JOVACET
Journal of Vocational, Adult and Continuing Education and Training

To cite: Mdiza, B., Mathebula, R. N., Nyewe, P. K., & Chigona, A. (2026). Challenges in provision of institutional support and inclusive pedagogy: Voices of TVET students with disabilities in the Western Cape. *Journal of Vocational, Adult and Continuing Education and Training, 9*(1), 37–58. http://doi.org/10.14426/jovacet.v9i1.635

Challenges in provision of institutional support and inclusive pedagogy: Voices of TVET students with disabilities in the Western Cape

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ABSTRACT

Despite rising enrolment of students with disabilities at technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, many still experience significant challenges there. This article explores the challenges experienced by TVET students with disabilities in the Western Cape. The article adopted a qualitative case study design. The study was conducted at a selected college, with six participants purposively sampled. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews supported by document analysis. Thematic data analysis revealed ongoing challenges, including non-disclosure owing to stigma, poor communication systems, inadequate infrastructure and limited lecturer training. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's system theory, the analysis revealed personal, institutional and broader systemic factors affecting students' everyday experiences. The findings emphasise the significance of TVET colleges adopting a holistic and proactive approach to inclusive education, including improving accessibility, providing targeted professional training for lecturers and strengthening advocacy. Ultimately, fostering such inclusive environments contributes to improved educational outcomes and social justice in the TVET sector.

Keywords: TVET college, disability, student with disability, inclusion, inclusive education

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Introduction

South Africa is constitutionally committed to inclusiveness and equal access to education for all students, regardless of their ability, age, religion, race or gender. Education is recognised as a fundamental right by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). Higher education in South Africa includes not only universities, but also technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, which are mandated to offer occupational and vocational programmes aligned with labour market needs. Despite this mandate, significant challenges persist in ensuring equitable access and success for students with disabilities in the TVET sector (Sako, 2020).

Globally, there has been a steady increase in the enrolment of students with disabilities at higher education institutions, including students with physical, visual and hearing impairments (McKinney & Swartz, 2020; Ntombela, 2019). Ferguson and McKenzie (2019) similarly reported consistent growth in the participation of students with disabilities in post-secondary education worldwide. In the South African context, Sako (2020) reported a notable increase in the enrolment of TVET students with disabilities. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2023), enrolment figures for students with disabilities increased from 0.32% in 2018 to 0.8% in 2023. During this period, TVET colleges enrolled a total of 556 415 students across all programmes. However, despite this increase, students with disabilities still constitute less than 1% of the total student population, which highlights persistent access barriers and systemic exclusion.

Beyond access, students with disabilities continue to encounter significant challenges once enrolled in higher education institutions, particularly at TVET colleges (Ntombela, 2020). These challenges are demonstrated by lower retention and graduation for this group (Safer et al., 2020). Although Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) aims to address these issues by removing systemic barriers and responding to diverse learning needs, its implementation remains inconsistent. The difficulties encountered by students with disabilities are often linked to inconsistent application of inclusive education policies, limited institutional awareness, inadequate staff training and lack of accountability mechanisms for lecturers (Delubom et al., 2020; Ntombela, 2019).

Furthermore, insufficient provision of reasonably accommodating the needs of students with disabilities, lack of assistive technologies and inadequate disability support services continue to hinder meaningful participation and academic success of students with disabilities (Munyaradzi, 2021). These challenges are compounded by structural constraints at TVET colleges, including inaccessible infrastructure, rigid curricula and limited financial and human resources (Ntombela, 2020). As a result, students with disabilities often experience exclusion, marginalisation and reduced opportunities for social and academic integration.

Despite global and national commitment to inclusive education, the challenges faced by TVET students with disabilities remain under-researched and inadequately addressed

(McPherson, 2021). There is limited understanding of the complex challenges affecting their academic progress, social inclusion and overall well-being (Ntombela, 2020). This research gap impedes the development of effective interventions, policy reforms and support mechanisms to create inclusive learning environments. Addressing these challenges is crucial for strengthening equity in the TVET system and enabling students with disabilities to fully realise their educational and societal potential. The present study was guided by the following research questions in order to address this gap and better understand the challenges experienced by TVET students with disabilities.

Research questions

The research questions underpinning this article can be posed as follows:

1. What challenges do TVET students with disabilities in the Western Cape experience regarding institutional support, policy implementation and inclusive pedagogical practices?
2. What institutional factors contribute to challenges in institutional support and inclusive pedagogy for TVET students with disabilities?

