TURKISH ACADEMIC RESEARCH REVIEW

Disability Disclosure by Students with Disabilities in an Open, Distance, and E-Learning (ODeL) Institution: Insights from Support Staff and Students

Bir Açık, Uzaktan ve E-Öğrenme (ODeL) Kurumunda Engelli Öğrenciler Tarafından Engelliliğin İfşası: Destek Personeli ve Öğrencilerin Görüşleri

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Öz

Çevrimiçi ve uzaktan eğitimin büyümesi, bu benzersiz ortamlarda engelli öğrencileri desteklemenin hem potansiyelini hem de zorluklarını gün ışığına çıkarmıştır. ODeL kurumları esnek öğrenme seçenekleri sunmak için iyi bir konuma sahip olsa da, fiziksel yakınlığın olmaması engelli öğrenciler arasında izolasyon hissini artırabilir ve zamanında desteğe erişmelerini zorlaştırabilir. Buna ek olarak, kampüste fiziksel destek hizmetlerinin bulunmaması, öğrencilerin dijital sistemlerde bağımsız olarak gezinme ihtiyacı ile birleştiğinde, uzaktan eğitim kurumlarındaki engelli öğrenciler için bir dışlanma hissine yol açabilir. Mevcut uygulamalar genellikle, personelin daha kolay erişilebilir olduğu ve öğrencilerle doğrudan, yüz yüze etkileşime girebildiği yüz yüze eğitime daha uygun olan geleneksel varsayımları yansıtmaktadır. Bu uygulamalar, öğrencilerin yalnızca kurumsal gizlilik ve destek güvencelerine güvendikleri ODeL'de istemeden de olsa ifşanın önünde engeller oluşturabilir. Örneğin, politikalar, engellilikle ilgili bilgilerin dijital bağlamda nasıl yönetileceği, öğrencilerin belirli kolaylıklara nasıl erişebileceği veya coğrafi ve fiziksel engeller öğrencileri kurumsal personelden ayırdığında destek hizmetlerine nasıl ulaşılabileceği konusunda net yönergelerden yoksun olabilir. Yükseköğretim Kurumları (HEI), özellikle Güney Afrika gibi bölgelerde ODeL modellerini giderek daha fazla benimsedikçe, öğrencilerin engellerini ifşa etme isteklerini ve becerilerini etkileyen benzersiz faktörleri anlamak çok önemli hale gelmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu makale Açık, Uzaktan ve e-Öğrenme (ODeL) ortamında engelli öğrenciler arasında engelliliğin ifşasını çevreleyen dinamikleri ve zorlukları incelemektedir. Bu makale, önde gelen bir Güney Afrika üniversitesinde engelli öğrencilerden ve destek personelinden oluşan farklı bir gruptan toplanan verileri incelemek için karma yöntemli bir araştırma yaklaşımı kullanmaktadır. Bu çalışma için 333 katılımcının seçilmesinde sistematik rastgele örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, ifşayı etkileyen motivasyonlar ve engeller ağını ortaya çıkarmış ve kurumların ODeL bağlamlarında engelli öğrencileri nasıl daha iyi destekleyebileceğine dair kritik bilgiler sunmuştur. Ayrıca, engelli öğrencilerin aldıkları destek üzerinde bir etkisi olduğu için engelliliğin açıklanma döneminin çok önemli olduğu bulunmuştur. Yükseköğretimde, özellikle de uzaktan eğitim kurumları bağlamında kapsayıcılığı artırmak için politika ve uygulamaya yönelik öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uzaktan eğitim, e-öğrenme, açık uzaktan eğitim, engelli öğrenciler, engelliliğin ifşası.

Disability Disclosure by Students with Disabilities in an Open, Distance, and E-Learning (ODeL) Institution: Insights from Support Staff and Students

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Abstract
The growth of online and distance education has brought to light both the potential and the challenges of supporting students with disabilities in these unique environments. While ODeL institutions are well-positioned to provide flexible learning options, the lack of physical proximity can exacerbate feelings of isolation among students with disabilities, complicating their ability to access timely support. In addition, the absence of physical support services on campus, coupled with the need for students to navigate digital systems independently, can lead to a sense of exclusion for students with disabilities in distance education institutions. Current practices often reflect traditional assumptions that are better suited to in-person education, where staff are more easily accessible and can engage in direct, face-to-face interactions with students. These practices may inadvertently create barriers to disclosure in ODeL, where students rely solely on institutional assurances of confidentiality and support. For instance, policies may lack clear guidelines on how disability-related information is managed in a digital context, how students can access specific accommodations, or how support services can be reached when geographical and physical barriers separate students from institutional staff. As Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) increasingly adopt ODeL models, particularly in regions such as South Africa, understanding the unique factors that affect students' willingness and ability to disclose their disabilities becomes crucial. Hence, this article examines the dynamics and challenges that surround disability disclosure among students with disabilities in an Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ODeL) environment. This paper utilizes a mixed-methods research approach to examine data gathered from a diverse cohort of students with disabilities and support staff members at a prominent South African university. Systematic random sampling was used to select 333 participants for this study. Findings revealed a web of motivations and barriers that influence disclosure, offering critical insights into how institutions can better support students with disabilities in ODeL contexts. Also, the period of disability disclosure was found to be crucial as it had an impact on the support that is received by students with disabilities. Recommendations for policy and practice are provided to enhance inclusivity in higher education, particularly within the context of distance education institutions.

