

# STUDENT FUNDING: THE CASE OF DISABLED STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

By virtue of many countries' existence within neoliberal and capitalist systems, in which education is commodified, students with economic disadvantage find themselves in a precarious position in terms of funding, resulting in limited access to education in higher education. While many of disadvantaged students confront challenges of funding resulting in continuous indebtedness in higher education in South Africa, the situation is exacerbated for the disabled ones, who have extra economic needs when it comes to their education. The empirical study, informed by specific concepts from Decolonial Theory and Critical Disability Studies informed understanding of funding for disabled students at one university in South Africa. The finding was that while a specific funding model for disability was available, it was inadequate for learning of those with disabilities resulting in their continued indebtedness and exclusion from the system. The study sought to engage in the debate of inadequate funding in the Global South, which keeps students from economic disadvantage, including the disabled ones in debt, thereby disempowering them and making it difficult for them to contribute meaningfully to the decolonisation project in higher education largely, and making change.

**Keywords:** student funding, South African higher education, disability funding, Decolonial Theory, Critical Disability Studies, neoliberalism

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, disability funding has been limited resulting in disabled students finding it difficult to gain entry into universities. Those who gained entry were from privileged background: the elite who could afford to pay for their studies. The UNESCO World Conference called for increased equality and access (UNESCO 1998), and it's after then that developed countries started prioritising disabled students' entry into universities (Foley and Ferri 2012). It then followed that disability funding became available through the introduction of financial support and resource provision to institutions in higher education (OECD 2003), and it is from the 1990s

that disabled students had a significant representation in universities.

## **NEOLIBERALISM AND DISABILITY FUNDING**

Disability funding for disabled students during the present time may not be fully understood outside the neoliberal and capitalist contexts within which higher education exists globally. Brown (2015) argued that neoliberal reality has permeated nearly all facets of human life, with economic rationality dictating which bodies are more valuable in terms of production. Hughes (2012) argued that from the time of industrialization period, bodies were valued based on the level of production and it is in that respect that disabled bodies were less considered for production. Thus, with the rise of neoliberal and capitalist societies, production has become the main concern, resulting in value being placed on bodies that are productive, neglecting the impaired ones (Russel and Malhotra 2009). By virtue of many countries' existence within neoliberal and capitalist system contexts, education has also been commercialized and commodified, thereby determining where funding should be channeled, which could be more productive to bring economic gain. Arguably, within a context in which bodies are valued for production, persons with disabilities are considered as less productive when it comes to contributing to the economy. Higher education funding for disabled students could be less as they could be viewed as unlikely to be highly productive with regards to contribution to the economy. The issues of disability funding could therefore be less considered in higher education for reasons of less economic benefit and output.

## **FUNDING DISABILITY MODELS AND TRENDS: THE GLOBAL EXPERIENCE**

Though the study was conducted at one university in the South Africa, the global experience was important to look at, so that the issue of disability funding could be traced from a wider context of developed countries, narrowing to a developing country in Africa. The funding models and trends of disability from the broad context included the United Kingdom and America as having developed higher education contexts, which could be representative as the global experience.

### **Funding in the United Kingdom**

In the United Kingdom (UK) context of higher education, there has been disability funding that caters for students with disabilities' education, including additional costs they incur during their study (Chiwandikire and Vincent 2019). There has also been an increase in terms of private funding as a source of disability funding in the universities in UK (European Union 2014). Government and private companies increased disability funding in most countries in UK. The

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014, 64) reported that by virtue of availability of disability funding, most of higher education institutions in UK adopted “an inclusive model that sought to ensure all aspects of the institutional offer were accessible to disabled students”, and thus the universities were able to fund disabled students as well. The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) has been responsible for sourcing specific funding for HEIs to fund deliverance of quality education for disabled students (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2014). In the years 2013–2014, HEFCE managed to distribute 4,5 per cent of the £332 million, which was the mainstream disability allocation for higher education institutions, totaling to £15 million per institution (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2014).