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological system theory was adopted to explore the multi-layered challenges experienced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory is crucial for this article, as it emphasises the relationship between individual development and the broader social context in which TVET students with disabilities are situated. The theory explains that students with disabilities are affected by interconnected systems, including institutional factors, interactions, accessible infrastructure and inclusive education policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Furthermore, this is a multifaceted human development model in which changes in one system influence other systems, shaping growth and development (Smit et al., 2020). For example, inefficiencies in the South African national education system, such as lack of funding, inadequate lecturer training and poor policy implementation, may negatively affect the capacity of institutions of learning to support students with disabilities (McPherson, 2021). According to Sako (2020), students do not exist in isolation as educational structures, lecturers and TVET institutions can significantly affect their academic performance. As a result, this theory serves as a guiding framework to explore how immediate individual and societal factors collectively shape the challenges experienced by students with disabilities in higher education institutions (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2021).

The article applies the five levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory to explore the lived experiences of TVET students with disabilities. These five interconnected systems are briefly explained below.

Microsystem

The microsystem includes direct interactions with peers, support staff, lecturers and infrastructure, which directly influence the academic performance and well-being of students with disabilities.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem highlights challenges arising from poor coordination and communication between TVET college departments, support services and external disability organisations.

Ecosystem

This encompasses external factors indirectly affecting students with disabilities in higher education institutions, including societal attitudes, policies, funding, assistive technology and reasonably accommodating students with disabilities.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses the broad social, cultural and historical influences shaping attitudes to disability.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem refers to changes over time and interactions among systems, examining how historical and developmental shifts influence the challenges encountered by students with disabilities.

By framing this article within ecological system theory, the challenges encountered by TVET students with disabilities are understood as systemic rather than isolated, requiring a holistic approach. This theory serves as a lens for exploring the complex challenges experienced by students with disabilities. El Zaatari and Maalouf (2021) state that the theory enables the researcher to examine how interacting environmental systems shape the experiences of students with disabilities. The five interconnected systems guide the analysis of both immediate and broader contextual factors that influence students' social and academic lives. Importantly, this theory supports an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences by situating their voices in the broader environmental contexts that shape their realities.

Literature review

Historical and policy context of inclusive education in South Africa

South Africa's education system was characterised by segregation and inequality throughout the apartheid years (Juan et al., 2021). The government institutionalised racial discrimination resulted in a deeply divided education system (Smit et al., 2020). Under the Bantu Education Act of 1953, black students and those with disabilities were offered inferior education intended for a situation of servitude (Ntombela, 2020). Furthermore, special needs education was largely neglected and most children with disabilities had no access to formal education (Sedibe & Fourie, 2018). However, the end of apartheid initiated significant transformation in the education system. Although progress has been made, the system remains shaped by the country's sociopolitical history (Masoga & Maoto, 2021), particularly the transition to democracy (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Ntombela (2020) notes a shift from exclusionary practices to inclusive policies aimed at improving access for all students regardless of their abilities. The democratic government emphasised human rights and equity, dismantling the racially segregated education system (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). South Africa's Constitution underpins all policies, ensuring basic education for everyone (Republic of South Africa, 1996a), while the South African Schools Act mandates all public schools to admit and accommodate students with disabilities without unfair discrimination (Republic of South Africa, 1996b). This was further emphasised by the Education White Paper 6 on special needs education (Department of Education, 2001). By contrast, post-apartheid policies have for the most part focused on redressing historical marginalisation (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022), though challenges to fully implementing inclusive education still persist (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024).

Furthermore, despite these post-apartheid policy frameworks, institutions of learning in South Africa still encounter significant challenges when implementing inclusive education (Lindner et al., 2022). These challenges stem from several issues like poor accessibility, a lack of reasonably accommodating students with disabilities and limited resources (Masoga & Maoto, 2021; Sako, 2020). Owing to certain challenges like those outlined below, TVET colleges continue to marginalise and exclude students with disabilities.

Policy implementation gaps

South Africa has adopted several policies intended to support inclusive education, although their implementation remains ineffective, particularly at TVET colleges, as they are not specifically tailored for this sector (Sako, 2020). The lack of clear and TVET-specific policy guidelines negatively affects the provision of reasonable accommodation of students with disabilities (Ndlovu, 2023). Similarly, Ntombela (2019) reported that inclusive education in TVET colleges is hindered by the lack of a dedicated legislative policy framework. As a result, institutions adopt different and inconsistent implementation approaches due to unclear guidance (McPherson, 2021). These policy and legislative gaps result in significant challenges,

including limited direction regarding inclusive practices and inconsistencies across colleges, which undermine effective implementation (DHET, 2019). Such shortcomings restrict the development and sustainability of inclusive education in the TVET sector (Ntombela, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires the development of comprehensive and context-specific policies and legislative frameworks for inclusive education at TVET colleges.

On the other hand, the Department of Basic Education's Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy does provide strategies to promote inclusion, including the establishment of a disability unit to accommodate students with disabilities, assistive technologies and support services (DBE, 2014). Despite this, a DHET survey revealed that most colleges lack disability units, posing significant challenges to effectively addressing the needs of TVET students with disabilities (DHET, 2019).

