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Attitudes Constraining the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in a Ghanaian Public University: Student and Staff Perspective

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Abstract

Attitudes are fundamental to the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. This study explored the perspectives of students and staff regarding the attitudes that hinder the inclusion of students with disabilities in a Ghanaian university. A qualitative methodology was employed, with data collected through interviews with 13 respondents, including seven university lecturers and six students with disabilities. These data were analysed and presented thematically. From the perspective of these respondents, the attitudes that influence the inclusion of students with disabilities in the university community are: preconceived ideas and mindsets, offensive remarks and comments, and undesirable patterns of behaviour and actions. It was recommended that tools such as comprehensive awareness raising, continuous contact and participation in university activities, and integrating attitudes and beliefs into professional preparation and development programmes be used to combat these negative attitudes. It was concluded that the identification and implementation of programmes, guidelines, and procedures that may bring about fundamental attitudinal change are essential for successfully including people with disabilities in higher education institutions (HEIs).

Keywords: Attitudes, inclusion, people with disabilities, Ghanaian public university

Introduction

Attitudes refer to a psychological construct that motivates individuals to conduct themselves in certain ways; they are forces that inform beliefs (Triandis et al., 1984). Values, attitudes, and behaviour patterns are developed from socio-cultural interactions, including modelling and observation, family relationships, educators, and peers, with significant others playing a key role (Bandura (1977)). Further, the attitudes of people without disabilities towards people with disabilities are intricate and multifaceted, and these aspects affect behaviour towards people with disabilities (Yuker, 1988). Moreover, discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities are entrenched in societies. These imperceptible and subtle barriers constrain social connections with people with disabilities and preserve the mutuality of unfavourable attitudes (Shannon et al., 2009). Jones and Guskin (1984) contend that unacceptable attitudes are founded on naivety and deception, which lead to the denunciation of people with disabilities.

Among African countries, people with disabilities can be excluded, denounced, and treated unkindly. According to Amanze (2019), people with disabilities are treated as objects rather than as human beings. Bruno and Fangnwi (2019) maintain that prejudice, misconceptions, mockery, insults, and stigmatisation hurt the emotional state and personality of people with disabilities. Researchers (e.g., Agbenyega, 2003, Amanze, 2019; Naami & Hayashi, 2012) argue that these unacceptable attitudes are founded on the assumption that disability is the outcome of evil spirits, sins, witchcraft, magic, 'juju' and/or retribution from the gods. According to Bandura (1986), people's behaviours are significantly influenced by strongly held beliefs.

Despite the growing awareness and the political will to enact inclusion, negative attitudes, stigma, and limited knowledge of disability still prevail in education systems in many countries (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2014). Although inclusion is at the core of governments' educational and political agenda, the notion of disability from a deficit perspective remains dominant (Helena-Martins et al., 2018). Attitudes are fundamental to implementing successful policy for including students with disabilities in HEIs (Zafir, 2016).

The literature highlighted that many students with disabilities face stigma, discrimination, and resistance from stakeholders in the academic landscape, including faculty, administrators, and students without disabilities. Students with disabilities have cited instances of isolation, rebuffing, and derogatory treatment, as well as difficulties related to the attitudes of management staff (Ebersold & Evans, 2003; FOTIM, 2011). Some students with disabilities expressed the feeling that the management of HEIs was pressured to accept inclusive education for students with disabilities because of apprehensions about change (FOTIM, 2011). Dowrick et al. (2005)

conducted a study and found that most students with disabilities felt stigmatised due to the notion that 'disability equals inability'. Researchers (Budu, 2016); Ebersold and Evans, 2003), for example, documented similar findings regarding unacceptable attitudes toward students with disabilities in HEIs. Similarly, Morley and Croft (2011) reported that students with disabilities recounted numerous experiences of 'othering', prejudice, socio-cultural exclusion, powerlessness, frustration, and social isolation on university campuses. Cases of isolation, derogatory treatment, and rejection of students with disabilities have also been reported by FOTIM (2011).

It is important to respect, value, and provide for 'difference' within a university campus environment (Gillies & Dupuis, 2013; Evans et al., 2017). This diversity should be made visible to create welcoming, accepting, friendly, embracing, and inclusive spaces. A campus community with noticeably diverse characteristics decreases sentiments of 'stigma and otherness' associated with disability (Evans et al., 2017). Faculty and peers are responsible for creating inclusive spaces and increasing social and learning opportunities for students with disabilities in the university landscape (Gilson et al., 2020).

