's) Quality Policy (Unisa, 2018, p.2) as lens to evaluate the quality of workspace provision for EwDs:

Quality [is defined as] ... "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs". The features and characteristics, products, practices and services as well as stated and implied needs of higher education and distance education, in general, and Unisa in particular, are both contextual and historical and should be consensual amongst its stakeholders.

Although Unisa's quality policy guides the quality of the provisions of the learning journey of students, it is broad enough to include the quality of provisions of EwDs.

Quality of Workspaces and Workplaces for EwDs

The quality of workspace provision is one of the most critical factors for employees' satisfaction, performance, and productivity. Universities are not spared from this actuality. There is a lot that needs to be considered in the planning of workspaces to consider quality and effectiveness. Adenipekun (2021, p.1) noted that to plan for sustainable and effective workspaces, "it is required that dynamic, fluid nature of academic work, work force diversity, virtual work setting, work flexibility, office sound control and the spatial layout be considered, emphasising the importance of

creating spaces that are inclusive". Research on the quality of workplaces provided to EwDs in higher education is limited, and institutional engagement around disability is still relatively new. Higher education institutions struggled to offer EwD the benefits they rightfully deserved due to increased costs, administrative and regulatory requirements, and shrinking funds.

Provision for EwDs in the Workplace: International and National perspective

The 1993 United Nations (UN) Standard Guidelines on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities directed national governments to create an enabling environment in the labour market. From 1994, the democratic government of South Africa focused on removing barriers by putting into practice a number of disability laws and policies, including the 1997 Higher Education Act (Department of Education, 1997), the 1997 White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (Office of the Deputy President, 1997), the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2001), and the 2001 Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). Moreover, the national government took proactive measures that ensure the promotion and protection of the rights of PwD in both higher education and the workplace by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD) which prohibits all forms of discrimination in employment. Blanck (2020, p.505) concurs, and argues that:

In disability employment, antidiscrimination law and policy, perhaps the most important driver of the inclusion command is the "accommodation principle," which requires that employers make reasonable adjustments to tasks and places of work to enable full and equal participation by qualified individuals with disabilities.

In this regard, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Employment Equity (EE) Act, No. 55 of 1998, amongst others, make it clear that discrimination based on disability violates the right to equality.

Regarding policy directives for quality of workspaces and workplaces, the Council on Higher Education's recently approved the Quality Assurance Framework (CHE(a), 2021). This reaffirms that an institution's fitness for/of purpose will be measured in relation to its specified mission within a national framework that encompasses differentiation and diversity. The recognition of institutional diversity is noteworthy. However, this does not necessarily translate to the recognition of diversity of staff needs, especially regarding infrastructure and support as was evident in the 2022 Institutional Audit conducted by the Council on Higher Education. The CHE Institutional Audit Manual (CHE (b), 2021) includes adequate and appropriate workplace provisions such as ICT facilities for staff as a quality construct, amongst others. Regrettably, the Manual does not specifically address institutional policies and quality standards for workplace provisions for EwDs. This puts the EwD at a disadvantage as the institutional policies and procedures on workplace provisions EwD may not be subjected to rigorous scrutiny and are often overlooked.

Theoretical Framework

To restate, the study sought to determine whether and how EwDs' lived experiences during the VUCA (Covid-19) influenced the rethinking of quality in workplace provisions for EwDs in higher education. The focus of the paper is therefore to understand and highlight EwDs' perspectives and experiences on the discourses related to quality workspaces. Ultimately, our engagement in this social inquiry into the lived experiences of EwDs in an open distance learning (ODL) higher education workplace context, is consistent with Motalebi et al's. (2021) conception that better spaces for living can be designed by simply asking for users' feedback. In this regard, the study draws on McGregor's Theory Z (which is an extension theories X and Y) inspired by Maslow's humanistic postulation that workers perform at their best when they feel appreciated, accommodated and motivated when conditions at work are sufficiently enabling. The theory also considers that the way workers are being led sets a tone for their quality of work life, specifically their behaviour, productivity, self-worth and intention to remain in the organisation. Moreover, Theory Z suggests that involvement of employees in related matters improves their commitment and performance. Involvement implies meaningful participation of EWD in the decision-making process, particularly in matters directly affecting them.