Physical-accessibility challenges

Physical accessibility is a key aspect of inclusive education, as it allows students with disabilities to access lecture rooms, workshops and other learning spaces alongside their peers (Smit et al., 2020). The United Nations Development Programme (2017) emphasises that inadequate, inaccessible facilities and physical barriers in buildings can impede the effective implementation of inclusive education. TVET colleges also limit students with disabilities from fully participating in educational activities, as well as accessing necessary resources (Sako, 2020). According to Ndlovu (2023), investing in accessible infrastructure is crucial for ensuring that all students can engage fully in learning environments. Infrastructure challenges are widely recognised as a major obstacle to TVET colleges' preparedness for inclusive education (Delubom et al., 2020). As a result, TVET institutions have a responsibility to create environments that are both welcoming and supportive, thereby promoting success for all students, including those with disabilities (McKinney & Swartz, 2020). Despite this responsibility, limited physical accessibility remains a persistent challenge, preventing the full realisation of inclusive education at South African TVET colleges (Munyaradzi, 2021). Addressing these infrastructural challenges is therefore crucial to fostering equitable opportunities for students with disabilities.

Negative attitudes and stereotypes

Among the significant challenges that students with disabilities may encounter at TVET colleges are attitudinal barriers (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024). Ntombela (2020) echoes this sentiment by stating that negative attitudes, stereotypes and resistance to change are some of the attitudinal obstacles that may prevent TVET colleges from successfully implementing inclusive education. Sako (2020) supports these views, stating that one of the major difficulties that students with disabilities encounter is negative attitudes. Raising awareness and prompting positive attitudes among students and college employees are strategies that can be used to address attitudinal barriers (Ferguson & McKenzie, 2019; Ndlovu, 2023).

Inadequate support services

All students should be welcomed into educational institutions, programmes and teaching strategies that create a caring environment, one that responds effectively to their diverse needs (McPherson, 2021). Ferguson and McKenzie (2019) argue that the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream educational settings is often hindered by insufficient support services. Furthermore, Sako (2020) emphasises the establishment of disability units as a crucial mechanism for promoting inclusion of all TVET students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Ndlovu (2023) explains that disability units play a crucial role in ensuring that students with disabilities can access the necessary resources and support services. The absence of such units in South African TVET colleges limits the participation and success of students with disabilities in vocational education training (Ndlovu, 2019). As a result, without dedicated structures to address disability-related issues, TVET colleges are failing to provide appropriate and effective support for students with disabilities (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024).

Insufficient training of TVET lecturers

According to Williams (2021), TVET lecturer training has historically focused on mainstream teaching approaches, often leaving lecturers without the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to implement inclusive education. Research indicates that many TVET lecturers continue to struggle to accommodate students with disabilities in their classrooms (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024; Msimango, 2019). This lack of preparation often contributes to negative attitudes towards inclusive education, as lecturers are not adequately trained in inclusive practices (Delubom et al., 2020). Additionally, the quality of lecturers, including their skills and qualifications, plays a crucial role in students' academic success (Williams, 2021). Lecturers are key implementers of inclusive education in TVET colleges. Therefore, their attitudes and perceptions are critical in fostering inclusive learning environments. Nkumane (2025) emphasises that the successful integration of inclusive education at institutions of learning depends mainly on lecturers' attitudes.

However, TVET students with disabilities often receive limited or no academic support because of lecturers' inability to incorporate inclusive strategies into their teaching (Munyaradzi, 2021). This challenge is linked to the background of many TVET lecturers, who are trained primarily in vocational fields and often lack formal pedagogical training (Ntombela, 2020). Although some achieve teaching qualifications such as a postgraduate certificate in education, inclusive education is often not adequately addressed (Nkumane, 2025). As a result, lecturers remain insufficiently equipped to support TVET students with disabilities (Williams, 2021). This concern was reinforced by Ntombela (2019), who reported that accommodating students with special educational needs was historically lacking in lecturer training programmes.

Societal and cultural determinants of inclusive education

Societal and cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping the implementation of inclusive education in South African TVET colleges (Nkumane, 2025). These factors may either impede or promote the effectiveness of inclusive education policies and practices (Williams, 2021). Munyaradzi (2021) supports this view by stating that societal perceptions of disability strongly influence the educational experiences of students with disabilities. Historically, disability has been mainly understood through a medical model, which views disability as a deficiency requiring treatment or correction (Masoga & Maoto, 2021). This perception often results in the marginalisation of students with disabilities and restricts their access to inclusive learning environments (Smit et al., 2020). McKinney and Amosun (2020) argue that a transition towards the social model of disability is therefore essential, as it focuses on removing environmental and attitudinal barriers while promoting equal participation.