Keywords: Distance education, e-learning, open distance learning, students with disabilities, disability disclosure.

Introduction

In ODeL institutions, where physical and face-to-face interactions are minimal or absent, students with disabilities face distinct challenges in accessing support that is both adequate and equitable (Zongozzi, 2022). While ODeL models offer opportunities for students who may struggle with the accessibility of traditional campus environments, these models are not inherently inclusive. The reliance on digital platforms, remote communication, and asynchronous learning poses unique accessibility issues, particularly for students with disabilities who require accommodations (Chambers & Varoglu, 2023). This is compounded by the complex and often personal factors that influence students' decisions to disclose their disabilities to their institutions, a process that can be fraught with concerns about privacy, stigma, and potential discrimination. Whilst there is a plethora of studies on disability disclosure in higher education from the viewpoints of students, very few studies exist on the opinions of support staff in higher education on the subject matter, and even fewer studies combine the perspectives of students and support staff in higher education in the same study. Hence, this study responds to these gaps by examining the specific factors that influence disability disclosure within an ODeL institution from the perspectives of two sample subsets, that is, support staff members and students with disabilities. The central question that guides this study is: What are the views of support staff and students with disabilities on the factors that influence disability disclosure among students with disabilities in an ODeL setting?

Problem Statement

The effectiveness of disability support in higher education relies heavily on accurate disclosure to ensure tailored and adequate accommodations. However, disclosure is not a straightforward process in ODeL contexts. Unlike traditional universities, where students might more easily identify support services through in-person interactions or dedicated on-campus offices, ODeL environments lack immediate, visible pathways to support, making it more challenging for students to navigate the disclosure process (Lumadi, 2021). In addition, ODeL students with disabilities may feel uncertain about how their information will be used, particularly in digital contexts where data security and privacy are paramount (Habbal, Hamouda, Alnajim, Khan, & Alrifaie, 2024). This uncertainty may deter them from disclosing altogether, resulting in students not receiving the accommodations they need to succeed academically. This study provides insights into disability disclosure not just from the students with disabilities but also from the support staff, who receive and address the disclosure of disabilities by students.

Literature Review

Disability Disclosure in Higher Education

The disclosure of disabilities in higher education is a complex and multifaceted process, influenced by numerous social, institutional, and personal factors. Research on disability disclosure has consistently highlighted that students' decisions to disclose are deeply connected to their perceptions of institutional support, the attitudes of faculty and peers, and concerns over privacy and stigma (Melian & Meneses, 2022). In higher education contexts, disclosure often facilitates access to necessary accommodations, such as additional time on examinations, assistive technologies, or modified coursework (Dollinger, Finneran, & Ajjawi, 2023). However, studies reveal that not all students are inclined to disclose their disabilities due to a mix of psychological, social, and practical reasons. Hence, the motivations for disclosing a disability primarily include the desire for academic adjustments, the need for support in managing course load, and the pursuit of a learning environment that acknowledges and

accommodates their specific challenges (Lombardi, Gelbar, Dukes, Kowitt, Wei, Madaus, Lalor, & Faggella-Luvy, 2018). However, students may also experience several barriers to disclosure, which often stem from privacy concerns and fears of being treated differently. Some students worry that disclosing their disability may expose them to prejudice, potentially influencing faculty expectations and peer interactions, which could lead to reduced academic and social experiences (McLeod, 2023).

Research has also examined the outcomes associated with disability disclosure. Studies show that students who disclose and receive proper accommodations tend to experience better academic outcomes, improved mental health, and higher satisfaction with their educational experience compared to those who do not disclose (McNicholl, Casey, Desmond, & Gallagher, 2021). However, non-disclosure, often fuelled by fears of negative perceptions, can lead to unmet needs, higher dropout rates, and diminished academic performance (Grimes, Southgate, Scevak, & Buchanan, 2020). For ODeL students, where the physical disconnection from institutional resources is pronounced, the decision to disclose takes on added complexity. Distance learners may feel a heightened need to disclose to receive support, but they may also be more cautious about doing so in a digital environment, where privacy concerns are amplified.

Stigma and Accessibility in Higher Education

Stigma plays a significant role in the lives of students with disabilities, particularly in influencing their comfort with disclosure. Stigma can occur in various forms, such as structural stigma, stigma by association, public stigma, and self-stigma (Miesel, Haikalis, Colby, & Barnett, 2022). Similarly, research has highlighted that stigma, both external and internalised, can deter students from seeking the accommodations they need (ALSamhori, AlSamhori, AlSamhori, Abuaun, ALAwamleh, Saleh, Hussein, Mahmoud, Baimustafa, & Qaswal, 2024). External stigma, which includes negative attitudes and misconceptions held by others about disability, often fosters a social environment that discourages disclosure. For students, the stigma that arises from the fear of being labelled as “different” or “less capable” can create a psychological barrier, impacting their willingness to disclose (Appleyard-Keeling, 2021). Also, internalised stigma reflects the students’ own negative perceptions about their disabilities, often shaped by societal narratives. Such stigma can lead students to question the legitimacy of their need for support, even when it is crucial for their academic success (Trani, Moodley, Anand, Graham, & Maw, 2020). This dynamic is particularly pertinent in ODeL contexts, where the lack of in-person interaction might reduce direct stigma but does not necessarily mitigate the internalised pressures students face. Studies on stigma in ODeL settings suggest that the lack of physical presence can offer students a form of anonymity, which may lessen concerns over peer judgments but does not eliminate the need for accommodations that address their specific learning needs (Baker, Malik, Davis, & McKenna, 2023).