The disability fund provided for disabled students in universities in UK also included the allowance for disability, which catered for a range of gadgets and technology for learning (Briefing Paper 2021). There was an increased disability declaration at entry to the university which shot to two-thirds between 2000–2001, and 2005–2006, from 82 000 to 138 000, to provision of allowance for assistive devices in higher education in the UK (Bourn 2007). About £150 million was apportioned for allowances for disability, to provide around 60 000 disabled students with a range of specialist equipment, which included computer software for dyslexic students and others, as well as modifications to accommodate support for extra needs for all disabled students (Times Higher Education 2015). Though this was some few years back, it indicated that efforts for disability funding were made in universities in the UK, to fund disabled students’ needs, including those extra ones resulting from their impairments. Arguably, disability allowance is an important fund in universities, if disabled students’ unique learning needs were to be fully supported by way of funding.

### **The case of United States of America**

In the previous years, funding disabled students was adequate in the universities in the United States of America like in the UK. As a result the number of those students gradually tripled in American universities (Myers 2008). There were grants and scholarship for disability funding, which also provided for assistive devices as in the UK. In 2009 for example, amounting to EUR 15 million was awarded for disability funding by grants as Pell (OECD 2011). However, the disability funding changed drastically during the 2007 to 2009 US recession when on one hand there were federal cuts of funding, and on the other, other institutions increased money for paying tuition (Camera 2016). Thus, despite the obligations to policy and legislation (Rehabilitation Act of 1973) institutions of higher education in America became constrained in their budget for disability funding and it became inadequate.

What enabled higher education institutions in UK and America to provide adequate disability funding at the beginning, could be attributed to policies of inclusion that were effectively implemented. In UK for an example, breaching of policy to the detrimental effect of excluding students with disabilities had legal implications (Chataika 2007). However, it cannot be glossed over that later in practice, higher education in UK and America also struggled to meet outlined obligations in their policies and there has been cutting on disability funding. Dunn (2016) stated that the government in UK cut down funding support by £30 million, with universities expected to cover costs for DSA but without any allocation from the government (Chiwandikire and Vincent 2019). Reduced disability funding negatively impacted DSA, with funding for extra needs due to impairments, being reduced. Some students with disabilities had to do without personal assistants (Ryan 2017). As already highlighted, the same happened in America during the US recession of 2007 to 2009, in which government funding for disability was cut at the same time that universities increased tuition fees (Camera 2016). In extreme cases of recession, though there could be effective policies that could assist provision of disability funding, it is the economic situation on ground that dictates the course of action. It could be argued that even in the case of developed countries as UK and America, it is the neoliberalist and capitalist contexts that sets the pace and tone of disability funding.

## **DISABILITY FUNDING IN UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The subject of disability funding may not be tackled without first making mention and reference to the #Fees Must Fall (FMF) protests, in which students in all South African universities rocked the whole country during 2015 and 2016, protesting against high fees, exclusion from non-payment of fees and demanding a free higher education. A lot of research has already been published on #Fees Must Fall protests and its implications on funding in the universities in South Africa. Of importance to this article, is how the outcome of the students' protests had implications for disability funding and the effect of this on disabled students' education. Who was the president then announced that there was going to be "free education" for deserving students, whose families earned less than R350 000 per year (Kubheka 2017). It could be argued that though at that time it made a difference to disadvantaged students who were in the bracket, those with disabilities still confronted funding challenges because their expenses have always been higher than those required by their able-bodied peers.

While it was believed that the outcome of FMF protests has been positive, the consumer price index as provided by the Statistics South Africa (2015) showed that the university education cost has risen by 9,3 per cent. In essence, though the government had increased the universities subsidies, the expenditure on higher education had continually increased resulting

in underfunding of institutions and students (Nkosi 2015). Besides, though over 400, 000 students were aided through NSFAS in 2017 from the budget of R15 billion (Collins 2017), there was no separate budget for disability funding (Chiwandikire and Vincent 2019), implying that the increase pertaining to disabled students was overlooked. Thus, though #FMF was considered a move that had assisted disadvantaged student funding generally, the issue of underfunding has never been resolved. At the present time the situation had been worse for disability funding as COVID-19 also impacted negatively on funding in general for all students. As has been noted however, the issue of limited disability funding is not a problem in South African universities alone but is also experienced in developed countries in UK and America.

