Research Article

ERRCDF
Rethinking Education 4 Inclusive Development

Unpacking Disability Disclosure: Barriers, Enablers and the Lived Experiences of Students at a South African University

Emeldah C. Munjanja[1] (iD)
Eleanor A. Hendricks[2*] (iD)

AFFILIATIONS

[1]Social Work Department, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.
[3]Social Work Department, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: Ehendricks81@gmail.com*

DOI: 10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.1.17

Abstract: Disclosure of disability is critical for students with disabilities to receive necessary accommodations. However, some students opt to conceal their disability for several reasons, including the complexity of the disclosure process, fear, stigma, and more. As a result, these students may not receive adequate academic support, leading to poor performance and, in some cases, dropping out of university. The study aimed to investigate the enablers, barriers, and students' lived experiences of disability disclosure at a South African university. A qualitative study was conducted with an exploratory research design underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. Ten students with disabilities at a selected university were chosen through the snowball sampling method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Results revealed that students disclosed their disability due to personal motivation and growth, strong institutional support, previous positive experiences, and the need for accommodations. Conversely, reasons for concealment included the complicated disclosure process, fear of stigma, perceived irrelevance of disclosure, and the absence of a university disability policy. The study recommends that institutions simplify their disability processes, raise awareness about disability, and create a safe and supportive environment. The research contributes to existing knowledge by offering insights and guidelines to promote inclusive education in universities.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, disability disclosure, barriers, enablers, university.

1. Introduction

The number of students with disabilities (SWDs) attending university has steadily increased in recent years (De Cesarei, 2015). However, many students still choose not to disclose their disabilities, leading to underreporting and a lack of accurate data on this group's academic experiences. It is important to note that disclosure is not mandatory; students can decide whether to reveal their disabilities informally to peers and professors or formally through official accommodation requests (De Cesarei, 2015). While students must inform the Disability Unit (DU) to receive accommodations, they are not required to disclose the specifics of their disabilities to faculty (Tamjeed et al., 2021). Accommodations refer to modifications, supports, or adjustments made in educational, workplace, or social settings to ensure that individuals with disabilities can participate fully and equitably (Tamjeed et al., 2021). These accommodations may include assistive technology, flexible policies, accessible facilities, or tailored support services to remove barriers and promote inclusion (Tamjeed et al., 2021). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), disclosure is essential for accessing reasonable accommodations and ensuring equitable participation in education. Accommodations are key to the academic success of SWDs, and supported students are likely to succeed (Newman et al., 2019). Newman et al. (2019) also noted that when provided with resources and accommodations, SWDs can perform as well as their peers without disabilities. While disclosure is crucial for accessing accommodations as guaranteed by frameworks such as the UNCRPD (2006), it remains a deeply personal choice, with students

weighing the potential benefits of support against fears of negative consequences, including stereotyping and social exclusion (Mamboleo et al., 2020).

Disclosure can be both empowering and challenging, as it offers the potential for academic support and social integration and exposes individuals to risks of stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation (Grimes et al., 2019). The decision to disclose a disability is a complex choice that involves personal, social, and institutional factors. Individual factors such as a student's background, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, and personal disability identity can influence their willingness to disclose (Green, 2019). For instance, students who struggle to accept their disability are less likely to seek assistance (O'Shea & Kaplan, 2018). Furthermore, non-visible disabilities, such as learning disabilities and psychosocial disabilities, often present additional challenges in the disclosure process, as they are subject to stigma and misconceptions (Monagle, 2015). The likelihood of disclosure also varies by the type of disability. For example, students with learning disabilities are more likely to disclose than those with physical disabilities (Monagle, 2015), and those with multiple disabilities tend to seek more support (Newman & Madaus, 2015).

Moreover, some students found remote learning more accessible, while others struggled due to a lack of in-person accommodations and support (Lindsay et al., 2018). This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The shift to online learning during the pandemic exposed the possibilities and limitations of digital education for students with disabilities (SWDs). The pandemic highlighted the urgency of addressing the unique needs of SWDs and improving disclosure processes to ensure they receive the accommodations necessary for success.

