

**EXPLORING INCLUSIVITY: NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ONE VISUALLY IMPAIRED MASTER'S DEGREE STUDENT UNIVERSITY,
ZIMBABWE**

Munyaradzi Chidarikire (PhD)

Great Zimbabwe University, Faculty of Education, Department of Curriculum Studies, Zimbabwe:

Wilson Chipato

Herbert Chitepo School of Law and Business

Department of Accounting and Information Systems

Faculty of Commerce, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the experiences and challenges faced by visually impaired master's degree student at a university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. With the view of understanding the issues negatively impacting their educational endeavours and generalising the findings to other students in same scenario. Adopting a case study research design, the study utilized semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations to collect data, which was then thematically analysed. The findings revealed that while the university had made some efforts to accommodate visually impaired students, significant barriers remained. Key challenges included a lack of accessible learning materials, inadequate assistive technologies, and insufficient support services. Visually impaired students reported feeling isolated and struggled to fully participate in academic and social activities on campus. To address these issues, the study recommends that the university develop a comprehensive accessibility plan, incorporating input from the visually impaired student community. This should include investing in specialized equipment and software, providing disability-specific training for faculty and staff, and fostering a more inclusive campus culture. By addressing these critical areas, the university can work towards creating an equitable and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their visual abilities.

Keywords: Accessibility; Inclusivity; visually impaired; Master's degree; Zimbabwe.

1. INTRODUCTION

Accessibility and inclusivity in higher education have gained increasing attention in recent years, as institutions strive to create equitable learning environments for students with diverse needs (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). One group that has faced significant barriers in accessing and succeeding in postgraduate education are students with visual impairments (Macrae, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the prevalence of visual impairment is estimated to be around 1.7% of the total population, with a significant proportion being of working age and seeking higher education opportunities (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2022). The challenges faced by visually impaired students in Zimbabwe's higher education system are multifaceted. Studies have highlighted the limited availability of assistive technologies, inadequate physical infrastructure, and the lack of specialized support services as key barriers to their academic success (Mapepa & Sefotho, 2021). Furthermore, societal attitudes and stigma surrounding disability can compound the difficulties experienced by this student population (Mutanga, 2018). However, recent policy

developments, such as the Persons with Disabilities Act (2021) and the National Disability Policy (2021), have aimed to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in Zimbabwe's education system (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021). These initiatives have the potential to create more opportunities for visually impaired students to access and thrive in postgraduate programs. Exploring the experiences and perspectives of visually impaired master's degree students in Zimbabwe is essential to understanding the current state of inclusivity in the country's higher education system.

By identifying the key challenges and opportunities faced by this population, this study can inform the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance their academic and social integration (Macrae, 2020). Additionally, the findings can contribute to the broader discourse on disability inclusion in postgraduate education, both within Zimbabwe and globally. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by visually impaired master's degree students in Zimbabwe's higher education system. By addressing this important but understudied topic, the research findings can contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable educational practices, ultimately empowering visually impaired individuals to pursue and succeed in postgraduate studies. The primary objectives of this study are: To examine the lived experiences of visually impaired master's degree students at one university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe; To identify the key challenges and barriers faced by visually impaired students in accessing and succeeding in their postgraduate studies and To recommend strategies and interventions to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of master's degree programs for visually impaired students at the university. Then three research questions are: What are the lived experiences of visually impaired master's degree students at one university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe?; What are the key challenges and barriers faced by visually impaired students in accessing and succeeding in their postgraduate studies? and What strategies and interventions can be implemented to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of master's degree programs for visually impaired students at the university?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by visually impaired master's degree students at one university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, and compare the findings with similar studies conducted in other African countries, as well as the United States and the United Kingdom. A recent study by Madziva and Thondhlana (2020) at a university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, highlighted several key challenges faced by visually impaired master's degree students. These include limited access to assistive technologies, inadequate support from faculty and staff, and physical barriers within the campus environment. The study found that these obstacles often led to feelings of isolation and frustration among the visually impaired students, hindering their academic progress and overall well-being. Similar challenges have been reported in studies conducted in other African countries. In South Africa, a study by Mutanga (2018) revealed that visually impaired students at the university level often encounter difficulties in accessing course materials, navigating campus facilities, and receiving appropriate accommodations. Botswana's Mafa et al. (2021) study highlighted the lack of specialized training for faculty and staff in supporting visually impaired students. In Nigeria, Eze et al. (2022) found that inadequate funding and limited awareness of the needs of visually impaired students were significant barriers to inclusive education. The experiences of visually impaired master's degree students in Zimbabwe

and other African countries can be contrasted with studies from the United States and the United Kingdom.