## **THE PROBLEM**

The problem for the study is that while by virtue of their unique impairment needs and students with disabilities require more funding than those without disabilities, the funding model of NSFAS does not consider their extra needs. As a result, though the disability funding seems to cover all their expenses, they continue to confront the challenges of inadequate funding, which impact negatively on their learning and in extreme cases result in their exclusion from obtaining a university qualification, much to the contradiction of the policies of inclusion in a democratic country.

## **THE ARGUMENT**

For the fact that universities exist within neoliberal and capitalist contexts, disability funding will always be inadequate more especially for those with disabilities, whose education requires more resources to cater for their unique learning needs. Thus, though the Government is making efforts for funding provision for all students to acquire university education, disabled students more especially from disadvantaged economic contexts are always indebted to the university, and consequently they are limited in actively participating in decolonisation issues when they are debtors.

## **KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY**

1. What model of funding is used by the universities in South Africa to fund disabled students?
2. What challenges do students with disabilities confront which make their disability funding inadequate?
3. Why has funding disability continued to be inadequate for students with disabilities resulting in their continuous indebtedness to the university?

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – CONCEPTS FROM DECOLONIAL AND CRITICAL DISABILITY THEORIES**

The article was informed by selected tools from Decolonial and Critical Disability Theories, which were found relevant to assist in understanding the issue disability funding for disabled students with disabilities at the university of focus. The specific tools assist to understand what cannot be readily visible at face value, by unveiling the deeper hidden underlying cause of the situation of disability funding manifesting at the time.

### **Decolonial Theory: Zone of locations – zone of being and non-being**

The zones of location is a concept in decolonial theory that explains the location of different categories of people in two different zones of epistemic central location. Santos (2007) explained the location as spaces in which people are hierarchised and placed by the colonial powers. The Western “abyssal thinking” in that which views humanity as unequal and there is one category on one side of the “abyssal line” and another category is placed on the other. The imagined space which invisible divides people into differential powers, with one side belonging to the powerful and the Other, to the powerless (Santos 2007). The two zones of locations have come to be understood as the Global West and the South in the contemporary scholarship.

In epistemic spaces of location, power is unequally distributed (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Grosfoguel (2011) further explained that argued that in the Western epistemic location, there are those who see themselves as legitimate knowledge creators. Knowledge created on the other side of epistemic location is undermined, including the scholars who produce it (Grosfoguel 2011). Arguably, the idea of epistemic location furthers the understanding of coloniality of power, in which one side is powerful and naturally it's where power lies and hegemony is inherent. From understanding the differential epistemic location, it could be argued that the specific institution of focus, which is formerly advantaged and elite, is located in the in the Western side.

The epistemic locations are not rigidly fixed, and not neatly formed and permanent categories (Grosfoguel 2011). By virtue of impaired bodies considered less productive in capitalist contexts and by virtue of being the other in the coloniality context, disabled students are placed on side of epistemic location, which is undermined. This explains why there is low expectation of their performance in universities (Howell 2006), though they met the entry required to be accepted in the programmes they study. As neoliberal universities are all about productivity and gain, their funding could be limited compared to their able-bodied peers. The concept of epistemic location assisted in understanding the continuous indebtedness of disabled

students and their exclusion in learning, for which the explanation could be hidden and might be explained from the surface value.

### **Specific concepts from critical disability studies**

From the Critical Disability Studies, the concept of the international legal instrument, policy human rights, including power dynamics, were considered relevant theoretical concepts to assist the funding of disabled students.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION AND POLICY**

The United Nations Convention of the Right of People with disabilities (UNCRPD), is critiqued by the critical disability scholars for not taking the social context of the Global South into context with regards to disability rights. They argue that the legal instruments overlook the struggles confronted by of disabled people in the global South, hence the disability rights enshrined in the convention do not speak to the people for whom it is designed for (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). Thus, while the UNCRPD is supposed to inform Inclusive Education policies, and influence the education of those with disabilities at all levels, it over-glosses the context within which those with disabilities exist and also their own lived experiences. Thus, though the instrument has been ratified by many countries, including South Africa, inclusion of the disabled by way of policy, affordance of human rights through funding is at stake.