Accessibility in higher education requires an infrastructure that allows students to disclose and request accommodations in a way that respects their privacy while ensuring they receive the necessary support. Institutions that fail to provide adequate support mechanisms inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of stigma, as students may be forced to choose between disclosing their disabilities or going without essential accommodations. Scholars advocate that a disclosure-friendly environment, where institutional policies not only protect privacy but also normalise accommodations as a standard part of student support services, helps to reduce stigma over time (Lu & Li, 2024). In ODeL settings, ensuring accessibility means integrating assistive technologies, offering flexible learning options, and establishing digital platforms that allow confidential disclosure and efficient access to support services.

Method

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021), integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of disability disclosure of students in an ODeL context. The mixed-methods design explored the factors that influence disclosure, combining the depth of qualitative insights with the broader trends identified through quantitative data.

Population and Sample Size

The target population for this study is all the Unisa students with disabilities and all the student support staff at Unisa. The interviews were conducted with 8 students with disabilities and 8 support staff members and were designed to capture detailed accounts of the factors that influence disability disclosure, including barriers and motivations. In addition, quantitative data was collected from 225 students with disabilities and 92 support staff members. In total, the sample size for this study is 333 participants.

Sampling Technique

Systematic random sampling was employed in this study to ensure a representative dataset that captured the diversity of experiences among students and support staff members at the institution. Systematic random sampling allows researchers to select participants from a larger population according to a random starting point and a fixed, periodic interval (Ganesha & Aithal, 2022). Systematic random sampling enables studies to have a balance between simplicity, efficiency, and scientific rigour (Igwenagu, 2016). In using systematic random sampling for this study, Unisa's ICT department selected every tenth person on their list of students with disabilities and list of student support staff members. Systematic random sampling was suitable for this study because it provided a fair representation of both students and student support staff members. In other words, systematic random sampling ensured that each member of the population of this study had an equal chance of being selected, thereby providing a representative sample.

Inclusion Criteria

This study's inclusion criteria (Slattery, Saeri, & Bragge, 2020) were designed to ensure that participants have relevant experiences and characteristics that align with the study's research objectives. For this study, the inclusion criteria are student participants were enrolled as students at the institution, staff members had to be working directly with students, and had to have worked at the institution for more than two years – all of these were essential during the data collection phase of this study. The support staff who worked for the institution for more than two years during data collection included academic advisors, disability support staff, and administrative staff involved in student support. This criterion ensured that the study focused on the specific institutional context of the institution. Also, student participants must have registered their disabilities with the university's disability centre. This ensured that the study included individuals who formally recognized their disabilities and were eligible for support services. In addition, the student participants were students who must have utilised or attempted to utilise the support services provided by Unisa for students with disabilities. This criterion ensured that participants had direct experience with the services being explored in the study.

Exclusion Criteria

This study's exclusion criteria (Siritzky, Cox, Nadler, Grady, Kravitz, & Mitroff, 2023) were established to identify individuals who do not fit the study's focus or whose participation might introduce biases. Individuals who were not enrolled as students at Unisa during the time that the study was conducted were excluded from this

study. Support staff members who were not working within the student support unit of Unisa were excluded from this study. This criterion ensured that the study remains specific to the Unisa context and student support. Students who have disabilities but were not registered with Unisa's disability support services were excluded. This criterion ensured that the study focused on those who engaged with the formal support mechanisms in place at the university. The individuals who had never utilised or attempted to utilise the support services for students with disabilities at Unisa were excluded. Support staff members who had less than two years of work experience were excluded from this study. This criterion ensured that participants had relevant and recent experiences to share about the support services at the university, particularly as it relates to disability disclosure by students.

Data Collection Methods

The two data collection methods for this study are semi-structured interviews and surveys. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students and support staff. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to express their experiences and perspectives freely. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. Also, quantitative data were collected from students with disabilities and support staff members through structured surveys distributed to a broader sample of students and staff. The survey aimed to capture trends and correlations related to disability disclosure, including factors such as the periods and frequency of disclosure.

Data Collection Instruments

An interview guide was used to steer the interview conversations (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, & Syam, 2022). The data collection instrument for the survey was a questionnaire. The use of questionnaires in this study was critical for several reasons (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020); it contributed to both the methodological rigor and the robustness of the data collection process. Including questionnaires alongside an interview guide (Renjith, Yesodharan, Noronha, Ladd, & George, 2021) facilitated the collection of diverse data types. The questionnaire (Hansen & Swiderska, 2024) consisted of mostly closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis and a few open-ended questions to allow participants to express their views comprehensively.

