

Exploring Inclusive Practices for Students with Disabilities in Rural South African Universities

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Abstract—Despite various reforms, students with disabilities (SwDs) in South African Higher Education (SAHE) continue to face systemic exclusion, particularly in rural universities. While enrolment numbers are rising, persistent barriers such as physical, attitudinal, and informational constraints hinder their full participation. Many disability inclusion policies are derived from Global North frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which do not align with the resource-constrained realities of rural universities in the Global South.

This study argues that Ubuntu philosophy, with its emphasis on interdependence, dignity, and communal responsibility, offers a more contextually relevant approach to disability inclusion in SAHE. By integrating Ubuntu principles into policy and practice, rural universities can develop sustainable, culturally grounded solutions that foster inclusive environments.

The research will adopt a critical emancipatory qualitative approach, using semi structured, in-depth oral conversations with 12 participants, including SwDs, Disability Unit Managers, faculty and student affairs leadership at two rural universities in South Africa. Purposive sampling will be used, and data will be analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis.

This study is essential for advancing social justice and transformation in SAHE by identifying overlooked barriers and proposing an African epistemological framework for inclusion. By embedding Ubuntu into curriculum delivery, governance, and institutional culture, this research aims to contribute to the development of disability policies that are not only inclusive but also locally sustainable and socially just.

Keywords—Disability, Inclusive Education, Inclusion, Higher Education, Ubuntu Philosophy