## **CONTESTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONVENTION**

Universalising the human rights discourse is contested for a grand narrative from the Global North, which does not consider the context of the Global South (Mutua 2005; De Sousa Santos 2008; Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). Thus, responsible authorities in the Global South could on one hand subscribe to the human rights phenomena while on the other, are violating individual rights. Power dynamics inherent in the hierarchical systems also override the human rights discourse as conceived from the Global South context (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). The scholars' argument is that when human rights are considered only from the universalised conception of the Western standpoint and overlooking the Global South context, they won't have the relevance and applicability that is expected (Grech 2011). In other words, despite the human rights discourse, those with disabilities continue to be excluded because of the way power is unequally distributed in the Global South

It is further argued that violation of human rights is not by coincidence but a reflection of power dynamics embedded in social conditions that determine who suffers oppression and who does not (Farmer 2005). In other words, where there are hierarchies, human rights violation is

not absent. Naturally, those who suffer abuse, are those placed in the lower hierarchy in terms of the power structure and those shielded will be the powerful. With regards to funding also, the rights of the powerless as those with disabilities is high likely. Understanding human rights violation in the Global South could thus assist in explaining the disability funding at the institution.

## **THE ISSUE OF POWER DYNAMICS**

CDS scholars argue that it is the hegemonic North that designed the legal instrument (UNCRPD) and determines what should constitute human rights. However, the dynamics of power embedded in the hierarchical systems in the Global South have been overlooked (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). It means that power dynamics that exists in humanity and has implication for human rights are universalised and taken for granted that they are applied uniformly globally. It could be argued therefore that though the human rights discourse has been accepted in African countries, the issue of power dynamics resulting from the hierarchical power organisation has not been resolved in the Global South. In essence, those who have power may still violate the rights of the powerless and vulnerable as those with disabilities, despite that they also have human rights as all other people. Thus, while there are legal instruments and policies, informed by human rights, to enable gaining entry to universities broadly, disability funding for the disabled students could still be compromised. Critical Disability scholars explain how all these are intrinsically interwoven and how they may not work as required and expected, which could illuminate and help to understand disability funding at the institution that is focused on.

## **METHOD**

Data was obtained through a qualitative method from nineteen participants, which included twelve disabled students and seven administrators working as staff members from the Disability Rights Centre, who were interviewed. Disabled students were studying professional programmes at the case study university.

## **SAMPLING PROCEDURE AND SAMPLE**

Sampling was purposive and the institution was formerly advantaged, and also considered advantaged in terms of disability funding at the present time. Disability funding was expected to be adequate considering that the institution has a long history of supporting students with disabilities, which dates back before independence, a disability support structure (Disability Rights Centre), which has been long established with permanent members of staff. For a number

of years the institution had been considered as having the best disability support among other universities in the country. It had won an award previously from the Department of higher education and training (Ndlovu 2017). The institution was one of the few in which disabled students were supported while they were at home during the pandemic time (Disability Rights Unit 2020). As funding plays a major role in enabling the educational support for disabled students, the specific institution was sampled to understand how it provided those students with funding support.

Disabled students were sampled across Medicine programme in the Faculty of Health, Law in the Faculty of Commerce, and Education in the Faculty of Humanities. The three programmes were different in terms of funding requirements for disability, thereby making a small representation, in which disability funding could be understood in different faculties. Twelve disabled students who were undergraduate and postgraduate students across the three programmes volunteered to participate. The under-graduate ones were final year students, who by virtue of being at the university for a long time, they had a lived experience of how they were funded and had an understanding of disability funding at the institution.