Additionally, in the South African context, disability disclosure is further complicated by historical and societal factors, particularly the lingering effects of apartheid on education. South Africa's history of marginalisation has contributed to the widespread stigma surrounding disabilities, often associating them with physical or cognitive limitations (Green, 2019). This stigma shapes students' experiences in higher education (HE), making self-identification and disclosure difficult (Mutswanga et al., 2015). Fear of judgement, stigma, or marginalisation often prevents students from disclosing their disabilities, limiting their access to support services and negatively impacting their university experiences (Eccles et al., 2018). Institutional factors, including accessibility, faculty awareness, and campus climate, significantly facilitate or hinder disability disclosure (Green, 2019). In South African universities, financial barriers, accessibility challenges, and negative interactions with university staff may discourage disclosure. A lack of awareness about available services and accommodations exacerbates these barriers, creating further obstacles for SWDs (Dong & Lucas, 2016).

The experiences of students with disabilities (SWDs) in South African higher education reflect broader aspirations for inclusive education. South Africa's commitment to inclusive education aims to create an environment where SWDs can fully participate in academic and social life (Dong & Lucas, 2016). However, despite the growing number of SWDs in universities, many still face systemic and interpersonal discrimination. Systemic discrimination includes a lack of accessible infrastructure, limited resources, and policies that fail to support the needs of SWDs. In contrast, interpersonal discrimination often manifests as negative attitudes from peers and lecturers, who may harbour misconceptions about the abilities of SWDs (Mutswanga et al., 2015). These discriminatory experiences, both systemic and interpersonal, contribute to the challenges students face in disclosing their disabilities and accessing the necessary accommodations for academic success.

Conversely, when universities have a supportive institutional culture and clear support systems, students may be more likely to disclose, leading to improved access to accommodations and enhanced academic success (Mamboleo et al., 2020). Ultimately, the literature underscores that disclosure is not a one-size-fits-all action, and its success is contingent on the supportiveness of the environment, including institutional policies, faculty attitudes, and broader societal perceptions of disability.While a significant body of research exists on disability disclosure, this study aims to

contribute to the existing literature by exploring the barriers, enablers, and lived experiences of students disclosing their disabilities at a selected South African university. This study seeks to answer the following questions: What barriers prevent SWDs from disclosing their disabilities at a South African university? What enabling factors encourage SWDs to disclose their disabilities at a South African university? What are the experiences of students who disclosed their disabilities and those who did not? What are the perspectives of SWDs on how to improve rates of disability disclosure?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employed a Social Model of Disability theory primarily formulated by Michael Oliver (1983) and Tom Shakespeare (2006). The Social Model of Disability posits that disability is not solely an individual's medical condition but rather a result of societal barriers that prevent full participation in society (Shakespeare, 2006). According to this model, disability arises from the interaction between individuals and a society that is not designed to accommodate diverse needs. This framework challenges the medical model, which focuses on impairments and suggests that the solution lies in fixing or curing the individual. Instead, the Social Model advocates for a shift in societal attitudes, policies, and environments to ensure that people with disabilities can participate equally in all aspects of life (Oliver, 2023). The theory emphasises the importance of accessibility, social inclusion, and the removal of physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers.

The Social Model of Disability was employed to understand the enablers, barriers, and students' lived experiences of disclosure at a South African university. Thus, focusing on external barriers such as stigmatisation, inadequate support systems, and a lack of accessible infrastructure, the theory helps explain why students with disabilities (SWDs) may choose not to disclose their disabilities. Additionally, it aligns with the study's goal of unpacking how structural factors within South African universities, influenced by the legacy of apartheid and ongoing social inequities, contribute to the challenges of disability disclosure. Using Social Model theory, the study also explores students' lived experiences, shedding light on how systemic changes can be made to foster an inclusive and supportive environment and encourage students to disclose and seek necessary accommodations.

3. Methodology

The study explored the barriers, enablers, and students' lived experiences of disability disclosure at a selected South African university. A qualitative study was conducted using an exploratory research design, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm (Parker et al., 2019). This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of SWDs in the context of disclosure. A qualitative approach was chosen as it emphasises the deep exploration and understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals, institutions, or groups (Bansal et al., 2018). This methodology enabled the exploration of rich, detailed insights into SWDs' experiences and allowed for flexibility in capturing their diverse perspectives. Given the novelty of the topic, the exploratory design was well-suited to generate insights and lay the foundation for future research on the subject.