Methodology

A qualitative single case study research design was used to foreground the lived experiences of EwD at an ODL higher education during the Covid-pandemic to understand the provision of quality workspaces from their point of view (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2015). This was complemented with content analysis of the institutional policies and procedures for EwDs.

Purposive sampling was used to draw a sample for this study (Merriam, 2009) from the employees with declared disabilities. Participants for the broader study were recruited through individual e-mails, group lists, personal contacts and referrals by colleagues. Informed consent was sought from the participants. Five academic and professional support staff were e-interviewed through MS Teams in-depth interviews. The table below presents the participants who ranged in experience from 8 to 30 years.

The study used open-ended semi-structured e-interviews (Merriam, 2009) because it allowed the researchers to acquire specific information from the participants, and at the same time, support the researchers by probing and following up on ideas raised by the participants. The 60-to-90-minute e-interviews were recorded on MS Teams and transcribed afterward. The researchers followed an interview guide with a list of topics that allowed for follow-up questions that provided in-depth information about the participants (Merriam, 2009). To maintain rigour in this study, the team employed iterative questioning by rephrasing questions where appropriate or by persisting with questioning when researchers sensed that the participant did not provide adequate information. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the recordings.

Table 1*List of Participants*

Interviewee	Description
Participant A	Professor, relatively late onset of disability; challenging to acknowledge and accept her "disability identity "; "I only acknowledged my disability when I accepted it."
Participant B	Professor, with 30 yrs. experience, disabled at age of 21 (car accident); uses a wheelchair and said: "I cannot hide it [having a disability] because it is evident; everyone knows and can see it"
Participant C	Senior lecturer, for eight years at university at the time of the interview; physical disability due to an illness.
Participant D	Professional support staff member; started in 1989 (more than 30yrs experience). "Things were different then, there was no help whatsoever, probably due to our own negligence," she recalled.
Participant E	senior lecturer with a "visual impairment", with 28% sight and "use special software on my computer to enlarge things, and when my eyes get tired it reads it out loud for me."

The general inductive approach was used to analyse the data (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2012). A writing retreat was arranged to provide all co-researchers an opportunity to meet in a hybrid setting to read through all the transcripts and coding to clarify issues. Most of the team members were also employees with a declared disability and had first-hand experience with the disability management procedures in the institution and provided further clarification where needed. Drawing from the research question the authors started by identifying the key concepts and themes. ATLAS.ti was used to read each interview transcript. Similar phrases were clustered and assigned a code. An iterative process of open and focused coding was followed (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). Coded phrases, terms, and ideas from the data itself, were written next to the appropriate line or segments of the data. Similar codes were re-assembled to give a more focused and complete explanation about the theme or category (through axial coding). Assertions were generated from the themes by linking them together and noting how they relate to each other and what bigger information they provide about the study research question. Thereafter, analytic memos based on the assertions that emerged, along with supporting evidence (Miles et al., 2014), provided the basis for a descriptive story that leads to the analytic one. Triangulation was achieved by involving a diversity of employees with disabilities from the academic and administrative support sections of the institution to verify different views and experiences against each other to create rich information (Shenton, 2004). The study is trustworthy since the information gained reflects the participants' experiences and perspectives rather than the researchers' opinions (Shenton, 2004). In terms of confirmability, the findings are described and illustrated using the participants' verbatim comments.