Cultural beliefs and practices further negatively affect inclusivity in education (Ndlovu & Nyoni, 2021). In some African countries, disability is associated with superstitions or is viewed as a punishment for wrongdoing, which reinforces exclusion and discrimination (Mutlaneng, 2020; Ndlovu, 2023). These beliefs may also intersect with gender norms, further limiting educational opportunities for persons with disabilities (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). According to Ndlovu (2023), stigma and discrimination remain major impediments to inclusive education in TVET colleges. Furthermore, negative stereotypes can lead to exclusion, bullying and low expectations for students with disabilities. Moreover, they can negatively affect their academic performance and self-esteem (Ndlovu & Nyoni, 2021; Nkumane, 2025; Safer et al., 2020). Addressing these challenges requires legislative support, community engagement, adequate resources and ongoing professional development (Dube & Baleni, 2022).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach employing a case study design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students with disabilities within their specific contexts. Case studies are particularly useful for examining real-life problems (Baskarada, 2014). The study aimed to explore the challenges faced by students with disabilities in a selected TVET college in the Western Cape. This institution was considered appropriate for the present study as it accommodates a significant number of students with disabilities. It was also chosen based on its characteristics, including its environment, infrastructure and culture. Six students with disabilities who met the study's inclusion criteria were selected as participants from this college using a purposive sampling method. Participants were enrolled at the selected TVET college, self-identified as having a disability and were willing to participate in the study. They were selected because they had lived experiences of the institutional support and inclusion at the college and were able to provide relevant insights into the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, this method was suitable for this study

because the researchers specifically needed students with disabilities to achieve the main objective of the study. It was hoped that this sampling method would enhance the richness and depth of the findings, as it enables researchers to select participants who can provide in-depth and insightful information (Creswell, 2013).

The criteria ensured that participants aligned with the study's objective of exploring challenges faced by TVET students with disabilities. Selecting currently registered students with disabilities enhanced the credibility of the data, as they were able to provide first-hand experiences of challenges experienced within the college environment.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from TVET students with disabilities. This method was chosen as a tool because it is flexible. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to probe for a more detailed explanation, fostering a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). Open-ended questions were used, allowing the researchers to gather further data as expressed by the participants. The college boardroom was chosen as it offered a quiet, suitable environment for interviews. An audio recorder was used to capture the interview session and all recordings were subsequently transcribed. The data were interpreted and analysed using the thematic data analysis method to explore participants' personal experiences of the challenges they encounter at TVETs. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic data analysis refers to a method of analysing, identifying and reporting themes or patterns in the data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations ensure that research aligns with the requirements of the institution concerned, including obtaining approval from an ethics committee (Anney, 2014). Prior to data collection in the present instance, ethical clearance was obtained from the college's Ethics Committee, following a full review of the research proposal and compliance with all ethical guidelines. The study was formally approved and registered under the ethics clearance number EFEC04-07/2004. Permission to conduct the research was also sought and granted by the participating college and approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities. This process ensured that the study complied with the college's policies and procedures. All participants were fully informed of the purpose, objectives and procedures of the study before participation. Informed consent was obtained and participants agreed voluntarily to take part in the research. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, as the study involved potentially sensitive information. Pseudonyms were used and participants' identities were protected throughout the research process. Data were securely stored in a locked cabinet and electronic data were password-protected. Participants were also given the opportunity to confirm that the findings accurately reflected their views, thereby ensuring credibility and ethical integrity.

Findings

Demographics of participants

This section presents the demographic profile of the participants in the study. Such information is provided to contextualise the findings by offering insight into the students' backgrounds, particularly their age, gender and disabilities, which are essential in understanding their perspectives and experiences. The participants included three males and three females, aged between 19 and 31 years. Furthermore, a detailed description of each participant's disability is provided to offer a deeper understanding of their individual experiences and challenges. All the names used in this article are not the real names of participants. A summary of the participants' details is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant's background