3.1 Population, participants and selection of participants

The population of this study comprised the SWDs from the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The researchers chose to conduct their study at the University of Fort Hare because it offers a unique academic and social environment that may influence disability disclosure differently than other institutions. Being based at the university provided the researchers with firsthand exposure to the experiences of students with disabilities, emphasising the need for an in-depth study on the factors influencing disclosure. Furthermore, conducting research at this university facilitated cost-effective data collection, as proximity to the institution reduced travel and logistical expenses. Consequently, the researchers were able to leverage their familiarity with

institutional structures, student experiences, and accessibility challenges, ensuring a well-informed and context-specific study.

Snowball sampling was used to sample ten SWDs aged 20-56 years at a selected South African university. Among the participants, six were male SWDs and four were female SWDs. Five SWDs disclosed their disabilities, while five did not. Snowball sampling enabled researchers to locate students who had not disclosed their disabilities to the university. As described by Parker et al. (2019), snowball sampling involves asking initial research participants to help identify and recruit other potential subjects. The researchers approached the Disability Unit of the selected university and requested SWDs listed in their registers. The Disability Unit then shared the researchers' contact information with students who were willing to participate. The students contacted the researchers via phone and email, and those who volunteered referred prospective participants to the researchers.

3.3 Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Kallio et al. (2016) highlighted the significance of developing such a schedule to ensure thorough data collection, thereby enhancing the research's trustworthiness. This format allowed the researcher to obtain more relevant information from the participants (Kallio et al., 2016). Due to impending exams, some participants opted for virtual platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp for their interviews, with some choosing video and others opting for audio-only due to privacy concerns. The benefits of online interviews included flexibility and accessibility, while challenges comprised technical issues and limited non-verbal communication. To address these challenges, additional time was allocated for interviews to tackle connectivity issues, and some participants were encouraged to use video when possible to enhance interaction. Two students were interviewed via Zoom, four participants were interviewed via WhatsApp calls, and four participants were interviewed face-to-face. The researcher conducted the interviews in English, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, and all participants were comfortable with being interviewed in English. These interviews were held in private settings suitable for each participant in the study. The primary researcher provided the participants with a detailed explanation of every facet of the study.

3.4 Method of data analysis and ethical considerations

Data from participants were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for structuring and examining data to extract insights (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis identified emerging themes following Martin's (2022) six-step process. First, interviews were transcribed and translated into English, with repeated readings and note-taking to enhance familiarity. Second, data were coded by identifying relevant segments aligned with the research objectives, transferring them to a Microsoft Word document, and marking them with distinct colours and descriptive notes. Third, coded data were grouped into themes, forming a thematic map with potential subtopics (Martin, 2022). Fourth, themes were reviewed to ensure alignment with coded data and overall findings, refining them until data saturation was reached (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Fifth, themes were defined and named through continuous analysis. Lastly, a report was produced, including a detailed discussion of the findings. The thematic analysis allowed the authors to explore in depth students' lived experiences by identifying recurring patterns and nuanced perspectives on the barriers and enablers to disability disclosure in a South African university context.

To ensure trustworthiness, four criteria were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was enhanced through careful planning and prolonged engagement. Transferability was ensured via non-probability sampling to select relevant participants. Dependability was achieved by comparing coding results for consistency, thereby strengthening the study's reliability (Nowell et al., 2017).

The study received approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Fort Hare. The ethical clearance number for the project is HEN031SMUN01, which was approved on 29th September 2023. Participation required full and informed consent in accordance with the ethical standards set by the Ethics Boards. Therefore, participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information about the study prior to consenting. The primary researcher made it clear to participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time if they wished. Participants signed the consent forms. The research adhered to strict confidentiality and anonymity guidelines. Privacy was ensured by conducting semi-structured interviews, with the exception of the research assistant present, for whom consent was obtained from each participant beforehand. Pseudonyms were employed to protect participants' identities. The researcher implemented strict data security protocols by password-protecting all stored data.

4. Presentation of Results

This chapter presents the study's findings, which were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The findings are provided in the themes developed during data analysis. Direct quotations from interviewees are also used to support the main themes. Four themes emerged from the findings and are presented below.

4.1 Theme 1: Enablers of disability disclosure

This theme discusses the factors that motivated SWDs to disclose their disabilities. The participants mentioned personal motivation and growth as key influences on their decisions to disclose. These elements have emerged as critical enablers for disclosure:

> *"I have a physical disability. Accepting who I am and being okay with it was part of my personal growth" (Participant 6).*

Another student expressed that she was influenced by her previous positive experience in high school, where she disclosed her disability to the school and received support.