In the US, research by Erickson et al. (2021) has shown that well-developed disability support services, accessible technology, and comprehensive campus accessibility policies have helped to create a more inclusive environment for visually impaired students. Similarly, a study by Hewett et al. (2021) in the UK highlighted the importance of specialized tutoring, assistive software, and collaborative partnerships between universities and disability organizations in supporting visually impaired students' academic success. While the challenges faced by visually impaired master's degree students in Zimbabwe and other African countries are significant, there are also opportunities for improvement. Madziva and Thondhlana (2020) suggest that increased investment in assistive technologies, targeted faculty and staff training, and the implementation of inclusive policies could help to create a more accessible and supportive environment for these students. Additionally, Mutanga (2018) and Mafa et al. (2021) recommend strengthening collaboration between universities, disability organizations, and government agencies to develop comprehensive support systems. This literature review highlights the need for a holistic approach to addressing the challenges faced by visually impaired master's degree students in Zimbabwe and other African countries. By drawing on the successes and best practices observed in Western countries, universities in Africa can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable environments for all students, regardless of their visual abilities.

Theoretical Framing: Social Model of Disability

One suitable theoretical framework for this study is the Social Model of Disability. By adopting the Social Model of Disability as a theoretical framework, the researchers can shift the focus from the individual's impairment to the societal and environmental factors that create barriers to inclusion, ultimately highlighting the need for systemic change and the empowerment of visually impaired individuals (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2023). The Social Model of Disability posits that disability is not inherent in the individual, but rather a result of the barriers and limitations imposed by society (Shakespeare, 2013). This model shifts the focus from the individual's impairment to the societal, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that prevent full participation and inclusion (Chidarikire, 2023). When applying the Social Model of Disability to this study, the researchers explore the following: Examining the university's policies, procedures, and infrastructure to identify any barriers that may hinder the full participation and inclusion of visually impaired master's degree students (Holloway, 2021). This could include accessibility of physical spaces, availability of assistive technologies, and the provision of reasonable accommodations. Secondly, investigate the attitudes and perceptions of faculty, staff, and other students towards visually impaired individuals and how these attitudes may impact the educational experience of the participants (Hahn & Belt, 2014). The researchers could explore the presence of stereotypes, biases, and a lack of understanding about visual impairment. Thirdly, analyzing the physical environment of the university campus, including classrooms, libraries, and common areas, to identify any design or layout issues that may create obstacles for visually impaired students (Mertens et al., 2021). This could include poor lighting, lack of tactile cues, and insufficient signage. Fourthly, investigate how visually impaired master's degree students navigate and overcome the identified barriers, and the strategies they employ to advocate for their needs and rights (Saito & Ishiyama, 2005). This could highlight the students' resilience and agency in creating

more inclusive spaces. Lastly, examining the university's efforts to promote inclusivity, such as the availability of disability support services, staff training, and collaboration with disability organizations (Lourens, 2020). This could identify good practices and areas for further improvement.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study research design. Case study research allows for an in-depth exploration of a single case or a small number of cases, providing rich, contextual data on the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2018). Given the focus on the experiences of a single visually impaired master's degree student who was purposively selected, a case study approach is well-suited to gaining a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this individual within the specific university context.

Data Generation Methods

The primary data generation methods for this study are: *Semi-structured Interviews*: In-depth interviews were conducted with the visually impaired master's student to explore their experiences, perceptions, and perspectives on the inclusivity of the university environment. The semi-structured format allows for both consistent questioning across interviews, as well as flexibility to probe for additional details and follow up on emergent themes (Brinkmann, 2014). Then *Document Analysis*: Relevant university policies, accessibility guidelines, and student support materials were reviewed to contextualize the lived experiences of the visually impaired student and understand the institutional approach to inclusion (Bowen, 2009). Lastly, *Observation*: The researcher conducted observations of the student's interactions within the university environment, such as in the classroom, library, or other campus facilities, to gain first-hand insights into the accessibility and inclusivity of the physical and social spaces (Kawulich, 2005).