Research Findings

The interaction between quality (assurance and management) and the lived experience of EwDs in the workplace and workspace is the main theme, with a focus on

accessibility and a welcoming work environment. Universities employ various quality evaluation tools, including tools for the allocation of resources and physical facilities to identify the most suitable learning and working environments (COL, 2009; CHE, 2021). The following institutional policies, procedures, plans, and systems for EwD were analysed:

- 2010 Terms of reference of the Disability Steering Committee; revived in 2023 (Unisa, 2010)
- Statement of Commitment for Persons with Disabilities (including EwDs) (Unisa, 2011a)
- Quality Management System (QMS) for PwD (EwDs) (Unisa, 2011b)
- Policy for Employees with Disabilities (Unisa, 2017a)
- Diversity Management Policy (Unisa, 2017b)
- Integrated Quality Assurance Policy (Unisa, 2018).

The content analysis of the above confirmed institutional support for an accessible working environment for EwDs. Furthermore, that the University will consult the EwDs to establish appropriate mechanism to accommodate the employee. In particular, the Statement of Commitment for EwDs (Unisa, 2011a) and the Diversity Management Policy (Unisa, 2017b) accentuates the institution's commitment to foster and encourage a positive and unprejudiced attitude towards EwDs. Most importantly, the Policy for EwDs (Unisa, 2017a) stresses the institution's intolerance to unfair in the provision of inaccessible workplace. The Diversity Management Policy (Unisa, 2017b) assigns specific roles and responsibilities for departments. For example, University Estates should ensure that the work environment is *literally* (author's emphasis) accessible for EwDs regarding the physical environment factors. In this regard, the Quality Management System (QMS) for PwD (Unisa, 2011b) stated the following processes as presented in table 3.

Table 2

Quality Management System (QMS) for PwD, 2011 (author's construct)

Stage/step	Process	Description
Step 1.1	Profile the Department	Identification of services rendered; Incorporate concerns of PwD into Departmental operational plans and performance agreement
Step 1.2	Profile the PwD community and dialogue with key stakeholders	Consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders to identify key issues

The QMS for PwD (Unisa, 2011b) resonates with Welzant et al.'s (2015) conceptual model of quality, highlighting the importance of incorporating the concerns of EwDs raised during performance agreements in the departmental operational plans. Furthermore, the Statement of Commitment for Persons with Disabilities (Unisa, 2011a) affirms commitment to creating a barrier-free, conducive working and learning environment for EwD by "moving the discourse on disability from the margins, and mainstreaming disability issues into all areas of institutional operation." Moreover, the Statement emphasised the institution's commitment to move from ad hoc and reactive provisioning towards a proactive Model of Provisioning.

It is promising to note the policies and procedures that the institution put in place to accommodate EwDs. However, policy formulation does not automatically translate into conducive work experiences. The analysis of the lived experiences of the EwD as shared during the interviews showed the extent to which policies and procedures enhance or hinder the provision of quality workspaces towards EwDs. The analysis of the interviews revealed four primary themes, namely:

Theme 1: Managing quality of workplaces and workspaces of EwD

Theme 2: Lived experiences as a quality construct

Theme 3: Availability of adequate and appropriate resources for quality output

Theme 4: Performance Management - a key quality indicator

Theme 1: Managing quality of workplaces and workspaces of EwD

The Participants were asked about their understanding of disability management procedures at the workplace. The responses were varied.

Participant A: *The strengths are the fact that it [disability management] is there, the fact that Unisa has got a good policy, and the fact that Unisa will support you.*

Participant B: *I do not have a clue. I just know that you must declare [your disability] and ask for support. I personally have no experience with it or how it works. I know of it [Disability Management] but not what they do.*

Participant C: *Disability management is an unknown concept*

When asked whether they were aware of the different forms of support that should be in place, the responses were also varied. Participant B:

"I don't know for myself. I know of colleagues who get assistance to carry out tasks. The visually impaired, etc. I suppose you can get some form of assistance, whether temporary or on a permanent basis to carry out your tasks effectively."

Interestingly, Participant B also revealed that the interview "has opened [her] eyes to how much I don't know about the procedure."