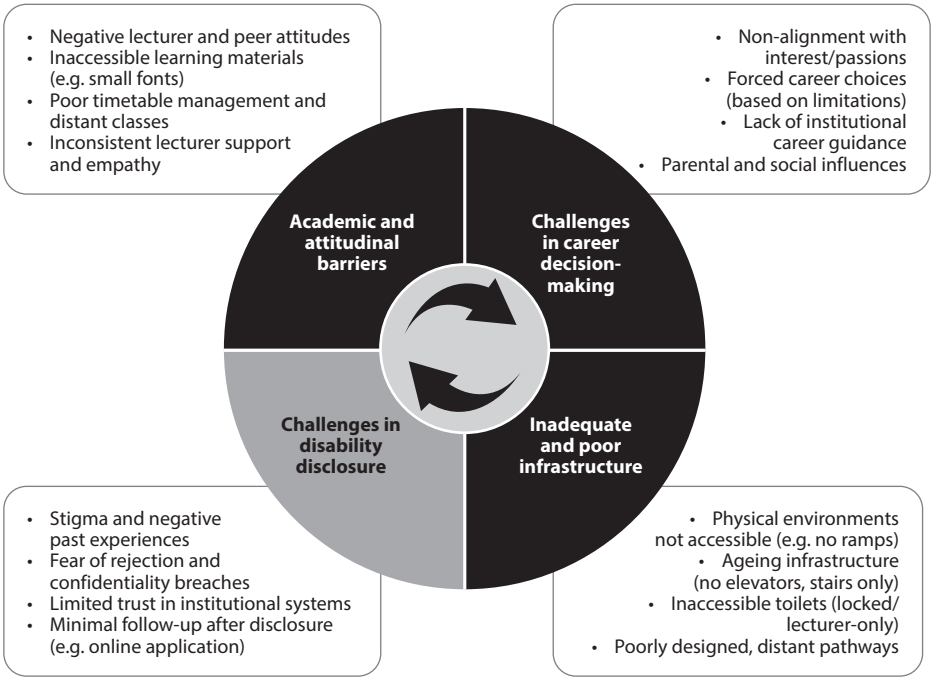
Participant	Gender	Age	Disability	Disabilities in detail
1. John	Male	31	Visually impaired	Decreased ability to see that cannot be fully corrected through standard methods such as glasses.
2. Mary	Female	21	Anisomelia	A condition where one limb is shorter than the other.
3. Sipho	Male	28	Using crutches	Using assistive devices to help with mobility.
4. Siya	Male	19	Mild cerebral palsy	Neurological condition that affects muscle control and movement.
5. Amanda	Female	20	Visually impaired	Decreased ability to see that cannot be fully corrected through standard methods such as glasses.
6. Zanele	Female	23	Partially deaf	Decreased ability to hear, but not completely deaf.

Key barriers to academic and social participation

This section presents findings on the challenges encountered by TVET students with disabilities, guided by the two research questions that sought to identify the key barriers affecting their academic and social participation. These results highlighted persistent challenges related to non-disclosure of disability owing to stigma, poor communication systems, inadequate infrastructure and limited lecturer training in inclusive practices. Participants further noted negative attitudes and low expectations on the part of lecturers and peers, which contributed to social isolation and low self-esteem. These challenges were further compounded by institutional barriers such as inadequate infrastructure,

poor disability support services, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive education policies. Understanding these challenges is pivotal to developing effective interventions that promote inclusion and provide all students with full access to enable them to benefit from TVET opportunities. The themes and their subthemes are represented graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Graphic representation of the themes and their subthemes



Source: Authors.

Challenges in career decision-making

An interesting pattern emerged regarding programme selection among participants. Most participants (83%) were registered for business-related programmes, not because these aligned with their interests or aspirations, but because they were perceived as more manageable in relation to their disabilities. This suggests that one of the initial challenges encountered by TVET students with disabilities was making career choices that did not necessarily reflect their passions but rather their physical or contextual limitations. For instance, Amanda, a visually impaired student who was studying human resource management, shared that she had always aspired to study electrical engineering. However, her parents discouraged this choice, citing the demanding working conditions and job requirements associated with this field.

As Amanda explained:

> I always had a dream of working for Eskom. But because my parents advised me about the working conditions … My parents told me I would need to have a driver's licence to work for Eskom, which I could not have.

Similarly, participants reported that career decisions were often shaped by personal assessments of their conditions, by family advice and by societal expectations rather than institutional career guidance. Mary explained that she deliberately chose a field that would allow her to work in a seated position, stating:

> So, seeing the nature of my disability, I decided that I needed to study for a job where most of the times I have to sit so that I don't strain my leg even more.

Siya added that, although the college did not provide career guidance, he selected a course that he believed was suitable for his condition, stating:

> No, the college did not offer me any career advice, but I did not really need the career advice since I'm already knowledgeable about my condition and which careers would suit me best.

These findings illustrate how students with disabilities are often forced to compromise their ambitions, pursuing careers that are imposed either extrinsically or intrinsically. According to Walton and Engelbrecht (2022), educational barriers, societal expectations and insufficient support often limit career choices of students with disabilities, leading to decisions that are shaped by external circumstances instead of individual ambitions. This process can be emotionally challenging. As Amanda reflected, 'That was not nice at all but I had to adjust to the present conditions'. Overall, these findings demonstrate how disability-related constraints and social influences interact to limit career choices and shape educational pathways for TVET students with disabilities.

Challenges regarding disability disclosure

As part of the application/registration process, prospective students are required to disclose any disability (McPherson, 2021). However, the findings reveal that several students with disabilities chose not to disclose. Non-disclosure emerged as a hidden but significant challenge, influenced by negative experiences, stigma and limited trust in institutional systems. Consequently, many students missed opportunities to access support and being accommodated.