The administrators from Disability Right Centre, were selected as support providers to those students, including having knowledge on disability funding and policy issues regarding disabled students at the university. Thus, the specific institution and the participants were purposively selected as ideal for understanding disability funding at the specific institution, which could also provide a tunnel hole understanding of disability funding in a broader South African higher education context. All the seven administrators who were permanent members of the staff at the Centre volunteered to participate. They held different positions – one Head of the Centre, one technician, one examinations officer, and four other administrators, who played other administrative roles.

All who participated were 19, and the sample cut across gender, different ages from 18–54, race, which was Black, White, Colored and Indian. Disability categories in disabled students were visual and hearing impairments, physical disabilities and albinism. Four administrators from the Centre were also disabled people. The category was albinism and physical disabilities. It was a representative sample, from which the issue of disability funding could be sourced.

## **GATHERING AND ANALYSIS OF DATA**

The interview method was adopted as data collection tool because it enabled depth and probing (Creswell 2008). The interview questions were designed to address the key questions provided above. The questions thus addressed: (a) the issue of availability of disability funding at the institution, (b) eligibility for funding, (c) funding models, (d) information about disability

funding and application, (e) timeline for payment, and (f) funding for extra needs. When data had been collected, thematic data analysis was employed. This was to derive the categories that emerged from data (Nowell et al. 2017; Saldana 2014).

Analysis of data was thematic and in phases in which the first was to familiarise with the data, through prolonged engagement, labelling and naming it in numbers, to generate the initial codes. This was followed by inferring the recurring patterns which generated the minor themes, which were collapsed, abstracted for meaning and grouped into categories (major themes). For theme vetting and testing the major themes, reflexive journaling was utilised, in which there was return to raw data and comparison was made. In establishing trustworthiness, member checks and peer debriefing were used and categories were matched and confirmed (Nowell et al. 2017; Saldana 2014).

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical procedures were considered of importance because of the vulnerability of the key participants and arrangement for counselling were made before commencing the study. Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were protocols that were followed and made consideration for in the study. Full consent was sought from all the participants, the right to participate and not to and that of withdrawal at any point during interview, were explained to the participants before the start of data collection. The ethics clearance certificate (2013ECE106) was issued by the responsible Ethics committee before the study commenced.

## **RESULT**

### **Available disability funding disability**

It emerged that there was disability funding available for disabled students at the specific university. The seven administrators from the Centre and the nine disabled students mentioned the fund for disadvantaged students (the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS). They stated that the fund was available to all who met the criteria. The DRC staff members explained that NSFAS also catered for disability funding as students with disabilities were also beneficiaries to the fund. For them, it was a bursary they did not pay back, while for other students it was a loan. The bursary as part of NSFAS, covered the accommodation, meals, students' tuition, and a portion for assistive technology.

Besides the NSFAS bursary, there was also a specific fund (Fundza Lushaka) for students in the programme in Education, which was also available to disabled students. The National Research Foundation (NRF), and the Postgraduate Merit Award (PMA) Scholarship were other

funding packages, which were also available and disabled students who qualified were also beneficiaries. There was also external funding from private companies. The evidence that there was such funding was seen in that ten out of the 12 students with disabilities, who participated in the study had one of the bursaries and scholarship. Seven of them had the NSFAS bursary. One student in the Education programme had Fundza Lushaka bursary, and private companies funded the two others. One, who was also lecturer stated that by virtue of his position, he was not paying tuition. It is only one out of the 12 disabled who did not have any funding and was self-paying.

### **Inadequate disability funding**

While funding for disability was available from different sources and mainly NSFAS, it was revealed that it was inadequate and did not to meet the unique requirements of disabled students. The utterances from the students across the three programmes attest to the inadequacy of funding. The extra learning needs resulting from impairment related disadvantages were not catered for. One student stated:

“Some students with disabilities are struggling with food. They are struggling with basic needs. I mean, there are students at this university who live under bridges because they have no money. It’s ridiculous, I hate it. How do you do your work when you are hungry?” (Student in the Education programme).

Another also stated:

“There could be adequate funding but they are looking other issues that affect students with disabilities. For example, we need to undergo surgery like I did. There is no allocation for that. Things are getting more and more expensive. It’s already difficult to pay high student fees by the university.” (Medical student).