Participant C:

"Our institution has a lot of support; there are many units in HR that are focused on helping people with disabilities. They provide you with the necessary devices, I was provided with voice recognition software. It was not cheap but they provided that for me. Thereafter my voice became softer, and the software couldn't recognize it. The software also recognizes a certain accent, an American accent. At first, I could speak it but when as my voice changed it couldn't recognize me at all. That's when I started talking about the assistant. They have this program where they provide you with someone to help you full-time. I think they have a separate and special budget for that. Although in the beginning I was paying the assistant a stipend myself, later I started the process... and now we are at the final stage we just need to sign the contract."

This emphasised the importance of policies for EwD that are proactive rather than reactive. Moreover, to ensure sustainable policies, processes and procedures. This resonates with the Statement of Commitment for Persons with Disabilities (2011) which stated the institution's commitment to move towards a Model of Provisioning based on 'being prepared in advance'. This has however not materialised.

The participants were asked how they would you make the policies, procedures and the people supposed to do the disability support, work in their favour. The responses differed according to the designation level and work experience. Participant D mentioned the importance of proper training for all staff members regarding disability, understanding the differences, and looking at all disabilities from management to staff.

"They [disability support staff] must be aware and have a list of the various disability that one needs to do. A thing one hears a lot at Unisa from staff living with a disability is "Nothing about us without us. It happens too often; the university or line management decides what is needed by staff or students living with a disability by what they know the law to be without the buy-in or consultations with students and staff living with a disability."

Furthermore:

"Having ramps and lifts, is good, but that is addressing a certain sector of the disability spectrum. Understanding that there cannot be a blanket approach for all disabilities. Each disability must be treated differently. More awareness around depression for example. Knowledge of what accommodation is required. Yes, one can function, but there are times that it is more difficult. It is in those times that there needs to be accommodation."

Participant E was a member of the college employment equity committee, representing EwD. As a member of the committee, she had an opportunity to give input to the policy on EwD. She also indicated that she was not sure if she would have been aware of the policy if she were not on the committee

"I know [the policy] was on IntCom but I really don't think that's enough. Nothing has been done, for example in our department to sensitize people with disabilities, or what the options may be, and things like that. I think that is perhaps a need, not just top management but the line managers need to be more aware, because I think often when people with disabilities feel neglected or that they don't matter or that their needs don't matter, it is not that people don't care. It's ignorance, they just don't know."

When asked about the current procedures to support person with disabilities, participant E stated that there is a need for a more targeted approach towards EwDs who have disclosed their disabilities, instead of the generalised approach on IntCom. She agreed that disclosing your disability is voluntary but asserted that the Human Resource (HR) department knows the people who have disclosed. She therefore advocated for a more personalised approach, where HR asked the EwDs who has disclosed what help they need.

Participant E:

"Even through an email or just checking on us once a year to see if everything is still going well, if we need further support because not all disabilities are static. I don't think there should be more pressure on managers, to figure out who in their

department has disabilities and make sure that they are accommodated because of the voluntary disclosure. I think the people with disabilities who have disclosed should be targeted.... I think again just that personal touch, that someone out there is still aware of the fact that I am working at [the University] with my disability and maybe just check on us once a year in terms of reasonable accommodation, because that's a legislative obligation. Now these reasonable obligations must come from us, we must motivate and write memos, it feels like you are asking for something huge. Just knowing that someone up there knows that I'm down here working with my disability and I'm doing my best and just check on me to see if I need anything and if I'm coping. I think the framework is there, it's just a matter of making it a little bit more individualized per employee with disabilities."

The response concerning innovating or improving Disability Management procedure, if given the chance, highlighted the importance of raising awareness of the role of Disability Management unit. Participant B pointed out the importance of marketing and awareness raising.

"It would be the visibility of the unit. There are millions of policy documents and procedures in place. If you do not know of them, where to go, which form to submit to the [Human Resource Department] or whatever the case might be...if you do not know of these people and what they do to the benefit of the whole Unisa population, it's the first point of contact."

When asked about the support provided by the Disability Forum, not all the Participants were aware of this support structure for EwD. Participant B recalled that there was Disability Forum that she served in, but "it disappeared." Her response regarding the Disability Steering Committee (of the Disability Forum).