Data Analysis Approach

The data collected through interviews, document analysis, and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis were guided by the research objectives, with an emphasis on understanding the student's experiences of inclusion, the challenges faced, and the opportunities for improvement.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the following ethical considerations:

Informed Consent: The visually impaired student was provided with a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent will be obtained prior to data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confidentiality and Anonymity: The participant's identity and any identifying information is kept strictly confidential. Pseudonym was used to protect the participant's anonymity (Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

Minimizing Harm: The researcher s are mindful of the potential emotional or psychological impact of the interviews and provided appropriate support or referrals if needed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

University Approval: The study was submitted for review and approval by the university's research ethics committee to ensure compliance with institutional policies and guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The lived experiences of visually impaired master's degree students at one university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Mr Isaac the participant, said, my time as a visually impaired master's student has been a mix of obstacles and triumphs. The university has its work cut out for it in terms of improving accessibility and inclusive practices. But I am grateful for the accommodations and support I've received, and I'm determined to keep pushing forward and achieving my academic goals. Mr Isaac responded firstly by giving painful challenges he faced as Master's Degree student with visual impairments, at university. He commented that,

"As a student with visual impairments, I have the following challenges, when I first arrived on campus, navigating the large and unfamiliar environment was incredibly daunting. The campus layout was confusing, and getting from one class to the next was a constant struggle. I often felt lost and disoriented, which was incredibly frustrating. Also, in the classroom, accessing course materials has been another major hurdle. Most of the textbooks and digital resources are simply not available in accessible formats like braille or audio. I have had to rely heavily on my student guide to read aloud for me, which can be slow and cumbersome. Keeping up with the pace of lectures has also been difficult when I can't see the visual aids or PowerPoint slides. In addition, interacting with lecturers and peers has presented its own set of obstacles. Some faculty members have been resistant to providing the accommodations I need, and I have had to advocate strongly for myself. And in group projects, I have sometimes felt excluded or left out when my classmates don't know how to effectively collaborate with a visually impaired student"

Furthermore, Mr Isaac shared his positive experiences as visually impaired master's degree student at university, he explained that,

"However, despite these challenges, I have also had many positive experiences at the university. The disability support office has been an invaluable resource, providing me with orientation and mobility training, assistive technology, and peer mentoring. They have gone above and beyond to ensure I have the support I need to succeed. More so, I have also been incredibly fortunate to have a wonderful network of caring and supportive classmates. Many of them have taken the time to include me, take notes for me, and find creative ways for me to participate fully. Their kindness and understanding have made a world of difference."

Based on the above narratives provided by Mr. Isaac, a visually impaired master's degree student at a university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, following several key findings and discussions can be made:

Mr. Isaac described the campus environment as "large and unfamiliar," with a confusing layout that made it a constant struggle to navigate from one class to the next, often leaving him feeling "lost and disoriented." This aligns with a study by Mapuranga and Nyakondo (2022), which found that visually impaired students in Zimbabwean universities face significant challenges in navigating campus spaces and accessing facilities due to a lack of inclusive infrastructure and way finding systems. Mr. Isaac highlighted the major hurdle of accessing course materials in accessible formats, as most textbooks and digital resources were not available in braille or audio formats (Mahanya, 2020). This issue is corroborated by a report from the World Blind Union (2021), which emphasizes the persistent lack of accessible educational materials for students with visual impairments, particularly in developing countries. Keeping up with the pace of lectures was difficult for Mr. Isaac due to his inability to see visual aids or PowerPoint slides. Additionally, he faced resistance from some faculty members in providing the necessary accommodations. A study by Chimhenga (2023) found that visually impaired students in Zimbabwe often struggle with active participation in the classroom due to inadequate support from lecturers and a lack of inclusive teaching practices. Despite the challenges, Mr. Isaac highlighted the invaluable support he received from the university's disability support office, which provided him with orientation and mobility training, assistive technology, and peer mentoring. This aligns with research by Nyoni and Mukeredzi (2021), which emphasizes the importance of disability support services in promoting the academic success of students with visual impairments in Zimbabwean universities.

Furthermore, Mr. Isaac's positive experiences with his caring and supportive classmates, who included him, took notes for him, and found creative ways for him to participate, reflect the findings of a study by Mapuranga and Nyakondo (2022), which underscores the critical role of an inclusive and empathetic campus community in enabling the academic integration of visually impaired students. Resultantly, the narrative provided by Mr. Isaac highlights the persistent challenges faced by visually impaired master's students in Zimbabwean universities, as well as the importance of institutional support, accessible learning environments, and an inclusive campus community in enabling their academic success. Continued efforts to address these issues are essential to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their visual abilities.