According to Costea-Bărluțiu and Rusu (2015) and Thompson et al. (2012), social closeness to disability is fundamental in establishing variations in attitudes towards people with disabilities. Research has established that social proximity or interaction with a disability is a key ingredient that impacts how attitudes towards people with disabilities become visible (Shannon et al., 2009). Similarly, classroom interaction significantly affects students' acceptance of disabilities (McGregor, 2003). Regular and frequent contact with friends, acquaintances, and colleagues is essential to create familiarity, foster respect for people with disabilities, and promote inclusivity (Thompson et al., 2012). A study conducted by Hayashi and May (2011) revealed that students who a professor with a disability tutored demonstrated a greater pro-disability attitude.

HEIs require changing values and attitudes to include individuals with disabilities effectively. Paradoxically, the essence of HEIs is to engender intellectual growth. A paradigm shift in the attitudes and mindsets of these HEIs is essential "for their own intellectual growth to occur in disability inclusion" (FOTIM, 2011, pp. 83-84). Transforming values and attitudes takes extended time and requires thoroughly examining assumptions and practices. Societies must understand and accept inclusive education through advocacy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009).

Parchomiuk (2015) contends that people working with those with disabilities must have a positive mindset to eliminate irrational actions, and assumptions, as undesirable and stereotyped attitudes can manifest in work-

related behaviour. Commitment, appreciation of differences, meaningful friendships, flexibility, respect, patience, joy, teaching, and mentoring are important and critical skills, qualities, and attributes for people working with those with disabilities (Shippy, 2015). The leadership of HEIs has central responsibility for building and maintaining a supportive culture and philosophy of inclusion in their respective institutions (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Slee et al. (2014) argue that university leadership must demonstrate a commitment to the positive educational experience of students with disabilities. Similarly, Shaddock et al. (2009) maintain that the role of leadership is, thus, critical to implementing the inclusion agenda.

In Ghana, prevailing cultural beliefs continue to hinder the inclusion of people with disabilities in HEIs and influence the way they are treated. Conceptualisations of disability are based on history, cultural beliefs, and norms, impacting attitudes towards people with disabilities (Anthony, 2011). For example, Ghanaians generally believe that people with disabilities possess evil spirits and bring bad omens to the family and society. Scholars, for example, Agbenyega (2003), Avoke (2002), and Kuyini (2014) reported that in history, such beliefs have led to negative attitudes, acts of villainy, and/or infanticides.

Societal perceptions of what causes disability and the possibility of causing destruction have implications for educational provision and attitudes towards persons with disabilities (Kuyini, 2014) in HEIs in Ghana. As mentioned by researchers such as Agbenyega, et al. (2005), Asiedu, et al. (2018), and Avoke (2002), unacceptable attitudes and disregard are basic impediments to social and educational engagement of persons with disabilities in Ghana. Agbenyega (2007) asserts that negative attitudes and prejudice are at the heart of all educational barriers, especially for people with disabilities in Ghana. Research has established that people without disabilities within the university community are not certain of the characteristics of students with disabilities and are therefore reluctant to engage with them (Naami & Hayashi, 2012).

The philosophy of social justice is fundamental to protecting the rights of people with disabilities. This philosophy eradicates systems that support exclusionary practices and marginalisation in tertiary education (Evans et al., 2017). According to UNESCO (2014), numerous international treaties and declarations affirmed the right of everyone to education, and these rights are recognised in several legally and non-legally enforceable instruments. Similarly, the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, and the Persons with Disability Act, Act 715, 2006, forbids discriminatory treatment of people with disabilities. Section 37 of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2006 prohibits the use of pejorative labels for persons with disabilities on account of their disabilities (Government of Ghana, 2013; Republic of Ghana, 2006). In 2015,

Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy was promulgated; this policy forms the basis for inclusive education practices and support for people with disabilities in HEIs. This policy seeks to create an educational system that is responsive to diverse learners' needs and also ensures that every learner has the best opportunity to study at any level (Ministry of Education, Republic of Ghana, 2015).

Attitudes are widely recognised as an obstruction to the inclusion of people with disabilities in HEIs. These attitudinal barriers are positively associated with their academic and social engagements. Although a few studies have been conducted by researchers such as Asiedu et al. (2018), Morley and Croft (2011), and Naami and Hayashi (2012) in HEIs in Ghana to isolate some of the unacceptable attitudes experienced by students with disabilities, no such study has been conducted in the study university. Therefore, this study explored the perspectives of students and staff regarding the attitudes that inhibit the inclusion of students with disabilities in this particular Ghanaian university.