"One thing that really bothers me is the lack of top management in how they handle the whole issue of people with disabilities. There are so many times when people with disabilities are [regarded as] "sort of an afterthought." Only when one of the Vice-Principal's was passionate about people with disabilities and addressing the inequalities, did things start happening at the Disability Steering Committee, but when that person was not there it just fell apart. Which is the wrong way to do it."

Theme 2: Lived experiences as a quality construct

Not all the Participants had a positive workplace experience. Participant A had an office "almost opposite the lift." She became disabled while in the employ of Unisa, and before she returned to the workplace, her department had planned to adapt the toilet just around the corner of her office.

"They even built a shower for when I needed to shower there," she mentioned.

In addition, she had a workplace assistant, to

"Help with making copies and accompany her to meetings."

She reported that the Chair of the Department (CoD) at the time was extremely supportive in making sure that everything is right to accommodate her needs.

She also reported that sometimes people “forget that [she’s] there when they are standing.” However, later staff started “seeing the person and not the wheelchair.”

“I have workplace assistance that I’ve had since I started there. So, I’ve always had someone to help me with making copies and accompanying me to meetings, etc.”

For Participant B, the most challenging about having a disability in your working environment is accessibility to meeting rooms and washrooms which she describes as “minor things.”

“Not being able to go up to certain floors especially if the lift is not working and having certain levels where the bathrooms are not adapted for us or are not functional. Or having people use your bathroom for whatever it is, and stay for inordinate amounts of time, then it is fine.”

Her office is on the sixth floor, and the departmental meeting room is on the seventh floor. When the elevator is not working, she had to be carried up the stairs. And the security guards had to carry her down from the sixth floor to the ground floor, and someone had to drive her car from the parking space to the entrance of the building.

“We had meetings on the seventh floor, because it had a lovely board room. I kept apologizing until they changed the venue.”

When asked why she was not attending meetings, she replied that “to carry me up and down the stairs...it’s not fun anymore. As she said: “You get around then it reaches a certain point where you just say I cannot anymore.” She mentions that the disregard of management about the needs of all the staff members, and assuming that “carrying an adult woman up the stairs” that is humiliating and disrespectful. Furthermore, she says, this disregard is also with the cleaning staff that leave their trolleys and baskets and bins in the way, making it difficult for a person in a wheelchair to reach the taps. However, having raised this, she still said: “Overall, it’s not that bad.”

Participant C mentioned similar experiences with inaccessible workspaces.

“There are also things like accessibility; suddenly there were places that I could not access, venues that I couldn’t access, so I had to stop going there. You miss out on important meeting, important seminars and important workshops.”

Participants also highlighted that their colleagues and line managers contributed to a positive lived experience in the workplace. When asked what contributes to a comfortable and conducive workplace and work environment, Participant B mentioned a positive attitude.

“Usually, the lifts are working to get to the sixth floor. [If not] then your colleagues, and one’s attitude I suppose [are important]. I always have someone in hand to help me with this and that, ... Collegiality is the key for me. We work very well in our department because you have a support structure that helps with admin, exam papers etc. It’s a close-knit Department [and] that makes it easier.”

However, Participant E mentioned that in her experience the way the word access is currently defined in the policy, is perceived as physical access – “getting to the office, getting to lift, that type of thing”. She asserted that access to the systems is equally important. Participant E:

“... The way the word access is currently defined, is perceived as physical access - getting to the office, getting to the lift, that type of thing. But I think getting access to the systems are equally important. I can think for example when we have library training, we all must go sit in that room and look at that projector. I can't see [the screen] so perhaps [consider] one-on-one training sessions for those that need it.”

She also mentioned that not being able to drive to venues limited her in terms of attending, conferences and seminars on campus. She referred to the “humungous benefit” of working remotely since covid as she “attended way more webinars and conferences because I can do it remotely and transport is not an issue.”