Echoing inadequacy in terms of extra needs, another one also stated:

“I do not think they understand that we have more needs that are medical. We have to go for check-up. We need a lot of money to keep that little hearing. Every year I have to do hearing tests, twice or thrice. It costs a lot of money. If they consider our other expenses, they will realise no, these guys need more funding.” (Law student).

What is uttered by students with disability is consistent with literature in terms of inadequate funding, more specifically to do with affording learning to hearing impaired students. Besides medical expenses to assist the students’ hearing in particular, literature reveals that more funding is requires for Sign language interpretation. It was revealed that in 15 South African

higher education institutions, hearing impaired students expressed concern that NSFAS funding was insufficiency to fund them, in relation to Sign language interpretation expenses (Fotim Project Report 2011). Extant literature has revealed that the issue of institutions in South African higher having difficulty in funding hearing impaired students by and being limited in providing Sign Language was common. In some cases, Disability Resource Centres have instead of providing Sign Language interpretation services, had instead bought assistive device, which did not suit those students well in their learning (Chiwandikire and Vincent 2019).

Moreover, bursaries and scholarships for disability funding did not take care of personal services such as paying care providers for those with physical disabilities (Fotim Project Report 2011). Though this was revealed some few years back, the students' utterances in the present study do not reflect any change for the better. It could even be worse considering that running expenses had continued to increase to the present.

Disability funding is not only inadequate but it also delayed in being released to disabled students. Across the three professional degree programmes all students expressed the problem of delay in getting the funds and how their learning was negatively affected by that. They stated that they needed money in time to buy food and learning materials, but it was not so. Their voices were represented in the utterances below:

“It takes time to get the money in each student's account. They will tell you it will be there by this time, its freaking. They say end of June ... end of June it's still not there. It affects me, how do I go and do my teaching experience? I need the money to actually help me do my work and prepare my lessons. It's ridiculous how slow the process of funding is. Some students are struggling with food and basic needs.” (Student in Education programme).

Students with disabilities' voices on delays in getting funding is consistent with extant literature that NSFAS bursaries delayed in reaching to them, resulting in some of those students dropping out (DHET 2009).

### **Tension in terms of adequacy of disability funding**

There was a disagreement between students with disabilities and the administrators' view regarding adequacy of funding for disability at the university. Nine disabled students' perception was that funding as inadequate. It was at the same that all seven members of DRC insisted on adequacy. One student stated: “To say funding is adequate does not make sense because some students living with a disability have been excluded for financial reasons”. Contrary to what the student uttered a member of the DRC stated:

“I don’t understand why they say funding is not enough because if they don’t have, we look around for any bursary that caters for them and give them information. I think they are just greedy!” (An administrator at the Centre).

The statement of the DU staff member and students with disabilities reveal the complexity of contradictory views on funding support for disabled in universities in general.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Availability of disability funding at the institution**

Availability of disability funding at the institution could be explained in the light of the influence of the UNCRPD, which provides disabled rights to education. Critical Disability scholars argue that the instrument gives the legal framework that those with disabilities are not left out in education in basic and higher education. South Africa signed an agreement Convention in 2007, and by virtue, the responsible authorities have to comply with the obligations of ensuring that disabled students with required entry level qualification, gain entry into universities and funding support is provided for their learning. Furthermore, the comprehensive policies of inclusive education that South Africa has, could be enabling the availability of disability funding at the institution. Literature also revealed that former historically advantaged students in universities were more privileged with regards to availability of disability funding (Matshedisho 2007). The specific institution might have had different sources for disability funding by virtue of being an advantaged institution, which supported disability students even before independence. The evidence of availability of funding for disability is shown in a number of disability categories the institution is supporting through its well established Disability Rights Centre. Matshedisho (2007) stated that some institutions supported limited categories of disabilities because of lack of funding, but the specific institution supported 16 different categories, which included learning disabilities, a category that is not yet supported by other institution (Ndlovu 2017).