The findings of this study may offer useful insights for leadership, faculty, and administrators in designing interventions to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in HEIs. The findings may also help to create and maintain positive attitudes towards students with disabilities within the university community.

Method

Research Approach

This study explored the views of students and staff regarding the attitudes that limited the participation of students with disabilities in a public university in Ghana. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to explore and understand the phenomena as they occur. The qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to engage and interact with respondents in a naturalistic environment. This environment facilitated an in-depth understanding of their perceptions, perspectives, values, and interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) regarding the university community's attitudes towards students with disabilities. The researcher adopted a case study design, which is appropriate for a study that seeks to answer the 'how and why' of phenomena (Yin, 2014).

Selection of respondents

The overarching goal of qualitative research is to understand the specific social context (Connolly, 1998). The qualitative approach allowed this researcher to choose 'information-rich' respondents to gain insights into the phenomena under study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participating university to obtain valuable data for this study (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2013). The researcher selected 13 respondents,

including seven members of staff and six students with disabilities from the participating university.

The seven staff respondents were picked using a purposive sampling technique to obtain information-rich cases (Creswell, 2013). The researcher adopted a convenience sampling technique to select six student respondents who were both available and interested in being part of the research (Etikan et al., 2016; Taherdoost, 2016). The seven staff respondents were selected from the university's leadership and management team, comprising the Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Dean of Students, Dean of Faculty, Vice-Dean of Faculty, Head of Department, Head of Disability Support Unit, and Deputy Head of Disability Support Unit. The six students who participated in the study were from various bachelor's and master's degree programmes, including four students with vision impairment and two with physical disabilities.

The anonymity of the study respondents was ensured by using identifiers (pseudonyms) to replace their names. The seven staff respondents were designated as AP1, AP2, AP3, AP4, AP5, AP6, and AP7. Similarly, the names of the six student respondents were designated as follows: APS1, APS2, APS3, APS4, APS5, and APS6. Altogether, the respondents had a rich array of insights and experiences relating to the attitudes that affect the academic experiences of students with disabilities.

Data Collection and Analysis

The respondents' voices are fundamental to this research and were elicited through face-to-face interviews (Cohen et al., 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) maintain that interviews are identified as "the preferred methodological tool of the qualitative researcher" (p. 353). Interviews allowed the researcher to understand the respondents' perspectives on the investigated phenomena (Best & Kahn, 2006). Through detailed interviews, respondents shared their thoughts and experience regarding the attitudes that affect students with disabilities in HEIs. A similar set of questions was presented to each respondent via an interview guide. The literature review provided the framework for the content of the interview protocol, which focused on the attitudes of students with disabilities and aspects that prevent their full participation in the university community. The basic responses to these issues have been presented and discussed more fully in the following section.

According to Cohen, et al (2011), qualitative data analysis is about organising, reporting, and explaining data. The qualitative data analysis process involves making sense of a huge amount of data to reduce the raw information, identify key trends and build a framework to communicate the substance of the data (Patton, 2015). Thus, the process involves how data are translated into findings. The researcher followed the three steps of qualitative analysis proposed by Ary et al. (2019) to transform the interview data into

findings. These phases include 1) familiarisation and organisation 2) coding and reducing 3) interpretation and representation. Short and long quotes from study respondents were woven into the findings to provide readers with the substance of the raw data and to demonstrate the strength and credibility of the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

As Johnson and Christensen (2014) and Lewis and Nicholls (2014) suggest this researcher accurately reported the interview data to ensure extreme rigour. Following the transcription of the interview data, member checking (participant validation) was conducted to allow respondents to confirm their transcripts and any interpretations applied to those words. Member checking facilitated a healthy balance between the views of the respondents and the representation of these views by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data presented in this study form part of the data collected for the researcher's doctoral thesis (Mensah, 2020).

Ethical considerations

Yin (2014) asserts that ethical concerns are essential to any study involving human subjects. Ethical protocols were followed from the beginning of the research through to how data was collected, analysed, and reported (Creswell, 2013). Before the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the institution where the researcher was pursuing her PhD programme. In Ghana, clearance for fieldwork was issued by the university's Ethics Committee that participated in the study. Thus, the ethical procedures established by the two universities were duly followed.