Data Analysis Methods

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using thematic coding to identify recurring themes and insights (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023). This thematic approach identified patterns in participants' responses, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors affecting disability disclosure in an ODeL environment. While SPSS software was used to conduct statistical analyses, allowing for the identification of significant relationships between variables and the quantification of trends observed in the qualitative data. Descriptive statistics and inferential tests provided insights into the general attitudes and experiences related to disclosure, accessibility, and stigma within the ODeL setting.

The integration of SPSS analysis for quantitative data and thematic coding for qualitative data (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021) ensured a rigorous and comprehensive analysis, combining empirical patterns with rich narrative insights. This mixed methods approach not only facilitated a balanced examination of the data but also supported the study's goal of understanding the complex dynamics of disability disclosure. In addition, this study employed triangulation (Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017) to validate and corroborate findings. This in-depth context of triangulation (Leko, Cook, & Cook, 2021) was essential for interpreting results, as it helped to identify information and factors that may not be captured through numerical data, that is quantitative data, alone. Triangulation also increased the reliability and validity of this study by examining the research questions from

multiple perspectives (Farquhar, Michels, & Robson, 2020), thereby strengthening the overall evidence from this study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research is a fundamental component that ensures scholarly work's integrity, reliability, and validity (Zhaksylyk, Zimba, Yessirkepov, & Kocyigit, 2023). It involves adhering to moral principles and professional standards that guide researchers in conducting studies responsibly. Ethical considerations are paramount in protecting research participants' rights, dignity, and welfare, maintaining scientific integrity, and promoting public trust in research findings (Lal & Sharma, 2023). In this study, ethical considerations, including informed consent (Gordon, 2020), confidentiality (Dougherty, 2021), v**oluntary participation** (Xu, Baysari, Stocker, Leow, Day, & Carland, 2020), and the principle of **do no harm** (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021) were meticulously integrated into the research design and implementation. In addition, ethical approval was obtained for this study from Unisa's ethics review committee (reference: 62007491_CREC_CHS_2023).

FINDINGS

This section begins with a discussion of the demographic variables of the participants. This is followed by the study's other findings and a discussion of the findings.

Demographic details of participants

This study involved two groups of participants, students with disabilities (SWD) and support staff members (SSM) of an ODeL university. The data in Table 1 indicates that many of the student participants were relatively young, with 75.6% being 40 years old or younger. The age group 21-30 years constitutes the largest proportion of participants, which highlights a predominantly younger demographic. The representation of participants differed with age, with the smallest proportion being those below 20 years and those 50 years and above.

Table 2 shows the gender distribution of the students with disabilities who responded to the survey. The total number of participants is 225 - the females constituted 53.5%; the males constituted 42.2%; the non-binary constituted 2.2%; the students who preferred not to state their gender constituted 1.3%; and the transgender constituted 0.4%. This data indicates a higher proportion of female participants compared to males, with a small representation of non-binary and transgender participants and a few who preferred not to disclose their gender.

Table 1. Students with disabilities – Age (in years)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	21-30	96	42,7	42,7	42,7
	31-40	74	32,9	32,9	75,6
	41-50	30	13,3	13,3	88,9
	50 and above	19	8,4	8,4	97,3
	Below 20	6	2,7	2,7	100,0
	Total	225	100,0	100,0	

Table 2. Students with disabilities - Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	121	53,8	53,8	53,8
	Transgender female	1	,4	,4	54,2
	Male	95	42,2	42,2	96,4
	Prefer not to say	3	1,3	1,3	97,8
	Non-binary	5	2,2	2,2	100,0
	Total	225	100,0	100,0	

Types of Disabilities

Table 3 summarises the distribution of various disabilities reported by the student participants during the interviews. Also, the table shows the frequency and percentage of each disability within the surveyed student population. The participants from the interviews reported an array of disabilities, which influenced their experiences and the type of support that they required. The interviews with students with disabilities consisted of eight students in total, and the students had different types of disabilities, with some having more than one disability.

Table 3. Types of Disabilities Reported by Students with Disabilities - Interviews

Disability Type	**Number of Students (with the disability)**
Severe visual impairment (less than 20% sight)	1
Paralysed face (cannot smile or frown)	1
Partially blind	2
Autism	1
ADHD	2
Dysgraphia	1
Dyslexia	1
Blind	1
Hard of hearing	1
Partially sighted	1
Total	**12**

Disability Prevalence

According to Table 4, the total frequency of students with reported disabilities is 195, while the total percentage is 106.96%. The percentage exceeding 100% suggests possible overlapping conditions, where some students may have disclosed multiple disabilities. The prevalence of disability types within the institution reveals distinct patterns that have significant implications for support structures and accessibility measures. Neurodevelopmental disabilities also emerge as a notable category, with ADHD comprising 7.25% of reported conditions and dyslexia accounting for 3.63%. These figures underscore the need for tailored academic support services that cater to the specific learning needs of students with cognitive and processing challenges. Strategies such as extended examination time, note-taking assistance, structured learning environments, and specialised

tutoring can enhance academic success for these students. The diversity in disability types highlights the necessity for a multidimensional approach to accessibility and inclusion, ensuring that institutional policies and support services comprehensively address a wide range of student needs.