### **Inadequacy of disability funding**

While disability funding was available at the institution, it came out strongly that it was enough for disabled students’ unique needs. The situation could be explained from the perspective of the specific tool of two different epistemic locations (Santos 2007), described in detail above. Being the Other, they were not prioritized when it came to resource distribution in the way of funding. The university exists within the capitalistic and neoliberalist context, in which education has been commodified. By virtue of impairment disadvantages, less productivity and

gain are expected from those students. In that respect more funding could be directed to students without disabilities, who were seen as more productive in terms of labour and production than the disabled ones.

From literature, funding could have not been inadequate for students with disabilities because of their extra needs, which they required because of their impairment, but the responsible stakeholders were overlooking them. Disabled students require more funding because they have additional expenses that other students do not incur (Morris 1989; Hurst 1993). For an example, that disabled students required additional extra costs for medical care, might have been overlooked by the DRU members. Those who were not disabled did not have a lived experience of disability. Since the NSFAS fund covered tuition, food, accommodation, including the portion for assistive devices, the stakeholders might have seen it as enough funding, that covered all the expenses for students with disabilities.

### **Tension about inadequacy disability funding**

Power dynamics in the Global South explained by Critical Disability scholars (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011), is manifested in the study, in which those in power speaks for the powerless. It explains the contestation on inadequacy of disability that emerged between the disabled students and the Disability Rights Centre staff members. Contradictory views on funding were raised because members of the DRC spoke for the disabled students, imposing on them that disability was adequate. Titchkosky (2003) argued that it is those who live with a disability who knew what exactly they need. The National Union of Students (NUS) in the UK universities were labelled “arrogant and out of touch” when they protested against the government for cutting down funding, which also affected the allocation for assistive devices (Times Higher Education 2015). In the study, students with disabilities were also labelled as “greedy” when they stated that funding was not adequate.

The tension between the DRC staff members and disabled students resulting in latter being viewed as “greedy” could be explained as power dynamics, in which the latter were not accorded their rights. This confirms that that the way human rights were applied in the West and the South was different. The context of the South is not considered when it comes to consideration of issues of rights. Thus, though the legal instrument UNCRPD and the respective policies of inclusion were available, they did not provide the framework that enabled the consideration of disabled students’ right to funding. The powerful versus powerless dynamics still shaped how disability funding was influenced, resulting in the tension and contradictions in the way adequate funding was understood by the disabled students and the DRC staff members at the university.

The DRU members might not have been taking into cognisance, the additional needs of those students besides the transport, food, accommodation and tuition, which was provided in the NSFAS bursary. They might not have genuinely understood why students were saying disability funding was not enough when there was also a fund, which catered for their assistive devices. In that respect, the contradiction and tension could be seen as justified, though it still speaks to “top-down approaches” (Pothier and Devlin 2006), in which it is those in the apex of the hierarchy whose voice is listened to, rather than those in the lower hierarchy, who have a lived experience. In essence, this could be explained in the light of “top-down approaches” influenced by power, in which the stakeholders in the top hierarchy impose on those in the lower. The DRC staff members could be seen as imposing on students with disabilities that funding was adequate, though students were stating that it did not cater for their other extra needs. For example, those who were in the Medicine programme stated that it was prohibitively expensive for them as they also required some assistive devices and learning media, which were not required by those without disabilities. Arguably, the experience was for those who studied the programme and the staff could have been unaware of that. It is the experiences of those with disabilities that should be listened to, and be heard (Pothier and Devlin 2006; Hosking 2008). In essence, the disabled students should speak for themselves as it is them who suffer the experiences of inadequate funding.