Findings

This study explored the attitudes that hinder the inclusion of people with disabilities in a Ghanaian university. The study's findings are presented under three themes emerging from the data. These themes are preconceptions and mindsets; offensive remarks and comments; and patterns of undesirable behaviours and actions.

Preconceptions and mindsets

Respondents reported the following: mindsets and prejudices, including negative perceptions, bizarre assertions, and thoughts, which are not alien to Ghanaian culture (APS2 & APS4). Respondent AP6 noted that as a human organisation, the university has people from different backgrounds; as such, the manifestation of some undesirable characteristics towards some categories of people is unavoidable. These undesirable behaviours emanate mainly from the value systems and beliefs transferred from society to the

university community. These include stigmatisation, doubts, and uncertainties regarding the potential, competencies, and abilities of people with disabilities.

A student respondent indicated that some people within the university community have no previous contact with people with visual impairments, which triggers negative perceptions. *"You know, some people... it's the first time they come into contact with visually impaired people, so sometimes they have their own stereotypes, they have their own thoughts"* (APS2). The respondent further noted that due to such misapprehensions, certain lecturers perceive students with disabilities as an extra duty to perform in the lecture halls. *"Some lecturers, when they see you in class, maybe it's the first time they see you... they have their own thinking. They think that you are just coming to be a burden to them"*.

If some lecturers distribute course materials at lectures and students with vision impairment also go to pick theirs, they respond as if *"you are a nuisance and you worry them"* (APS2). Five student respondents (AP1, AP2, AP3, AP4, AP5) reported that, in their experience, the common belief is that people with disabilities are worthless and a burden on society; they do not merit any kind of support. Respondent APS4 pointed out that although society seems to be making attempts to avoid stereotyping and stigmatising people with disabilities, such attitudes are still deeply rooted, even within the university community. Five student respondents referred to this issue, as demonstrated by a quote from APS4:

Some of our lecturers ... think that as a disabled person you can't do what is required. ...sometimes they tend to sympathise or ignore... I think that's really very dangerous. ... And it's like the stigma or these kinds of social stereotypes that we're all trying to prevent will never stop. ... And some of them have weird assertions too. And we all know that in Ghanaian society, there is this problem with how society sees people with disabilities in general. ... Some people still think, "after all, what are you doing here [at the university]?" They don't see the need for you to be here and so they don't value you as much as they should.

Respondents reported that students with disabilities are constantly dissatisfied with how administrative staff in the offices sometimes received them.

Sometimes when you have a disability and you go to an office, the impression is that you are always complaining about everything. People see us as always needing something, so when you go there, the reception is not there. ... In some offices you go in and the reception is bad. (APS1)

Respondent AP7 corroborated this perspective by stating *"so there are petty, petty attitudes. Sometimes they'll go to this office or that office and the reception is not good"*.

Offensive remarks and comments

Offensive remarks and comments describe unacceptable statements and opinions about students with disabilities within the university community. Respondents reported the following: complaints of inquisitiveness, unfounded generalisations, excessive curiosity, and lack of respect from lecturers in the way they communicate with students with disabilities.

Respondent AP4 reported derogatory remarks from some lecturers on issues relating to students with disabilities. They underestimated the abilities of students with disabilities to be successful in life. The respondent cited an incident of a derogatory remark from a fellow lecturer as follows:

People express, you know, sympathy instead of empathy. They make quite offensive comments about disability issues and so on. ... For example, one lecturer said that disabled people have no way of progressing in life. You see. That was a very unfortunate comment that he made. (AP4)

APS2 noted that people, including their colleagues without disabilities, *"try to be so inquisitive by asking ... all sorts of questions - funny, funny questions"* whenever they meet students with disabilities. Many of these irrelevant and unnecessary probes are meant to undermine the abilities of students with disabilities to participate in lectures, learn, and use the facilities available on campus. Three student respondents referred to such probes, including APS3:

...one can be when you go to lecturers, some people will say: Ei, how can you learn? So, when the lecturer speaks, how can you listen? But, while speaking, we listen with our ears, right. ... So, they ask some questions that don't need an answer. Rhetorical questions! So, there are a lot of them. Maybe when we talk about mobility on campus: Ei, how can you go to the lecture hall, how can you go to your hostel? How can you...? A whole lot...

APS3 added that *"...some people... I think they are inflexible. They don't want to ask around to find out more. So, they always conclude: oh, this person is visually impaired, so they can't learn with me, they can't walk with me ..."*. AP2 supported the experiences shared by APS3 with an example. AP2 noted that, unlike students without disabilities, if any student with a disability acts in a specific way, this behaviour is attributed to all students with disabilities.