> *"Where I did my high school, I disclosed that I have a physical disability, and I received unwavering support from my teachers" (Participant 8).*

Another student pointed out that previous positive experiences of others influenced him to disclose his disability.

> *"Other students shared their positive experiences, such as receiving adequate accommodations, emotional support, or access to resources, which made me feel that the university has our backs. I have a psychosocial disability" (Participant 7).*

Also, some students were influenced by robust institutional support systems. One participant who benefited from such a support system stated:

> *"We have staff members that are specifically assigned to help students like me. This made me comfortable to disclose my physical disability" (Participant 10).*

Other participants highlighted the pivotal role of positive interactions with lecturers and peers in influencing their decision to disclose their disability:

> *"My lecturer always encouraged me and told me to approach her if I needed help. I felt reassured knowing that someone in my academic environment was open-minded and understanding. My lecturer's general willingness to offer help and create an open, understanding environment made me comfortable to disclose to my university that I have a physical disability" (Participant 4).*

> *"My classmates accepted me like everyone else but quickly offered help when needed. I did not have to hide to them that I have a physical disability" (Participant 6, physical disability).*

Participants indicated that access to essential support services, such as extended exam time, assistive technologies, and note-taking assistance, encouraged them to disclose their disability.

> *"After realising the academic accommodations I could receive, like extra time for exams and access to lecture notes, I disclosed that I have a physical disability. Without these accommodations, I would struggle to keep up with my peers" (Participant 4).*

Participants identified key enablers for disability disclosure, including personal growth, self-acceptance, and past positive experiences. Hearing success stories reassured students like Participant 7, while institutional support, such as dedicated staff, played a crucial role. Positive interactions with lecturers and peers fostered a sense of belonging, as noted by Participants 4 and 6, while access to academic accommodations highlighted the practical benefits of disclosure. These findings suggest that a supportive university environment can significantly influence students' willingness to disclose.

4.2 Theme 2: Barriers to disability disclosure

The students identified various barriers that prevent them from disclosing their disability to their university. Some students reported that the institutional disclosure process often deters them because of its complexity and the intrusive assessments required to determine their eligibility for support.

> *"It feels like you are being interrogated just to prove that you have a disability. I have a physical disability, but they still want proof. That part of the process is discouraging" (Participant 1).*

Some students expressed that one of the key factors discouraging them from disclosing was fear of negative academic consequences. The participants mentioned the following:

> *"I have partial vision impairment. I heard stories of students excluded from opportunities because their lecturers did not want to deal with what they saw as 'extra work.' It is better to be on my own" (Participant 2).*

> *"I have a physical disability. There is this stigma attached to disclosure, and I do not want to risk my grades and reputation" (Participant 9).*

Students indicated that one reason they chose to conceal their disabilities is stigma. Some students mentioned that if they disclose their disabilities, they might be viewed as lesser students by their lecturers, while others fear it could threaten their future employment.

> *"I have a partial impairment. I am afraid that if I disclose my disability to my lecturers, they might see me as less capable or assume that I cannot keep up with the work even though I can" (Participant 2).*

> *" I have a physical disability. I fear that if I tell the university, somehow, this information could follow me when I apply for jobs "(Participant 3).*

Participants indicated that they concealed their disabilities because they believed that these did not significantly affect their academic experience and that they could manage independently.

> *"I have a physical disability, and I have always managed independently. My disability does not affect my studies" (Participant 3).*

> *"I think it is not necessary to disclose my disability. Although I have a physical disability I have learned to work around it, and it has not been a problem for me academically" (Participant 9).*

Students highlighted the detrimental impact of the absence of a university disability policy, emphasising that without clear guidelines for protection, they felt compelled to hide their disabilities.

> *"I have a physical disability. The university does not have a disability policy, and it makes it uncomfortable for me to share my challenges. I feel there is no formal process to do so" (Participant 1).*

> *"I have a physical disability, and I worry that disclosing my disability could lead to discrimination or stigma since there is no university disability policy in place to advocate for our rights" (Participant 5).*

Participants identified several barriers to disability disclosure, including a complex and intrusive process, fear of academic consequences, and concerns about stigma affecting grades and future employment. Some participants, such as Participants 3 and 9, felt that disclosure was unnecessary because their disabilities did not impact their studies. In contrast, Participant 5 highlighted the absence of a university disability policy as a significant deterrent. These findings reveal key institutional and social factors that discourage disclosure.