The presence of mental health issues and chronic illnesses among students highlights the necessity for comprehensive and responsive support services. Mental health conditions, including depression (3.11%) and anxiety (2.07%), underscore the importance of psychological counseling services, peer support networks, and mental health awareness initiatives within the institution. Addressing these challenges requires individual counseling and a broader institutional commitment to fostering a supportive and stigma-free environment that encourages students to seek help without fear of discrimination.

Physical disabilities constitute the largest reported category, accounting for 32% of disclosed conditions. This highlights the critical need for infrastructural accessibility, including ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and adaptive transportation services to ensure that students with mobility challenges can navigate the campus with ease. In addition to physical disabilities, sensory disabilities also represent a substantial portion of reported cases. Visual impairments account for 13% of disclosures, while hearing impairments constitute 8%. These conditions necessitate the integration of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, braille resources, captioning services, and sign language interpreters. Furthermore, adaptable teaching strategies, including alternative content delivery methods and inclusive assessment practices, are essential to accommodate these students effectively.

Chronic illnesses, which account for 19% of reported conditions, further reinforce the need for ongoing medical care and flexible academic accommodations. Conditions such as epilepsy, which constitutes 7% of the cases, require proactive health management strategies, emergency response plans, and academic flexibility to ensure that students can continue their education without disruption. This may include access to medical professionals, adjustments in attendance policies, and coordination between students and faculty to accommodate health-related absences.

Additionally, the complexity of support services is amplified by the presence of multiple and overlapping disabilities. The 3% prevalence of multiple disabilities, including conditions involving psychological and chemical imbalances, reflects the need for individualised intervention plans. These cases require an integrated approach that combines medical, psychological, and academic support, ensuring that students receive holistic care tailored to their individual needs. The intersection of mental health challenges, chronic illnesses, and multiple disabilities emphasise the necessity for a flexible, inclusive, and multidisciplinary approach to student support services.

Table 4. Student Disability Prevalence

Disability Type	**Frequency (Number of Students)**	**Percentage (%)**
Neurodevelopmental Disabilities		
ADHD	14	7.25%
Dyslexia	7	3.63%
Autism	6	3.11%
Dyscalculia	2	1.04%
Cognitive Development Disorders	1	0.52%
Mild Cognitive Impairment	1	0.52%

Intellectual Disabilities	1	0.52%
Mental Health Issues		
Depression	6	3.11%
Anxiety	4	2.07%
Mental Illness	3	1.55%
Schizophrenia	2	1.04%
Bipolar Disorder	2	1.04%
OCD	1	0.52%
Physical Disabilities		
Physical Disabilities (not specified)	20	10%
Paraplegia	12	6%
Wheelchair-bound	9	5%
Amputations	7	4%
Cerebral Palsy	4	2%
Spinal Cord Injuries	3	2%
Multiple Disabilities (not specified)	3	2%
Sensory Disabilities		
Visual Impairments	26	13%
Hearing Impairments	15	8%
Blindness	3	2%
Chronic Illnesses		
Epilepsy	14	7%
Chronic Illnesses (not specified)	9	5%
Diabetes	4	2%
Cardiac Issues	2	1%
End-stage Chronic Renal Failure	1	1%
Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	1	1%
Chemical Disabilities	1	1%
Serious Chronic Conditions	1	1%
Congenital Malformations	1	1%
Congenital Myopathy	1	1%
Musculoskeletal Disorders	1	1%
Polytrauma	1	1%
Scoliosis	1	1%
Other Disabilities		
Neurological Disorders	2	1.04%

Psychological and Chemical Imbalances	3	2%
TOTAL	**195**	**106.96%**

Work Experience of Support Staff

From Table 5, the largest group of staff were employed for a period of between 6 to 10 years. This suggests that a substantial proportion of employees had acquired considerable experience while still being relatively mid-career. Additionally, the second most common range of experience falls within 26 to 30 years, indicating a stable group of long-serving staff members who have remained with the institution for an extended period. This longevity suggests institutional continuity and the retention of institutional knowledge among this group of support staff. Furthermore, a significant number of employees had shorter tenures, ranging between 3 and 5 years. This trend highlights a steady inflow of new staff members, which may contribute to innovation, fresh perspectives, and the continued growth of the workforce.

Table 5. Support staff work experience

Work Experience (Years)	Frequency	Cumulative Percentage (%)
3–5	**17**	**18.5**
6–10	**33**	**43.5**
11–15	**8**	**52.2**
16–20	**11**	**64.1**
21–25	**13**	**72.8**
26–30	**18**	**100.0**

The roles of support staff members

Table 6 shows that student support roles constitute the largest portion of the workforce, underscoring the institution's strong emphasis on providing direct services to students. This reflects a commitment to ensuring that students receive the necessary guidance and resources to enhance their academic experience. In addition to student support, academic support, and library services represent a significant segment of the workforce, highlighting the institution's dedication to fostering excellence in teaching and learning. The presence of administrative and protection roles further indicates a well-established operational and safety infrastructure, ensuring the smooth functioning of institutional processes and the security of students and staff. Furthermore, the existence of specialised leadership roles demonstrates the presence of senior and strategically focused positions that guide the institution's overall direction and long-term objectives.