These views are reflected in the following example:

... This generalisation is wrong. "As for the blind, they are inquisitive". Why not say: Kwame [name of a boy born on Saturday] is inquisitive? So, if you have a sighted person who is inquisitive, do you say, "Sighted people are inquisitive"? You would not say that; you would mention the name of the person. So, they are also human beings. It is one person who has done this, so, call the name of that person and say that he is inquisitive. Don't generalise. (AP2)

AP7 reported that some lecturers are not polite in addressing people with disabilities. The respondent stated, *"...and sometimes, even some lecturers, the way they talk to them [students with disabilities]..."* (AP7). This comment depicts the inappropriate way some lecturers communicate with students with disabilities, which can be very upsetting and frustrating. It can sometimes demotivate and discourage students with disabilities from engaging in some activities (APS2).

Undesirable patterns of behaviour and actions

The third category of attitudes is manifested in unpleasant actions and/or behaviours towards students with disabilities within the university community. Respondents identified behaviours such as the following: distancing, isolation or shunning, providing coerced assistance and being physical, that is, competing (struggling) for space and seats in the lecture theatre. Further concerns highlighted included: the reluctance of administrative staff to collect Braille scripts from students with vision impairment; the unwillingness of some commercial drivers to exercise restraint in allowing students with vision impairment to use the road networks on campus; the undesirable treatment by some staff in the university halls of residence; and the weak interpersonal skills of shopkeepers and commercial drivers operating on campus. Similarly, some respondents reported that certain faculty members were impatient, insensitive, or indifferent when addressing the concerns of students with disabilities. Two staff interviewed described how students without disabilities sought to avoid students with disabilities, hence their reluctance to learn with them and/or live in hostels with them.

For instance, respondent AP2 said, *"... Some don't even want to mix with disabled people. They may not want to be in the same study group. Some people don't even want to be in the same room as these people"*. Similarly, respondent AP4 stated:

I heard a student say, "As for me, I will not go near him. If you go near him, the disabled student will tell you to help

him". Do you understand? It means that he avoids this disabled student so that he doesn't ask him to help him. And then others also try to avoid the company of such people. Some students will not like to offer help, so they will try to avoid such people. (AP4)

Student respondent APS4 corroborated the statements and further indicated that displaying their competencies, skills, potential abilities, talents, and many others does not persuade several classmates without disabilities to socialise with them. As their peers without disabilities often assist them unwillingly, they are sometimes hurt in the process. More precisely, the respondent said:

As a visually impaired person, sometimes you move around and get out of the way and are not able to follow the path. Someone sees you, but ... doesn't want to come and help you, but prefers to stay away and think that someone should help you instead. And this is a big problem. Sometimes it can even happen that some people come to your aid, but because they don't like it, they can do anything and you can get hurt in the process. (APS4)

Respondent APS1 felt that traders, taxi, and commercial bus drivers on campus have a lot of difficulties engaging with students with disabilities. *"There is a major problem in relating with these people, taxi drivers, traders when you go to the market. Some of them are mainly due to the level of illiteracy. They don't know how to relate with disabled people"* (APS1). The respondent attributed the challenges associated with interacting with students without disabilities to inadequate orientation for freshmen.

APS5 highlighted the indifferent behaviour of some lecturers concerning changing the location of lectures to places accessible to wheelchair users. The respondent recounted an incident involving a student with a physical disability who had an issue climbing the stairs to the lecture theatre. He decided to wait by the stairs for help when the lecturer who was to deliver the particular lecture was passing by. Although he explained his problem with access to the lecture theatre to the lecturer, the lecturer pointed out that the location of the class could not be changed because of his inaccessibility problem.

The insensitivity and indifference of students without disabilities are demonstrated by the way they push and/or compete with students with disabilities to get in and get seats in the lecture theatre. Respondent APS5 explained instances when she was pushed, trampled, and fought to get up on no less than three occasions. These incidences often occur when students

struggle to access the lecture theatre and get seats. Respondent APS5 recounted an example of such unwarranted behaviour as follows:

The hardest and most frustrating part is for those of us who have mobility challenges... In this university the learning facilities are few, particularly the lecture halls. ... We have to wait outside for those inside to close before we can enter. So when they close [end the lecture] and we're rushing in, those of us who are physically challenged, they turn to push us, and when we fall, they run over you, and go and sit down. I am a victim. Sometimes some of our friends try to get a seat for you to sit down, but the able-bodied students will decide to come and take the seat from you, and you have no choice but to either stand or those who have a seat allow you to pair up with them.

The same student respondent, (APS5), also pointed out that the entrance of some lecture theatres is small and that, as her legs are not strong, she was sometimes jostled. And *"while struggling, your leg can also be caught by other students' legs and you fall. As it is difficult to get up, all the seats may be taken before you get up from the floor"*.

The data revealed that negative attitudes towards students with disabilities were widespread. Reported examples included preconceptions, offensive language, and unacceptable behaviour. These attitudes were found throughout the university community.

Discussions

Data analysis showed clear, consistent, and substantial evidence of negative attitudes permeating every dimension of the university experiences of students with disabilities. The discourses indicated that these attitudes were extensive and manifested in many forms and nuances influencing their learning outcomes and university experiences. These negative attitudes are found among administrators, faculty, professionals, residence workers, shopkeepers, and taxi and commercial bus drivers who ply their trade on campus. Forms of attitudes, which were prevalent, included preconceptions, offensive language, and inappropriate behaviour. Some of these negative attitudes are specific to disability. These findings suggest that attitudes within the university landscape are inconsistent with the philosophy of social justice; this philosophy probes the labels, assumptions, and policies that strengthen exclusionary practices, isolation, and stigma in educational institutions (Cochran-Smith, 2010). In Ghana, attitudes towards people with disabilities are rooted in cultural and social beliefs grounded in the medical model of disability, where disability is viewed from a deficit perspective (e.g.,

Anthony, 2011; Avoke, 2002; Naami & Hayashi, 2012), informing society's attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities.

These notions have been transmitted from society to HEIs, a learning environment where people are envisaged to be critically minded and knowledgeable. Researchers (e.g., Helena-Martins et al., 2018; Jameel, 2011; Rao, 2014; Zafir, 2016) suggest that attitude is pivotal for welcoming and accommodating people with disabilities in HEIs. A change in values and attitudes takes time (UNESCO, 2009); certainly, the attitudes in HEIs cannot change overnight (UNESCO, 1999). However, an appreciation that disability is a matter of empowerment and rights, not pity and charity, is fundamental to a profound transformation of attitudes towards disability (Bruno & Fangnwi, 2019). An absolute prerequisite for successful inclusion is, thus, a transformation in people's values and attitudes.

Conclusion

The study highlighted that attitudes across all sections of the university landscape are essential to the inclusion of people with disabilities in HEIs. Where attitudes towards students with disabilities and what they value are fundamentally negative, access, engagement, and participation are likely to be minimal, no matter how well their academic, financial and physical access needs are addressed. Negative attitudes have a strong tendency to erase any gains made by HEIs in increasing access and promoting the engagement of students with disabilities. Adopting a positive attitude towards students with disabilities in HEIs requires a multifaceted and long-term approach. Implementing programmes, policies, and practices that can bring about major attitudinal change are crucial to the acceptance of people with disabilities in universities. As attitudes are fluid rather than static, they can be changed (Thompson et al., 2012). Therefore, unfavourable attitudes of the university community and society towards people with disabilities can be reshaped through comprehensive awareness-raising.

Recommendations

This study has shown that attitudes towards students with disabilities in universities are largely negative. The university community's beliefs and values influence how they treat and respond to students with disabilities. To engender and sustain supportive attitudes towards students with disabilities in HEIs, the following recommendations were made:

1. Through regular and comprehensive awareness-raising activities, people without disabilities will understand, welcome, and accept people with disabilities. Avenues such as workshops, seminars, university forums, various student gatherings, and radio broadcasts are

- ways to educate and disseminate information about disability within the university community.
2. Celebrating students with disabilities will help to develop positive attitudes towards them. Universities may draw up a policy or programme to introduce a 'disability day' where students with disabilities come and showcase their abilities, talents, skills, potential, competencies, and capabilities. Regular contact, participation, and involvement in programmes may reduce or eliminate negative notions associated with disability.
 3. Disability awareness can be improved by borrowing lessons from a university in Ghana where Special Education is a compulsory subject for all students during one semester of their study programme.
 4. Attitudes and beliefs should be an essential component of professional training and continuous development programmes to engender acceptable attitudes that will create welcoming spaces for the effective and meaningful participation of people with disabilities in HEIs.

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