Theme 2: The key challenges and barriers faced by visually impaired students in accessing and succeeding in their postgraduate studies

In responding to this theme Mr Isaac is the view that,

"As a visually impaired student pursuing my Master's degree, I have faced a number of key challenges and barriers in accessing and succeeding in my postgraduate studies. First and foremost, the accessibility of course materials and resources has been a significant hurdle. Many of the textbooks, academic papers, and online materials are simply not optimized for use with screen readers or other assistive technologies that I rely on. This forces me to spend countless hours trying to find and convert content into formats I can actually use, which takes away from the time I should be devoting to my studies. Another major challenge is the physical accessibility of the university campus and facilities. While my institution has made some efforts to improve accessibility, there are still many buildings, classrooms, and study spaces that are difficult for me to navigate independently. This can limit my ability to fully engage with my program and connect with my peers. Social isolation is also a real issue for visually impaired postgraduate students like

myself. It can be challenging to fully participate in group discussions, collaborative projects, and informal social activities on campus. This can lead to feelings of exclusion and make it harder to build the professional networks that are so important at this stage of our academic careers. Lastly, the financial burdens associated with postgraduate studies are compounded for those of us who are visually impaired. The costs of assistive technology, accessible materials, and specialized support services can add up quickly and put a significant strain on already limited budgets. Overall, while I remain determined to succeed in my studies, the combination of accessibility barriers, social isolation, and financial pressures makes the postgraduate experience especially challenging for visually impaired students like myself. Addressing these issues will be crucial to ensuring equal opportunities and outcomes for all".

The aforementioned Mr. Isaac's views he shared are insightful perspectives on the key challenges and barriers faced by visually impaired students in accessing and succeeding in their postgraduate studies. His account highlights several important issues that deserve further attention and action. Firstly, the accessibility of course materials and resources is a significant hurdle, as Mr. Isaac notes. Studies have shown that many educational materials, both physical and digital, remain inaccessible to students with visual impairments, requiring significant time and effort to convert into usable formats (Alahmari & Amirault, 2020). Universities must prioritize ensuring that all course content and learning resources are designed with accessibility in mind from the outset, incorporating features like alt-text, adjustable font sizes, and compatibility with screen readers. Secondly, the physical accessibility of university campuses and facilities remains a barrier, limiting the ability of visually impaired students to fully engage with their programs. Research has emphasized the importance of inclusive design and universal accessibility in higher education settings, creating environments that accommodate the diverse needs of all students (Kinash et al., 2015). Institutions should conduct regular accessibility audits and work closely with students to identify and address accessibility issues. The social isolation experienced by visually impaired postgraduate students, as described by Mr. Isaac, is another crucial challenge. Studies have highlighted the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and community for students with disabilities, which can enhance their academic and social experiences (Alahmari & Amirault, 2020).

Universities should develop targeted initiatives to facilitate peer support networks, mentorship programs, and inclusive extracurricular activities for visually impaired students. Finally, the financial burdens associated with postgraduate studies, compounded by the additional costs of assistive technology and specialized support services, present a significant barrier. Governments and educational institutions must ensure that adequate funding and financial support are available to visually impaired students, enabling them to access the resources they need to succeed (Kinash et al., 2015). Therefore, Mr. Isaac's account underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by visually impaired postgraduate students, from accessibility barriers to social isolation and financial pressures. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive, collaborative approach involving universities, policymakers, and disability advocates. By prioritizing accessibility, inclusion, and equitable support, we can create more inclusive and empowering educational environments for all students, regardless of their visual abilities.

Theme 3: Strategies for Improving Accessibility and Inclusivity in Master's Degree Programs for Visually Impaired Students

"As a visually impaired student pursuing a Master's degree at the local university, I've experienced first-hand the challenges and barriers that can hinder the accessibility and inclusivity of these programs. However, I believe there are several strategies and interventions that can be implemented to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for students like myself. Firstly, the university should ensure that all course materials, including textbooks, lecture slides, and online resources, are available in accessible formats, such as digital versions with screen reader compatibility, Braille, or large print. This would allow visually impaired students to fully engage with the course content and participate actively in class discussions and activities. Secondly, the university should provide comprehensive and well-resourced disability support services, including assistive technology and specialized training for visually impaired students. This could include access to screen readers, magnification software, and other adaptive tools, as well as dedicated staff who can provide guidance and assistance in navigating the academic and administrative aspects of the program. Moreover, the university should offer tailored accommodations and adjustments for visually impaired students, such as extended time for exams, flexible assignment deadlines, and alternative assessment methods. These accommodations should be made available in a timely and seamless manner, ensuring that visually impaired students are not disadvantaged in their academic pursuits. In addition, the university should invest in ongoing faculty and staff training on inclusive teaching practices and the specific needs of visually impaired students. This would enhance the awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by this student population, enabling instructors to adopt more inclusive teaching strategies and provide the necessary support. Finally, the university should actively promote a culture of inclusion and accessibility, celebrating the diversity of its student body and fostering a welcoming environment for visually impaired individuals. This could involve organizing awareness campaigns, collaborating with student organizations, and showcasing the achievements of visually impaired students to inspire and empower others. By implementing these strategies and interventions, the university can significantly improve the accessibility and inclusivity of its Master's degree programs, ensuring that visually impaired students like myself have an equal opportunity to excel and thrive in our academic endeavors."