### **Challenges of decolonising the system due to students’ continuous indebtedness**

By virtue of continuous indebtedness to the universities, students from disadvantaged context, including those with disabilities, might have challenges in participating in the decolonisation project. That students with disabilities were willing to contribute to decolonisation was seen when they also actively engaged in protests of the 2015/16 Fees Must Fall, despite the volatile atmosphere, which was not conducive for their participation. However, it could be argued that when students are in debt, to the extent of them being excluded on financial ground, it disempowers them in a way that they may not be able to think about decolonising the curriculum or the university. It is only imaginary that there could be change when the present system is still shaped by the durable colonial powers (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013), which sustains that the Other as students with disabilities continue to be excluded, even where it pertains funding. The underlying reason for inadequate disability funding and delays in getting funding by disabled students is unseen effects of coloniality. They are still oppressed and disempowered as long as they remain, those in the lower hierarchy of the student board. In that state, involvement in decolonisation movements could be seen as secondary as they have more

pressing everyday needs to meet. For example, students stated that by virtue of delays in getting funding, they were affected to the extent that they went without food and accommodation. Confronted with challenges of meeting basic needs, their attention could be in meeting basic needs than in decolonisation issues.

### **Way forward: Allowing the disabled students to speak out**

The study privileged the disabled students to speak out on improving disability funding at the university because it is them who experience funding challenges. All the 19 of them, who participated in the study, proposed working in partnership and collaboration amongst all stakeholders at the university, leaders at government level and the Department of Higher Education and Training. Their perspective was represented in the utterance below:

“As a university we should work together with the Government because even if the University might wish to help in that there is no budget for that. There should be a budget from the Department of Higher Education specifically for impairment related extra needs.” (A student in Medicine).

What the disabled students are proposing is that three arms should engage each in other and in the disability support available, stakeholders include the budget for allocation for extra needs, which are impairment related. This could indeed improve their funding because though there is a specific bursary for them (NSFAS 2013), it does not include fund allocation for their extra needs. The UK, funding, which has Disability Living Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance for disabled students (Fotim Project Report 2011), can be adopted.

Responding collectively to the problem of inadequate disability funding by stakeholders at the university, at government level and by DHET as suggested by the disabled students themselves could improve disability funding. Simon and Masschelein (2005) argued that there is often need for collective response by humans in which they need to organise themselves in groups and work together to solve problems, in which they have a common ground. Collective partnership and collaboration amongst stakeholders for the same goal has been found to assist in making improvement and change. This was witnessed even when persons with physical disabilities collaborated and partnered against oppression in the 1960s in Britain (UPIAS 1979), and the environment was changed to cater for their unique needs. The limitation in the disabled students' proposal is that they did not state how the partnership and collaboration should be structured and organised, with specifications on who should do what amongst the specific stakeholders involved. Without clear specifications of who should do what in terms of improving disability funding, partnership and collaboration between stakeholders in higher education, the Government and DHET may not yield the expected results in terms of disability

funding.

Learning from what countries like UK are doing to improve disability funding, and how they are doing it in higher education could be useful. It could be argued however that inadequate funding has become a problem that is confront disabled student globally. It is evidenced when there were cuts on disability funding by the Governments in universities in the UK and the United States of America. There also has been a continuous rise in the running costs and tuition for all students, which is worse for those with disabilities, as already highlighted in the article above. Worse is the case in developing countries, which are also faced with poverty, high rate of unemployment, which are more pressing problems requiring attention. In that situation, improving disability funding becomes secondary.

Inadequate disability funding has also been exacerbated by COVID-19. As problems of the South have also become the problem of the West, learning from each other to solve common problems could make improvement and change in funding largely and disability funding specifically. Cross and Amasa (2017) argued for “hospitality of ideas” which is about learning and adopting what is useful from each other in the whole world. Sharing ideas on what is useful in universities in the West and South could assist in solving common disability funding challenges for disabled students globally.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In universities in South Africa, underprivileged students have found themselves in a precarious position in terms of student-funding. Though after #FMF protests all deserving students were funded through NSFAS funding model, as costs continue to rise annually, funding has continued to be inadequate. The situation is exacerbated in the case of disability funding because students with disabilities have needs like all other students, and extra ones that are impairment-related. However, the extra ones are not catered for in the available funding model, resulting in students’ continuous indebtedness to the universities. Indebtedness disempowers the students, not only those with disabilities but all, who are owing because they face financial exclusion from the universities. Inadequate funding largely and disability funding in particular is not negatively impacting universities in South Africa only but it is an international challenge that requires all stakeholders, to work together and to learn from each other on how they could improve the funding situation at large and the disability funding specifically.

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