When asked about the policy regarding transport, equity and access for EwD, her response was as follows:

“I know about the procedure of special vehicles for people with wheelchairs and so on, but the problem is that they can drive all those vehicles. For us [with visual impairment] that need to get somewhere but can't drive ourselves, we must submit a special request, and it takes a couple of days for that to be approved, so that's not always feasible. I think the simple solution would be to change the way we do things where we don't expect everyone's physical presence in meetings, but where those that are not able to join physically can join virtually, something that we now know is very possible thanks to Covid. That eliminates the transport problem completely.”

Theme 3: Availability of adequate and appropriate resources for quality output

All quality evaluation tools include the allocation of resources and physical facilities to identify the most suitable learning and working environments (Commonwealth of Learning, 2020; Council on Higher Education, 2021), and the availability of adequate and appropriate resources is therefore a quality construct. The Participants also highlighted the importance of effective resource allocation and the role of the line manager in this regard. Participant B:

“If you are appointed, it is your head of department that should take the initiative. After being appointed they ask what you need. Do you have any special needs? If there is a need, he or she should be able to say, let's contact this special unit, then you start there... There are cases, like mine where you find that the disability occurs whilst you are at the employ of the University. It was after I opened to my [head of department] then we contacted the [disability] unit, [who] told me about the disability forum. That is how I found out about the declaration.”

Participant D:

"I somehow have experienced that my line manager does not really consider this or see this as real (this is my experience). Some might see this as "a cop out" from doing work. I have had situations where they [line managers] have not seen this as serious."

Participant C affirmed the sentiments of Participants B and D and highlighted the importance of awareness raising. Participant C:

*"There are no proactive programs, for instance, there are policies that you make that you develop for your department as a Chair of Department (CoD), but it's very unusual that they could have a disability plan. ...They [line managers] also do not know until they are faced with a situation. So, at times I've heard of situations where the [CoD] does not want to be a part of that, so they just say: "No, the person must just go home, there is nothing they can help with."
"In my case I was fortunate to have a person who had empathy and sympathy for me, so she made sure that I get all the help that I need."*

Furthermore:

"The only problem with this process is that you must have the knowledge and most of us don't have the knowledge, even our line managers don't know. We must let them know that this is what we have, or this is what they say we have."

Participant C acknowledged the roles and responsibilities of management and the EwD as follows:

"You start by letting your line manager know and that should happen when you are ready."

However, she also remembered how difficult this was for her.

"In my case, it was very difficult to let people know about my situation including my line manager. I didn't even want to share it, because I felt that if I told one person, they would tell the next [person], who would tell the next [person], etc. I knew that the line manager wouldn't do that but, in my mind, it felt like she would spread the news."

Participant E shared similar experiences with line management and resource allocation. When asked if the workplace does enough to support people living with disabilities, Participant E responded as follows:

"I don't think so, I think when you join [the institution] it's up to you the person living with a disability to make things happen and I don't think that's the way it should be. I think you should feel that there's that support, that if you fall, they will catch you, that they will help you up and I don't feel it's there. If you raise the issue that you need support, they are accommodating but it generally [takes] very long."

When asked what had made her declare her disability, Participant E recognised the importance of having appropriate resources to produce quality outputs.

"I did, specifically because of the software. I was afraid also for when it comes to marking, I must be honest with you that's very tough for me. To decipher the students handwriting because I read with a magnifying glass. I think I did it for proactive reasons, for if or when I run into trouble with those type of things that I can just say, please give me a few more days to mark or I need the software, etc."

Participant E received no assistance with accommodations in her workspace or any other resources that she needed to execute her duties effectively and efficiently. When she joined the university, she had to bring her own software. She recalled that "only when the university upgraded to Windows2007 and [my software] was no longer compatible and because it is a very expensive programme, I had to write a memo to motivate why I need [the upgrade] and then eventually the ICT department installed ZoomText for me". At the time of the interview, the software was "again out of date with Windows10". She had to use her own software again. Despite all, she said that "it's not an issue and I'm managing with that." This resilience is evident in her response regarding accommodations for her being light sensitive. She responded:

"I just keep the blinds closed in my office. I have a laptop, but ironically, they gave me the ones with a miniature screen, but I have an external screen at the office that I just use as an enlargement screen."