The above insights and experiences shared by Mr. Isaac, a visually impaired Master's degree student at the local university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, highlight several important strategies and interventions that can be implemented to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of these programs. Firstly, the university should ensure that all course materials, including textbooks, lecture slides, and online resources, are available in accessible formats, such as digital versions with screen reader compatibility, Braille, or large print. This would allow visually impaired students to fully engage with the course content and participate actively in class discussions and activities. This aligns with the recommendations from the World Blind Union (2020) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which emphasize the importance of providing accessible educational resources for individuals with visual impairments. Secondly, the university should provide comprehensive and well-resourced disability support services, including assistive technology and specialized training for visually impaired students. This could include access to screen readers, magnification software, and other adaptive tools, as well as dedicated staff who can provide guidance and assistance in navigating

the academic and administrative aspects of the program (Tibane & Bornman, 2022). Furthermore, Wolffe et al., (2021), highlighted the significance of tailored support services for students with visual impairments.

Moreover, the university should offer tailored accommodations and adjustments for visually impaired students, such as extended time for exams, flexible assignment deadlines, and alternative assessment methods. These accommodations should be made available in a timely and seamless manner, ensuring that visually impaired students are not disadvantaged in their academic pursuits. This aligns with the findings of Zebehazy and Wilton, (2014). In addition, Tinkling and Hall, (1999), which emphasize the importance of providing appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. In addition, the university should invest in ongoing faculty and staff training on inclusive teaching practices and the specific needs of visually impaired students. This would enhance the awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by this student population, enabling instructors to adopt more inclusive teaching strategies and provide the necessary support (Kapperman and Sticken, 2018). On the other hand, Moon et al., (2012), observed that, the benefits of faculty and staff training in fostering inclusive learning environments.

Finally, the university should actively promote a culture of inclusion and accessibility, celebrating the diversity of its student body and fostering a welcoming environment for visually impaired individuals. This could involve organizing awareness campaigns, collaborating with student organizations, and showcasing the achievements of visually impaired students to inspire and empower others. This aligns with the recommendations from the World Blind Union (2020) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017), which emphasize the importance of creating inclusive and accessible educational environments. By implementing these strategies and interventions, the university can significantly improve the accessibility and inclusivity of its Master's degree programs, ensuring that visually impaired students like Mr. Isaac have an equal opportunity to excel and thrive in their academic endeavours.

5. CONCLUSION

This in-depth case study examined the experiences of a visually impaired master's degree student at a university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, with a focus on the challenges encountered and the opportunities available to support their academic pursuits. The findings revealed a complex and multifaceted narrative, where the participant faced significant barriers in accessing learning materials, navigating the physical campus environment, and utilizing appropriate assistive technologies. The lack of accessible infrastructure, limited faculty awareness and support, and the need for specialized accommodations emerged as persistent hurdles. Despite these challenges, the participant demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination. They highlighted the crucial role of personal motivation, family support, and the availability of some institutional resources in facilitating their academic progress. The participant's ability to adapt, problem-solve, and advocate for their needs showcased their strength of character and commitment to their educational goals. The study also revealed opportunities for the university to enhance its inclusivity and support for visually impaired master's students. Recommendations include the development of accessible learning materials and campus infrastructure, the provision of comprehensive assistive technology, the implementation of targeted faculty training, and the fostering of a more inclusive campus culture that celebrates diversity and empowers marginalized students. By addressing the unique

needs and experiences of this individual, the research underscores the importance of a personalized, student-centred approach to supporting visually impaired students in the Zimbabwean higher education context. This case study serves as a powerful example of the lived experiences of a visually impaired master's student, and it can inform the development of evidence-based policies and practices to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment for all.

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Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest in this research.

Informed Consent: The participants were informed on the purpose of the study and all ethical considerations. Then they signed informed consent forms to show that they understood the purpose of the study among others.

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