4.3 Theme 3: Experiences of students based on disability disclosure

Both students who disclosed and those who did not disclose their disability expressed their academic and social experiences. Students who disclosed their disability expressed the following:

> *"I have a physical disability. Disclosing my disability was the best decision ever. When I need extra time during exams, I am given. The Disability Unit helps me stay on track academically, and I can see my grades improving" (Participant 4).*

> *"I have a psychosocial disability. Disclosing my disability gave me a sense of relief because my lecturers and classmates are more understanding. However, I have noticed that some people started treating me differently, like I need extra time all the time, even when I did not" (Participant 7).*

> *"I have a physical disability. The university helped provide necessary accommodations when I disclosed my disability. However, I do not like that sometimes when I need something from my lecturers, I must follow up multiple times" (Participant 10).*

On the other hand, students who did not disclose their disabilities also expressed the following:

> *"I have a physical disability. I did not disclose my disability and am struggling to keep up during lectures, and my grades are decreasing" (Participant 5).*

> *"I have a physical disability. I opted not to disclose my disability. Socially, I blended in, but it is tough to keep up. Sometimes I need assistance, but I feel uncomfortable asking, which makes me feel isolated sometimes" (Participant 3).*

> *"I have a partial vision impairment. I did not disclose my disability, and sometimes I struggle and wish I get extra time during exams" (Participant 2).*

> *"I have a physical disability. I am struggling mentally; I get frustrated because I am managing without formal help. It feels like I am fighting a battle alone, taking a toll on my well-being. If I gather my courage, I may disclose to my university" (Participant 1).*

Participants had varied experiences based on disclosure. Those who disclosed, such as Participant 4, benefited from academic support, while Participant 10 found accommodations helpful but frustrating to secure. However, Participant 7 noticed a change in how others treated them. Non-disclosing students faced challenges; for instance, Participant 5 struggled academically, and Participant 3 felt socially included but unsupported. Participant 2 wished for exam accommodations but hesitated to disclose, while Participant 1 struggled mentally without help. These findings highlight the trade-offs of disclosure and the need for stronger institutional support.

4.4 Theme 4: Participants' perspectives on how to improve rates of disability disclosure

After each interview, the researcher inquired about how the university should tackle barriers to disclosure for students. All the students provided different suggestions based on their understanding and the experiences they have gone through on campus. As found in this study, some of the participants' recommendations indicate that universities should simplify the disclosure process and provide continuous support post-disclosure. Three participants expressed the following:

> *"When I first considered disclosing my physical disability, I was hesitant because I did not know where to start. I think the university should have clear steps and ongoing support to make it easier for us to disclose our disabilities" (Participant 8).*

> *"I have a physical disability. There were too many forms. Knowing that my information is safe and will be protected would help me feel more comfortable" (Participant 10).*

> *"I have a physical disability. I felt like I was on my own after disclosing my disability. I received initial support, but no one followed up to check if the accommodations worked for me. Continuous support should be given" (Participant 4).*

Two participants expressed the need for staff training to foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, which would help alleviate students' fears and encourage them to seek the accommodations they require. They explained the following:

> *"I have a physical disability. If lecturers were trained to understand that having a disability does not mean you are less capable, more students like me would feel comfortable disclosing" (Participant 9).*

> *"I have a physical disability. I was scared that my academic performance would be judged differently if I asked for accommodations. If the lecturers were better trained, I think they would be more understanding and less likely to treat us differently" (Participant 1).*

Some of the participants' recommendations highlight the need for universities to raise awareness of disability among both staff members and students without disabilities. They expressed the following:

> *"I have a physical disability. The university should have campaigns to raise awareness and clarify that we can get help without judgment" (Participant 6).*

> *"I have a physical disability, and I think if more counsellors and services were available where you could talk without fear of being exposed, it would make a huge difference. The university should make us feel safe to come forward, maybe through awareness campaigns and proper support services" (Participant 3).*

In this study, students recommended that universities create platforms where peers can share their success stories, highlighting the benefits of disclosure. Participants explained the following:

> *"I have a partial vision impairment. I always thought my disability was not severe enough to mention, so I never disclosed it. If universities allowed more students to talk about their experiences, it could help students like me reconsider the importance of disclosure" (Participant 2).*