Theme 4: Performance Management - a key quality indicator

Broshkov, Forostian, Kichuk, Liapa, Horbashevskaya and Kakhiani (2020) asserted that the one of the main objectives of creating and implementing a system of key performance indicators in higher education is to create a motivating work environment for staff to improve performance. The Diversity Management Policy (2017) asserts that diversity should be managed and valued to improve people management and workplace productivity. Moreover, the policy acknowledged that EwD are often marginalised by society because of what they cannot do, ignoring what they can do (# 9.4). The Participants were asked how she viewed her abilities and capabilities as an EwD, and if and how their disability affected their work performance. For Participant C, her disability drastically changed her work performance.

"Acquiring a disability affects your work negatively, there were things that you were able to do but can no longer do. In my case it's a physical disability, I found myself not able to use my hands as effectively as I used to. I could not type anymore. Our work is mainly on the computer so that was firstly how I couldn't execute my work, that's where I needed accommodation, an alternative to typing."

Participant C also compared her work performance before and after the disability:

"Before I had a disability, I could work anytime and for as long as I wanted, that's why I was always ahead. But when I got the disability, I had to depend on someone to help me. At first, I had the device, but now I have a full-time

assistant. I must rely on those hours if the assistant comes for four hours, and I have too much work for four hours."

"I'm an interactive supervisor, I keep in touch with my students and my feedback is quick but all that changed, and they started enquiring what's going on, so that's when I had to let them know [about my disability]."

The responses from Participant D supported the views of Participant C:

"With the depression, I would disappear emotionally, become quiet, not participate in meetings, and not be willing to take chances. It affects my creativity, as well as in the work environment, ... it has really affected me and my creativity."

Participant E

"I don't view myself as someone who can do anything less than someone who doesn't have a disability, I just think I do things differently or with devices and technology. It really helps me to keep pace with those around me that do not have a disability. I don't expect others to think that I can't do as much or as fast as they can because I have a disability."

This was clear in her response regarding performance assessments.

"Yes, to be honest the "disability thing" never comes up during my performance session. I think they should be aware that this is my performance despite the disability, but other than that I don't think it should play a part."

The Policy for EwD (2017) stated the role of line managers as being responsible for the implementation and application of the diversity policy within their respective units, to set a positive example in everything they do and acknowledge their role as being a champion of diversity, and to support diversity management initiatives to eliminate barriers and increase opportunities to achieve their full potential in a working environment that is conducive.

Conclusions

The responses from the Participants confirmed that by allowing EwDs in open and remote learning workplaces to voice their needs from their individual perspectives and in their own words, we would pave the road for them to improve the quality of their online work environment. Moreover, their responses emphasised the importance of listening to the voices of all stakeholders when we craft our quality policies and quality management systems. More importantly, the resilience and fortitude of the Participants to carry on despite the limited support provided by the employer is noteworthy, but at the same time it is a serious indictment on the institution that promises a conducive welcoming working environment for all. EwDs had to purchase their own software, were made to feel that asking for what they rightfully deserve is "too much to ask;" made to feel that they are not deserving. The policies have assigned specific roles to line managers to knowing and understanding the individual needs of those they have been entrusted to lead. The responses from EwDs indicated the opposite, citing that line

managers often chose the easy way and say “go home” rather than addressing the policies, procedures, and systems that will ensure a welcoming, conducive workplace that will ensure quality output from all employees.

The findings revealed the varied experiences of employees with disabilities, highlighting the need to rethink the provision and management of quality in workplaces. It is concluded that more focussed attention to the policies, plans and procedures to ensure a quality workplace environment for EwDs will lead to improved work experience and improved institutional performance. Moreover, that by including the lived experiences of employees with disabilities as a significant quality domain, a more comprehensive and holistic approach to disability management in higher education settings will be encouraged. Furthermore, effective workplace provisions for all staff will improve both individual and institutional performance in higher education institutions.

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