Amanda explained that her past experiences at school discouraged her from being open about her condition:

> When I got to college, I decided not to disclose my condition. Reason being, when I was in high school, I disclosed about my condition, and I could hear other teachers, [whom] I did not tell, talking about my condition.

This highlights how breaches of confidentiality can undermine trust and reinforce silence, preventing students from seeking assistance. Similarly, Zanele chose not to disclose her disability because she feared rejection, stating:

> No, I did not disclose to the college because I was scared that I [would] get rejected and it [would] stop me from achieving my goal.

These narratives suggest that the absence of clear institutional assurance regarding confidentiality discourages disclosure.

Conversely, some participants disclosed their disabilities during the online application, motivated by the expectation of receiving support. John noted: 'I chose to disclose my disability status to the college. It was a matter of wanting knowledge, wanting support.' Siya added that online disclosure felt less intimidating, as it did not require face-to-face interaction. Despite this, both reported limited follow-up from the institution. Siya explained:

> As I mentioned earlier, when I applied to the college, I indicated that I have a disability yet no one asked me [about] support or accommodation that I would need.

Other participants echoed similar concerns. Mary expressed disappointment because, although she had disclosed her disability online, the institution did not engage with her regarding suitable courses or accommodating her needs. She stated, 'I expected them to confirm that the course I chose [was] suitable for my disability first.' Zanele and Sipho also reported only receiving basic information about the programmes, with no disability-related guidance. Zanele explained, '[T]hey only told me the difference between NATED and NCV.' In other words, this was information about different qualifications that had no bearing on her particular needs. Sipho added that 'they only explained to me about the requirements of the courses they have'.

These findings reveal a pattern of minimal communication on the part of the college. While disclosure is required, institutions lack proactive engagement regarding career guidance, support and accommodating students with disabilities (McKinney & Amosun, 2020). This lack of follow-up not only undermines the purpose of disclosure but further complicates students' adjustments to college life, thus reinforcing exclusion.

Inadequate and poor infrastructure

The findings indicate that inadequate and poorly maintained infrastructure remains a major problem for the implementation of inclusive education in TVET colleges. Participants consistently highlighted the inaccessibility of physical environments, including the absence of ramps and elevators, inaccessible toilets and poorly designed pathways. These structural limitations restrict students' mobility and contribute to experiences of exclusion and marginalisation. This aligns with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2017), which notes that inclusive education is often undermined by physical barriers at institutional facilities.

Several participants described how outdated design of college buildings negatively affected their daily academic experiences. Sipho emphasised that the ageing infrastructure was not suitable for students with disabilities, which made movements between classes challenging. He advocated for structural adjustments to improve accessibility:

> The college has got old buildings which are not suitable for someone like me. … I'm struggling to move from one class to another between periods. … I would suggest that the classes must be at the ground level in order to accommodate the students with disabilities.

Similarly, Mary explained how the lack of elevators and long distances between classrooms caused her to arrive late:

> I struggle to arrive on time to classes, especially when they are far apart, or I have to go up the stairs because it's not easy for me to go up the stairs … there are no lifts at all.

John echoed these sentiments by highlighting the challenges posed by the college layout, explaining that navigating between distant classrooms required constant self-adjustment:

> I have to educate myself; it's a problem – it's a very, very big problem because you have to know the area, [your] distance … from class [to] class and all those things.

Siya also echoed these concerns, observing that the college environment failed to accommodate physical disabilities, particularly wheelchair users:

> Even when I got to the college, I could see that the infrastructure does not accommodate any form of physical disability. For example, there are no ramps for people with wheelchairs.

Zanele described how access to certain classrooms and cloakrooms was only possible via stairs, limiting both academic participation and campus activities. She also raised concerns about restricted access to designated disability facilities:

> The college does have a bathroom for people with disability, but the problem is it's always locked and it's only used by the lecturers … At the back of the classes, we have another block of classes where it is only accessible using stairs … Even bathrooms in the same floor, you must only use stairs to get in.

These findings demonstrate gaps in the implementation of inclusive policies, which undermines efforts to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities at TVET colleges. Furthermore, these infrastructural gaps reflect systemic neglect of the diverse needs of students with disabilities at TVET colleges. According to the UNDP (2017), inclusive education requires removing physical barriers through infrastructural investments to ensure equity, dignity and equal opportunities beyond mere policy compliance.

Academic and attitudinal barriers

TVET students with disabilities reported a range of academic challenges that negatively affected their learning experiences. These challenges were influenced by both environmental conditions and the attitudes of lecturers and peers. Negative attitudes, stereotypes and resistance to change remain key attitudinal barriers that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education at TVET colleges (Ntombela, 2020). Participants highlighted inaccessible learning materials, poor timetable management and inconsistent lecturer support as major academic challenges.