> *"I have a physical disability. I did not think it was necessary to disclose because my disability does not affect my ability to learn. Maybe if I had heard other students talk about how disclosure helped them, I would have been more open to it" (Participant 1).*

Participants recommended that universities develop disability policies. Their input highlights the need for institutional disability policies. They elaborated on the following:

> *"I have a physical disability. I am not even aware of my rights in this institution. Unlike other universities, there is no disability policy here. The university should do something about formulating the policy" (Participant 3).*

> *"I have a physical disability. There is no clear disability policy here. I do not feel comfortable disclosing because I do not know if I will be protected. The university should have a policy that specifically advocates for our rights. I think many students would come forward, including me" (Participant 9).*

Participants recommended simplifying the disclosure process, ensuring confidentiality, and providing continuous support. Suggestions also included training lecturers to reduce bias and raising awareness through campaigns and counselling services. Participant 2 emphasised the value

of sharing success stories, while Participants 3 and 9 stressed the need for a formal disability policy. These insights highlight the necessity for structural and cultural changes to effectively support SWDs.

5. Discussion of Findings

A thorough analysis of the themes in this study uncovered the factors that influence SWDs in their decision to disclose or conceal their disabilities at a selected university in South Africa. These findings align with existing literature while also contributing new perspectives relevant to the ongoing research and discourse on disability disclosure.

5.1 Disclosure of disability

A significant finding from this study is the complex interaction of institutional, social, and personal factors that shape the decision to disclose a disability in higher education. The findings resonate with Kilpatrick et al. (2016) in that, while legal frameworks mandate reasonable adjustments, the inconsistent application of these policies across institutions is a critical issue. However, this study further argues that merely complying with legal mandates is insufficient; universities must create an inclusive environment that facilitates the seamless integration of accommodations into everyday academic practice. This perspective aligns with the Social Model of Disability, which emphasises the importance of addressing structural barriers rather than focusing solely on the individual.

The role of institutional culture and prior experiences with support systems cannot be understated. The study highlights that when students with disabilities (SWDs) perceive faculty members and peers as supportive, they are more inclined to disclose their disabilities. This reinforces the argument that a welcoming institutional climate is just as crucial as the availability of accommodations (De Cesarei, 2015; Mamboleo et al., 2018). Additionally, institutional support structures, particularly Disability Units, emerged as instrumental in facilitating disclosure. SWDs who engaged with these units reported improved academic performance and an enhanced sense of belonging. This corroborates Dong and Lucas's (2016) findings, which illustrate that engagement with Disability Units improves SWDs' understanding of available services and fosters self-awareness about their disabilities and their impact on academic progress. Thus, universities must foster inclusive cultures that view disclosure as a pathway to equity, requiring a shift toward structural adjustments, inclusivity, intersectionality, and ongoing accountability to empower SWDs to disclose without fear of marginalisation.

5.2 Non-disclosure of disability

The reluctance to disclose a disability is a complex issue deeply connected to institutional policies and societal attitudes. The study revealed how bureaucratic and financial barriers within university disclosure processes hindered students from disclosing their disabilities. This finding reinforces Kelepouris' (2014) argument that the financial burden placed on SWDs to obtain documentation for their disabilities exacerbates inequities. Additionally, stigma and fear of discrimination were significant barriers to disclosure, particularly for students with psychosocial disabilities. Through the Social Model of Disability, the study challenges the individualising approach that assumes non-disclosure is purely a personal decision, instead framing it as a response to systemic barriers that need addressing.

Moreover, stigma and fear remain formidable obstacles preventing disclosure. The persistent stigma surrounding disability fuels students' anxieties about being perceived as inferior or incapable, with potential ramifications for their academic and professional futures. Terzieva et al. (2016) illustrate how students with disabilities sometimes perceive themselves as undeserving of accommodations, reflecting a broader societal issue where disability is framed as an individual deficit rather than a structural issue requiring systemic intervention. This study found similar sentiments, with some

participants expressing that others needed support, justifying their decision not to disclose. This internalised ableism underscores the urgent need for universities to reframe disability accommodations as a right rather than a privilege.