Table 6. The Roles of Support Staff

Category	Roles	Frequency
Student Support	Application & Registration, Student Advisor, Student Support, Student Development, Psychologist	24
Academic Support	Curriculum Design, Teaching & Learning Support, Research Support, Digital Learning Advisor	16
Library Services	Librarian, Branch Librarian, Personal Librarian, Literature Search Services	11
Administrative Roles	Postgraduate Admin, Information Resource Management, Printing Access Cards, Registrations	10
Technical Roles	Technology Coordinator, Electrical Maintenance Manager	6
Protection Services	Security Officers, Protecting Assets, Protection Services	8
Leadership & Specialised Roles	Director, Deputy Director, Business Process Analyst, Specialist, Waste Manager	11

Periods Of Disability Disclosure

The various points in time that the students disclosed their disabilities to the university are outlined in Table 7. From Table 7, out of 225 student participants in the survey, 130 (57.8%) disclosed their disability during the application process. A total of 21.3% of students disclosed their disabilities during registration. Around 17.8% of students disclosed their disability when they realised they needed support. 2.2% of students indicated that they disclosed their disability around the exam period. Only 0.9% of students disclosed their disability during orientation. The cumulative percent column shows that 82.2% of students disclosed their disability by the time of registration.

Table 7. Periods of Disclosure for Students with Disabilities - Survey

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	During exams	5	2,2	2,2	2,2
	During orientation	2	,9	,9	3,1
	During the application process	130	57,8	57,8	60,9
	Upon registration	48	21,3	21,3	82,2
	When I realised that I needed support	40	17,8	17,8	100,0
	Total	225	100,0	100,0	

The Importance of Disability Disclosure and its Timely Disclosure

The importance of disability disclosure by students and its relationship with support for students with disabilities was highlighted by a support staff member during an interview:

> As a person with a disability, I understand that every person has a right to disclose or not disclose their disability. On the other hand, as an employee, I understand that Unisa has the priority to protect the integrity of its qualifications. With distance learning institutions, the qualifications are already in doubt because students are writing from home and there is still a margin for dishonesty. If you want to be accommodated, you must disclose and submit proof of disability – (staff interviewee 1).

The quote by staff interviewee 1 reflects the dual perspectives that support staff who are individuals with disabilities may hold to ensure that they balance personal rights with institutional responsibilities. The participant acknowledged the right to privacy in disability disclosure but also recognised the importance of academic integrity, particularly in a distance learning context where risks of dishonesty may be perceived as higher. The participant's statement shows the tension between individual autonomy and institutional regulation, which suggests that disclosure, while voluntary, is a necessary step for students with disabilities to receive institutional support, which in turn supports the institution's integrity.

A narrative from a support staff member emphasised the positive outcomes of disability disclosure, particularly in terms of academic support and retention:

> I think when students disclose their disabilities, they are then given reasonable accommodation for submission of assignments and exams. ARCSWiD also plays a role that helps with retention as they assist with ensuring that study material is converted to suit the student needs – (staff interviewee 3).

Another support staff participant highlighted the challenges that arise when students delay their disability disclosure:

> Some students do not want to disclose their disabilities. You see these students when exams are approaching, that is when we start receiving many requests for accommodation, where students will be requesting extra time for exams. Students need to be encouraged to disclose their disabilities during the entry point and awareness should also be available, and it can come from the counselling department and registration section – (staff interviewee 2).

Staff interviewee 2 observed that non-disclosure often results in last-minute requests for support, which could be avoided if students are encouraged to disclose their disabilities early in their academic journey. The narrative of staff interviewee 2 suggests a need for increased awareness and proactive measures, such as integrating disability disclosure into the registration and orientation processes, to ensure that students receive timely support and that the institution can plan accordingly. The observation by staff interviewee 2 notes that non-disclosure often results in last-minute requests for support, which could be avoided if students were encouraged to disclose their disabilities early in their academic journey. The narrative of staff interviewee 2 suggests a need for increased awareness and proactive measures, such as the integration of disability disclosure into the registration and orientation processes, to ensure that students receive timely support.

Staff interviewee 6 credits the Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities (ARCSWiD) with the crucial role they play in ensuring that disclosed disabilities are met with appropriate support, which not only helps

students meet academic requirements but also aids in their retention. This stresses the importance of institutional support structures to facilitate the success of students with disabilities and illustrates how disclosure can lead to tailored student support that enhances the educational experience. According to the participant:

> What we do is we do not force you [students] to disclose. We tell them [students] about the benefits of disclosing. You will find that because the benefits are great, people [students] will sort of choose to declare their disability…but it is their choice to do so if they want to. And then we help them [students] and assist them [students] with applications for bursaries and all these other funding-related stuff. We help them [students] fill up the forms, and then we send them [the filled forms] to the student funding [unit] after that. At the registration point, they [students] fill out a form that asks them [students] about what sort of services they want...We [ARCSWiD] produce study materials in alternative formats. That would be braille, large print, electronic, audio Daisey…We can produce any audio format, we can produce any word format processor. We can also do epub, even though no one has asked for it yet - (staff interview 6).