A recurring concern was related to the format of learning materials, particularly for the visually impaired. Amanda described her challenges with small fonts used in handouts and textbooks:

> The biggest challenge of all is in the classroom where I have to struggle with the font that is used most of the time. Printout work for us that is not in the right font for me. And having to read textbooks that have a very small font … I struggle to read, even with glasses.

Similarly, John explained how limited visibility affected his participation: 'I cannot see from the distance; I cannot rely on the board or anything that is written on the board'. Although some lecturers made efforts to enlarge text, this accommodation was not consistently applied. These accounts highlight how unsuitable learning-material formats and poor consideration of seating arrangements continue to disadvantage visually impaired students.

Poor timetable management also emerged as a significant academic challenge. Several participants described physical exhaustion and time pressure when moving between

classrooms located far apart within short intervals. Mary explained: 'If the lecture ends at 10 and the other one starts at 10, then I do not have enough time to move between the classes'. Sipho echoed this concern: 'I'm struggling to move from one class to another between periods … because there is not enough time'. Such scheduling practices fail to consider mobility needs and place additional strain on students with disabilities. Ntombela (2020) is of the opinion that poorly coordinated timetables may impede participation by limiting access to support services, accessible venues and reasonable accommodation of the needs of students with disabilities.

Inconsistent support from lecturers further compounded these challenges. While some lecturers were understanding and accommodating, others demonstrated limited awareness or empathy. Siya highlighted this inconsistency:

> Some give me notes. … Others even give me extra time … . However, since my condition is not really visible, some lecturers assume that I'm faking it and do not really provide much support.

He noted further that support appeared to depend on lecturers' willingness rather than obligation, leaving students uncertain about whether their needs would be met or not.

Amanda expressed similar frustration: 'Some lecturers will not print the right font, but there are other lecturers who will provide the good font'. *Z*anele, a partially deaf student, shared that her needs were often overlooked: 'They forget that I'm partially deaf … so I end up getting lost'. These experiences point to limited implementation of inclusive practices and to inadequate training in disability-related issues.

Sipho emphasised the role of ubuntu in shaping lecturer support, stating that accommodating their needs depended on whether lecturers demonstrated compassion and understanding. However, Zanele's view reflected broader institutional shortcomings, as she stated: 'No, they do not [accommodate] … because the college and the policies do not force them to do so'.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that academic challenges experienced by these students are intensified by systemic barriers that restrict their full participation in academic activities. Nkumane (2025) echoes these sentiments by stating that ineffective inclusive pedagogical practices reinforce academic barriers, restricting TVET students with disabilities from participating fully in teaching and learning.

Discussion

Research has consistently demonstrated that South African TVET students with disabilities continue to encounter challenges that impede their participation and success. In a study by Ntombela (2020), it was found that inadequate institutional support, inaccessible environments and limited lecturer capacity to implement inclusive practices remain a

major obstacle to inclusive education. Similarly, Sako (2020) and Mahlangu and Mtshali (2024) found that poor infrastructure and negative attitudes continue to hinder students' educational experiences in TVET colleges. The findings of the present study support these concerns, highlighting that the experiences of students are shaped by interacting personal, institutional and social factors.

Challenges in respect of career decision-making

One of the key findings was that participants' programme choices were shaped more by disability-related barriers than by their personal aspirations. Additionally, their educational choices were influenced by family advice, anticipated workplace challenges and a lack of disability-responsive career guidance, often requiring them to compromise their ambitions. The present findings corroborate those of Walton and Engelbrecht (2022), who emphasise that students with disabilities often experience restricted career opportunities owing to environmental and societal barriers rather than their abilities. These findings highlight the dynamic interactions between the microsystems and mesosystem, demonstrating how family expectations and institutional practices collectively shape students' educational pathways. The lack of career guidance that is responsive to disability further indicates how institutional support structures indirectly affect students' opportunities. As a result, students may enrol in programmes that do not align with their interests, potentially affecting their motivation, academic engagement and future employment opportunities. The findings of the present study emphasise the significance of strengthening inclusive career guidance services to ensure that students' aspirations are supported and reflect both their abilities and career ambitions.

Challenges relating to disability disclosure

Research suggests that disclosure should facilitate access to appropriate support services (McPherson, 2021) and that meaningful institutional engagement is crucial for promoting inclusion (Mckinney & Amosun, 2020). However, the findings indicate notable gaps in institutional disability-disclosure processes. Although institutions require students to disclose their disabilities during admission, the findings reveal that disability disclosure remains a significant challenge. The findings reveal further that disclosure does not necessarily translate to meaningful support and accommodating students with disabilities. Several participants were reluctant to disclose their disabilities because of fear of discrimination, stigma and breaches of confidentiality, while those who did disclose reported receiving little or no institutional follow-up, thereby undermining access to appropriate support.