Another key issue identified was the absence of comprehensive disability policies at the university. While the Department of Higher Education and Training (2018) mandates such policies, the lack of a dedicated disability policy at the selected university reflects institutional neglect. This finding is consistent with Moriña (2020), who argues that the absence of policies reflects an institution's failure to meaningfully engage with the needs of SWDs. The study highlights that, without clear and comprehensive policies, universities fail to create a supportive environment where disclosure is seen as a positive and necessary step, not a risky decision. The consequences of this neglect are far-reaching, manifesting in inadequate physical accessibility, insufficient faculty training in inclusive pedagogy, and limited awareness of the unique educational needs of SWDs (Collins et al., 2019). Without robust policy frameworks, universities inadvertently sustain environments where disclosure remains a high-risk decision rather than an avenue for necessary support.

5.3 Experiences of students based on disability disclosure

The experiences of SWDs who disclosed their disabilities and those who did not were explored. The students in this study indicated that they received support from their institutional support systems (DU and SCU) after disclosing their disabilities. This finding corroborates the work of Mamboleo et al. (2020), which demonstrates that disclosure facilitates access to necessary academic support, leading to better academic outcomes. Similarly, Lindsay et al. (2017) found that students who disclosed their disabilities received necessary accommodations and performed better academically. The students reported that disclosing their disabilities helped them improve their academic performance as they began receiving support from their university.

Mamboleo et al. (2020) argued that withholding disclosure limits access to essential academic support, increasing the risk of failure. Additionally, disclosure is pivotal in fostering a sense of belonging (Fleming et al., 2017). In this study, students who chose to conceal their disabilities reported struggling academically due to a lack of support that specifically addresses their needs from the institution. As a result, they experienced feelings of loneliness. According to Fleming et al. (2017), feelings of loneliness and social exclusion significantly predict academic performance and persistence. However, if non-disclosing students experience heightened social isolation, it may not be solely due to their decision to withhold disclosure, but rather the failure of institutions and student communities to foster genuinely inclusive spaces. Therefore, instead of positioning disclosure as the primary solution, efforts should focus on normalising disability and dismantling attitudinal barriers that create a divide between students who disclose and those who do not. This aligns with the Social Model of Disability, which emphasises the need to dismantle societal and institutional barriers to ensure that all students, regardless of their disclosure status, have an equal opportunity to thrive. Rather than focusing solely on encouraging disclosure, the study calls for efforts to normalise disability and address the underlying attitudinal barriers that create divisions between students who disclose and those who do not.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlighted the complex interplay of barriers and enablers that contribute to the decision of SWDs to disclose their status at a selected university in South Africa. The findings indicated that personal motivation, strong institutional support systems, and previous positive experiences of students who disclosed their disabilities are factors that influence students to disclose. Conversely, fear and stigma, perceived irrelevance of disclosure, the absence of a disability policy, and fear of negative academic consequences hinder students from disclosing their disabilities. Furthermore, a comparative analysis revealed that those who disclose benefit from greater institutional support. It

is recommended that universities address these barriers by simplifying the disclosure process, offering ongoing support, and formulating a disability policy. Such actions can significantly contribute to an inclusive higher education experience where students feel empowered to participate fully and openly.

In light of these findings, several recommendations emerge:

- The study recommends that universities streamline the disability disclosure process by reducing administrative burdens, such as excessive paperwork and intrusive assessments. Clear guidelines and step-by-step procedures should be developed to ensure that students can disclose their disabilities with ease and confidence. Awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate both students and staff about disabilities to eradicate stigma and foster an inclusive academic environment.
- Universities should formulate and implement a formal disability policy that outlines students' rights, available support structures, and institutional commitments to inclusivity. The policy should be widely communicated and easily accessible to ensure that all students are aware of their rights and the support available to them.
- Future research should explore the enablers, barriers, and disclosure experiences of students with disabilities across multiple South African universities to understand institutional differences in support structures and policies.

7. Declarations

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

References

Bansal, P., Smith, W. K., & Vaara, E. (2018). New ways of seeing through qualitative research. *Academy of Management Journal, 61*(4), 1189–1195. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26528897

Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 10*(6), 807–815. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019

Collins, A., Azmat, F., & Rentschler, R. (2019). 'Bringing everyone on the same journey': Revisiting inclusion in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 44*(8), 1475–1487. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1450852

De Cesarei, A. (2015). Psychological factors that foster or deter the disclosure of disability by university students. *Psychological Reports, 116*(3), 665–673. https://doi.org/10.2466/15.PR0.116k26w9

Department of Higher Education and Training. (2018). *Strategic policy framework on disability for the post-school education and training system.* https://www.wrseta.org.za/downloads/Disability%20Strategy.pdf

Dong, S., & Lucas, M. S. (2016). An analysis of disability, academic performance, and seeking support in one university setting. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 39*(1), 47–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143413475658

Eccles, S., Hutchings, M., Hunt, C., & Heaslip, V. (2018). Risk and stigma: Students' perceptions and disclosure of disability in higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 20*(4), 191–208.