Barriers to Disability Disclosure

A support staff participant identified two factors that promote the underreporting of disabilities by students as stigma and inadequate visibility of available institutional support services:

> We have a huge problem when it comes to declarations [of disabilities]. We are planning to devise strategies that will encourage students to declare their disabilities and let them know that there are advantages to doing that. Students do not declare enough, and this affects them negatively when they come during examination time. This might also be influenced by stigma, and our visibility will increase declaration – (staff interviewee 4).

The planned strategies to increase disability declarations suggest a recognition of the institutional barriers that prevent students from disability disclosure. The participant's focus on improving visibility and addressing stigma highlights the need for cultural and procedural changes within the institution to create an environment where students feel safe and supported to disclose their disabilities. Another participant echoed the issue of stigma and shed light on the complexities of support for students with less visible or psychological disabilities, such as traumatic brain injuries and anxiety disorders:

> We have people with traumatic brain injuries and then we don't realise that…sometimes they tell you that we should give them extra hours. We have students who will not accept that [their psychological disabilities], and they have anxiety attacks every time they write an exam. It’s a challenge for the students. It inhibits the students from achieving what they want. Imagine the student might have an anxiety attack for 30 minutes when they were supposed to scan the QR code. What happens then? And these students don't want to declare themselves because they are afraid of being stigmatised - (staff interviewee 7).

Staff interviewee 7 noted that some students may resist disability disclosure due to fear of stigma, which complicates their ability to receive the necessary support. Students who fear being stigmatised may not seek the help that they need, which negatively impacts their academic performance and well-being. This situation highlights the complex nature of disability disclosure. The participant’s narrative calls attention to the need for a more inclusive approach that considers the diverse experiences of students with disabilities.

Disability Disclosure to Lecturers/ Faculty

In addition to disclosure to ARCSWiD, some students felt the need to make their disabilities known to their lecturers or faculty too. While some other students did not think that this kind of disclosure was necessary; these views are captured in Table 7. Table 8 presents data on whether students had to disclose their disability to their lecturers, even though they were already registered with the ARCSWiD. A total of 115 students (51.1%) indicated that they disclosed their disability to their lecturers despite being registered with ARCSWiD. This suggests that slightly more than half of the students felt the need to personally inform their lecturers about their disability, possibly due to a lack of communication from ARCSWiD to the lecturers. 110 students (48.9%) indicated that they did not have to disclose their disability to their lecturers because they were registered with ARCSWiD. This shows that nearly half of the students believed that their registration with ARCSWiD sufficiently informed their lecturers about their disability, which reduced the need for personal disclosure. The cumulative percentage column shows that by the time all responses are accounted for, 100% of the students had provided their views on this question, with a near-even split between those who felt they had to disclose their disability and those who did not.

In addition, Table 8 indicates a division among students regarding the necessity to disclose their disabilities to lecturers. Just over half of the students felt the need to inform their lecturers directly, despite being registered with ARCSWiD, while the others felt that their registration was sufficient. This division may reflect inconsistencies in how information about students' disabilities is communicated to lecturers, or it could suggest variability in lecturers' awareness and understanding of ARCSWiD's role. The results imply that there is room for improvement regarding the communication channels between ARCSWiD and the lecturers to ensure that students do not feel obligated to disclose their disabilities repeatedly.

Table 8. Disability Disclosure to Lecturers by Students with Disabilities - Survey

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	115	51,1	51,1	51,1
	1	110	48,9	48,9	100,0
	Total	225	100,0	100,0	

Discussion

Disability disclosure allows students with disabilities to access necessary support when students inform their institutions of their needs. However, this process is often challenging due to concerns about stigma, privacy, and potential impact on academic status (Melian & Menesses, 2022). The findings of this study illuminate the dual challenge faced by students with disabilities in navigating disclosure within an ODeL context. Students grapple with the need to disclose their disabilities to access support services while simultaneously dealing with concerns about privacy and potential stigma (Christian, 2020). This tension is particularly significant in ODeL institutions, where students may already feel distanced from institutional support and must rely on digital interactions to communicate their needs (Bergdahl, 2022). The following discussion explores this balancing act and offers recommendations for institutional policies and practices to improve disability disclosure and support for students with disabilities in an ODeL setting.

The results of this study underscore a pervasive tension between students' right to privacy and the necessity of disclosure for accessing essential support services. For many students, disclosure involves relinquishing some control over personal information, which can feel particularly risky in educational environments where interactions with faculty and peers are often virtual and may lack the depth and immediacy of face-to-face interactions

(Vijayakumar & Pfeifer, 2020). This challenge is compounded in ODeL contexts, where students rely on institutional goodwill and effective communication systems to understand and meet their needs (Salamondra, 2021).

The necessity of disclosure to access accommodations places students in a vulnerable position, often forcing them to weigh the benefits of support against the risk of social stigma or judgment (Kassam, Antepim, & Sukhera, 2024). For example, students with less visible disabilities, such as mental health conditions or learning disabilities, may fear that disclosure could lead to biased perceptions of their academic abilities (Kline & Davidson, 2022). Given these concerns, ODeL institutions have the responsibility of approaching disability disclosure with sensitivity and respect. A proactive yet respectful outreach strategy that respects students' autonomy could mitigate the discomfort associated with disclosure (Brown, 2024). Such an approach should involve providing students with clear and accessible information about support services and the privacy safeguards in place, ensuring they feel empowered and protected in their decision to disclose. In addition, this study revealed distinct patterns in the timing of disability disclosure among students. Most students disclosed their disabilities either at the point of application or during registration, viewing these stages as formal opportunities to declare any support needs. However, a significant subset disclosed only when they encountered academic or accessibility challenges, prompting them to seek specific accommodations.

ARCSWiD played a crucial role in facilitating academic adjustments for students with disabilities. Hence, ARCSWiD provided resources, such as accessible study materials, assistive devices, and guidance on institutional processes, creating a supportive environment for students who had disclosed their disabilities early. However, gaps in coordination between ARCSWiD and academic departments posed significant challenges for the students. For instance, students reported repeatedly needing to disclose their disabilities directly to lecturers or explain their required accommodations, suggesting that institutional channels for communicating students' needs are neither centralised nor consistently applied.

Furthermore, stigma and privacy concerns emerged as significant factors in students' decisions not to disclose their disabilities. Many students feared that disclosure could result in differential treatment or lead to stereotypes that question their academic competence. For example, several participants highlighted concerns about being seen as "dependent" or "less capable," which discouraged them from accessing the support services they were entitled to.

Overall, the findings of this study note that while institutional support mechanisms such as ARCSWiD provide invaluable assistance to students with disabilities, significant gaps in inter-departmental coordination, accessibility of technological interfaces, and effective communication persist – all of which have implications for disability disclosure by students. These gaps discourage timely disclosure and may inadvertently marginalise students with disabilities who need systematic and reliable support (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). The data in this study suggests that addressing both the structural and social dimensions of disability disclosure could enhance the experience of students with disabilities in ODeL environments, thereby creating a more inclusive educational landscape.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To address some of the challenges of disability disclosure that were found in this study, ODeL institutions must adopt a comprehensive approach to disability disclosure for students with disabilities, ensuring that all students with disabilities have access to the support they need without compromising their privacy or dignity. To

better serve students with disabilities, particularly within ODeL contexts, higher education institutions can implement several specific, actionable strategies to promote disability disclosure by the students. These include:

1. **Proactive support structures:** Institutions should establish and promote visible support services from the earliest interactions with students. By embedding information about disability resources at all key entry points, such as application, orientation, and registration, institutions signal their commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. This proactive approach helps ensure that students are aware of available support from the outset, facilitating a smoother transition into their academic journey.
2. **Stigma reduction initiatives:** Effective stigma reduction initiatives can play a vital role in fostering a supportive learning environment. Awareness campaigns focused on disability inclusivity, held regularly across digital and social platforms, can encourage a culture of acceptance and understanding. By addressing misconceptions and promoting the value of diversity, such campaigns contribute to a more accepting academic community, reducing the social barriers associated with disability disclosure by students.
3. **Policy and communication enhancements:** Institutions should develop clear, enforceable policies on disability support and ensure all academic and administrative staff are educated on these protocols. Guidelines should detail the processes for supporting students with disabilities and provide specific directions for assisting students in both academic and non-academic settings. Regular communication about available resources and consistent policy enforcement can foster trust in institutional support systems, making it easier for students to disclose and receive the accommodations they need.

The foregoing recommendations underscore the importance of fostering an inclusive, accessible academic environment within ODeL institutions, one that recognises and responds to the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities with regards to disclosing their disabilities. By implementing the recommended strategies, institutions can better support the academic success and personal well-being of students with disabilities by encouraging them to disclose their disabilities and do so on time, ultimately creating a more equitable educational experience for them.

Conclusion

This study advances an understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities within ODeL environments by highlighting the challenges and motivations that surround disability disclosure. Robust insights on disability disclosure by students and support staff members were provided in this study. Unlike traditional campus settings, ODeL institutions rely heavily on digital interfaces and remote communication, which adds layers of complexity to support structures and students' willingness to disclose their disabilities to their academic institutions. This research discussed how concerns around stigma, privacy, and inconsistent institutional support systems uniquely affect students with disabilities in ODeL contexts, where visible resources and face-to-face interactions are often absent. By analysing both the structural and social factors that shape the students' experiences, the study offers a valuable perspective on the conditions necessary for inclusive learning environments.

Central to this study is the recognition that creating a safe and supportive academic environment is crucial for encouraging students with disabilities to disclose their needs. Such an environment requires visible, accessible resources and an institutional culture that prioritises understanding and respect. As students feel more supported

in disclosing their disabilities, they gain better access to accommodations, fostering greater academic success and engagement. This study's insights emphasise that when ODeL institutions proactively cultivate inclusive practices, they not only improve educational outcomes but also enhance equity within the academic community.

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