Similarly, in a study by Ndlovu (2023), it was found that stigma continues to discourage students with disabilities from accessing available support. The lack of coordinated follow-up after disclosure suggests further that institutional processes often fail to translate policy commitments into effective support and reasonably accommodating students with disabilities. These findings also suggest that disability disclosure is treated as an administrative requirement

rather than as the first step to a structured support process. As a result, students remain uncertain about the benefits of disclosure, reducing opportunities for institutions to identify and respond to individual support needs. Therefore, TVET colleges should establish student-centred systems that foster trust and confidentiality, ensure timely communication, provide support and accommodating towards students with disabilities throughout students' educational journey.

Inadequate and poor infrastructure

Previous studies have consistently identified poor infrastructure as one of the most significant challenges to inclusive education at South African TVET colleges (Ndlovu, 2023; Sako, 2020). Similarly, the UNDP (2017) highlights that inaccessible physical environments restrict the ability of students with disabilities to participate equally in educational opportunities. Consistent with these studies, another key finding of the present study was the persistence of inaccessible infrastructure across the college. Participants reported that inaccessible classrooms, toilets and pathways, and the lack of ramps and lifts, restricted their mobility and participation in academic activities. These findings emphasise that inclusive education cannot be achieved through policy commitments alone while the physical learning environment remains inaccessible. Incorporating Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory into this finding demonstrates that students' learning experiences are shaped by the interaction between the individuals and the environment around them. These findings further highlight the significance of infrastructure planning that accommodates the diverse accessibility needs of TVET students with disabilities. Therefore, improving infrastructure should move beyond legislative compliance and become the priority of the institution that promotes participation and equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of their abilities.

Academic and attitudinal barriers

In studies by, Mahlangu and Mtshali (2024), Nkumane (2025) and Williams (2021), inaccessible learning materials, inadequate lecturer preparation and negative attitudes were identified as major challenges to inclusive education in TVET colleges. Consistent with these studies, another important finding of the present study is that participants experienced academic and attitudinal challenges that limited their participation in teaching and learning. Participants reported inaccessible learning materials, poor timetable management, limited classroom adaptation to different student needs and non-inclusive teaching practices, especially for those with hearing and visual impairments. Ntombela (2020) supports this notion by affirming that inadequate lecturer awareness and training result in inconsistent implementation of inclusive teaching practices, thereby limiting students' ability to fully participate in classroom activities.

In a study by McPherson (2021), it was found that, when lecturers are not adequately prepared to support diverse learning needs, students are more likely to experience challenges that undermine their academic success. Although some lecturers demonstrated empathy by providing enlarged font size in learning material and additional time for

activities, others failed to provide the necessary accommodation of the different needs of students with disabilities or questioned the legitimacy of students' disability. These findings therefore suggest that reasonable accommodation of the needs of students with disabilities often depends on individual lecturers' willingness rather than institutional policies and procedures. The findings thus underscore the need for continuous professional development in inclusive education in order to strengthen accountability and the establishment of disability support structures that ensure consistent implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices across all programmes.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, TVET colleges must strengthen disclosure processes by ensuring confidentiality and clear communication regarding available support services, along with proactive follow-up after disclosure. Second, TVET institutions should prioritise infrastructure improvements to remove physical barriers through provision of elevators, ramps and accessible facilities. Third, continuous and compulsory training in inclusive education and disability awareness should be offered to all lecturers to implement consistent and inclusive teaching practices. Finally, TVET colleges should strengthen accountability and monitoring mechanisms to ensure effective implementation of inclusive education policies. Addressing these challenges is crucial for creating equitable conditions and enabling TVET environments that can support the success of all students.

Conclusions

Research on the experiences of South African TVET students with disabilities remains limited, especially in relation to how institutional support and inclusive pedagogical practices influence their educational experiences. The present study has demonstrated that the challenges encountered by TVET students with disabilities are solely rooted in individual impairments but arise from interconnected institutional, environmental and systemic factors. Guided by ecological system theory, the study demonstrates how interactions with and across multiple ecological systems shape students' access, participation and success at TVET colleges. The findings indicate that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved through policy commitments only. Instead, it requires well-coordinated institutional responses that improve physical accessibility, provide continuous lecturer development and consistently adapt according to the needs of disabled students. The findings highlight the need for further research to explore strategies for embedding inclusive practices across diverse TVET settings and to examine the long-term educational and employment trajectories of students with disabilities. Although the study was conducted at a single TVET college in the Western Cape, its findings have broader implications for ongoing efforts in advancing inclusive education across South Africa's TVET sector. More broadly, the study provides evidence to support the development of institutional policies and practices that foster equitable learning environments where students with disabilities can fully participate and realise their educational and social potential.

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