Fleming, A. R., Oertle, K. M., Plotner, A. J., & Hakun, J. G. (2017). Influence of social factors on student satisfaction among college students with disabilities. *Journal of College Student Development, 58*(2), 215–228. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0016

Fossey, E., Chaffey, L., Venville, A., Ennals, P., Douglas, J., & Bigby, C. (2015). Supporting tertiary students with disabilities: Individualised and institution-level approaches in practice. *Research Report.* National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd.

Green, J. (2019). Effects of institutional factors on college students' self-disclosure of disability status and their utilisation of disability services (Doctoral dissertation, University of Miami).

Grimes, S., Southgate, E., Scevak, J., & Buchanan, R. (2019). University student perspectives on institutional non-disclosure of disability and learning challenges: Reasons for staying invisible. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23*(6), 639–655. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1442507

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 72*(12), 2954–2965. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031

Kelepouris, C. (2014). Transitioning students with disabilities into higher education. *BYU Education & Law Journal, 24*(1), 27–39.

Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., Barnes, D., McLennan, D. S., Fischer, S., & Magnussen, K. (2016). *Exploring the retention and success of students with disability.* University of Tasmania. https://hdl.handle.net/102.100.100/495707

Lindsay, S., Cagliostro, E., & Carafa, G. (2018). A systematic review of barriers and facilitators of disability disclosure and accommodations for youth in post-secondary education. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 65*(5), 526–556. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2018.1430352

Mamboleo, G., Dong, S., & Fais, C. (2020). Factors associated with disability self-disclosure to their professors among college students with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 43*(2), 78–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143419893360

Martin, R. (2022). *"Action, comrades action": Social movement learning and knowledge generation in the anti-apartheid struggle during the decade of resistance 1980–1990.* Lancaster University.

Monagle, K. (2015). *Beyond access: An examination of factors that influence use of accommodations by college students with disabilities.* Northeastern University.

Moriña, A., Perera, V. H., & Carballo, R. (2020). Training needs of academics on inclusive education and disability. *SAGE Open, 10*(3), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020962758

Moser, A., & Korstjens, I. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European Journal of General Practice, 24*(1), 9–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091

Mutswanga, P., Makoni, E., & Chivasa, N. (2015). An analysis of stories of people with disabilities who experienced stigma in Pentecostal denominations in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Economic and Business Review, 3*(2), 173–181.

Newman, L. A., & Madaus, J. W. (2015). An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by postsecondary students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 36*, 208–219. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932515572912

Newman, L. A., Madaus, J. W., Lalor, A. R., & Javitz, H. S. (2019). Support receipt: Effect on postsecondary success of students with learning disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 42*(1), 6–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143418811288

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1), 1609406917733847. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Oliver, M. (2023). The social model of disability. In V. E. Cree & T. McCulloch (Eds.), *Social work* (pp. 137–140). Routledge.

O'Shea, A., & Kaplan, A. (2018). Disability identity and use of services among college students with psychiatric disabilities. *Qualitative Psychology, 5*(3), 358. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000099

Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). *Snowball sampling*. SAGE Research Methods Foundations.

Shakespeare, T. (2006). Disabled people's self-organisation: A new social movement? In L. Barton (Ed.), *Overcoming disabling barriers* (pp. 63–79). Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02674649366780261

Tamjeed, M., Tibdewal, V., Russell, M., McQuaid, M., Oh, T., & Shinohara, K. (2021, October). Understanding disability services toward improving graduate student support. In *Proceedings of the 23rd International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and accessibility* (pp. 1–14). https://doi.org/10.1145/3441852.3471231

Terzieva, B., Dibiasi, A., Kulhanek, A., Zaussinger, S., & Unger, M. (2016). *Zur Situation behinderter, chronisch kranker und gesundheitlich beeinträchtigter Studierender.* Projektbericht Research Report.

United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf