

Allow Us In And Handle Us Well: Lived Experiences Of Differently-Abled Students Of A Selected Ghanaian TVET University

¹Ramos Asafo-Adjei, ²Ronald Osei Mensah, and ³Joseph Mensah-Oti Asirifi

¹Ramos Asafo-Adjei

Communication Technology Department, Faculty of Media Technology and Liberal Studies,
P. O. Box 256, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi, Ghana

²Ronald Osei Mensah

²Social Development Department, Faculty of Media Technology and Liberal Studies, P. O. Box 256, Takoradi Technical University,
Takoradi, Ghana

³Joseph Mensah Oti-Asirifi

Directorate of Public Affairs, P. O. Box 256, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi, Ghana

Abstract

This research utilized a phenomenological approach grounded in the interpretivist framework to examine the academic and social experiences of students with disabilities at a Ghanaian Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) university. Through targeted sampling, 20 detailed interviews were carried out with students at Nhyira Technical University, recognized as one of Ghana's foremost institutions for admitting and graduating students with disabilities. Thematic analysis conducted with NVivo software uncovered a complex blend of resilience, inclusivity, and systemic obstacles. The results indicated that although participants shared positive experiences related to hands-on learning, peer support, and encouragement from individual lecturers, their academic paths were greatly affected by challenges, including a lack of sign language interpreters, exclusion from collaborative work, biased attitudes, and insufficient access to educational resources. Many experienced emotional and social challenges, especially during their transition to university life, expressing feelings of loneliness and being stigmatized. Support systems such as counseling and teaching modifications were discovered to be erratic and inadequate. However, peer connections, practical internships, and informal emotional assistance from lecturers were identified as crucial coping methods. Participants offered actionable suggestions such as university-wide sign language training, inclusive instructional strategies, increased availability of interpreters, enhanced counseling services, and better educational facilities. These findings underscore the critical need for institutional changes within Ghanaian TVET universities to promote inclusive education. Addressing these deficiencies through systemic, communicative, and pedagogical enhancements can improve the academic and social welfare of students with disabilities, ensuring equitable involvement and success in vocational and technical education. The study urges a stronger commitment to disability inclusion policies in higher education.

Keywords: Accessible Vocational Training, Disability Support Services, Equity in TVET, Inclusive Technical Education, Interpreter-mediated Learning

1. Introduction

The global discourse on inclusive education has grown increasingly complex, shifting from basic concerns about access and integration to broader issues of equity, social justice, and systemic transformation. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have played a pivotal role in this evolution. The CRPD rejects deficit-based views of disability and advocates for educational systems that accommodate the diverse needs of all learners (Abrahams et al., 2023). In higher education, this imperative is especially pressing, as universities are charged with preparing future leaders and professionals who can drive inclusive societal change. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) universities have a distinct role in this mission. With their emphasis on practical skills and employability, these institutions can be powerful engines for social and economic inclusion (Mefful et al., 2024; Gomda et al., 2022). When TVET institutions are inclusive, they empower differently-abled students to actively participate in the workforce and contribute meaningfully to national development. However, the realization of this potential is hindered by numerous systemic barriers.

In Ghana, policies such as the Persons with Disability Act signal a commitment to inclusive education (Abrahams et al., 2023). Nonetheless, differently-abled students continue to face significant challenges in higher education. These include inaccessible infrastructure (Ador, 2019), attitudinal discrimination (Amoah et al., 2023), and inadequate support services (Nieminen et al., 2024). For those in TVET institutions, the challenges are further compounded by the hands-on nature of training, limited resources, and the intersection of disability with other forms of marginalization (Attakora-Amaniampong et al., 2021). This study addresses a critical gap by exploring the lived academic and social experiences of differently-abled students in a Ghanaian TVET university.

2. Objectives

By shedding light on these issues, this study aims to answer the questions:

- a. What are the lived academic and social experiences of differently-abled students in a selected Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) university in Ghana?
- b. What barriers (physical, attitudinal, institutional, or technological) do differently-abled students face in accessing and succeeding in TVET education?

- c. How adequate and responsive are the support systems (e.g., teaching strategies, learning facilities, counselling services, and peer relationships) provided to differently-abled students in the selected TVET institution?
- d. What practical recommendations can be proposed to enhance inclusive practices and policies for differently-abled students in Ghanaian TVET institutions?

3. Methodology

This research utilized a phenomenological research design to investigate the lived academic and social experiences of students with disabilities at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) university in Ghana. Phenomenology was chosen because it effectively reveals the profound, subjective meanings tied to the participants' lived realities (Qutoshi, 2018; Teherani, 2015). The study was situated within an interpretivist framework, positing that knowledge is shaped through social interactions, language, and collective understanding (Myers, 2009; Pulla & Carter, 2018). The site of the research, which is referenced with a pseudonym as Nhyira Technical University, was intentionally selected because of its commendable history of enrolling and graduating students with disabilities. Out of a total population of 39 such students, 20 were purposely chosen to take part in in-depth interviews. Ethical approval was secured from the university's research directorate, and informed consent was acquired from each participant. Most interviews were facilitated with the help of two certified interpreters, as the majority of participants were deaf. These interviews took place in a quiet, private setting on the university's campus and lasted around 35 minutes each. Data were recorded and transcribed word-for-word, with participants verifying them to ensure their accuracy. Thematic analysis was performed using NVivo software, applying both open and axial coding to identify themes that were predetermined as well as those that emerged. The reliability of the coding process was enhanced through collaborative discussions among the researchers. Although formal approval from an ethics board was not required due to the anonymized nature of the data, the study complied with strict ethical standards. Confidentiality for participants was upheld through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, with participants being informed of their right to withdraw at any moment without facing any repercussions.

4. Results

Academic and Social Experiences of Differently-Abled Students

Theme 1: Transition from SHS to University

Participants described the transition from Senior High School (SHS) to the university as largely positive. The TVET institution offered more learning alternatives, advanced practical learning, and an enabling environment compared to SHS. Students appreciated the hands-on nature of vocational education and the support of lecturers in practical sessions.

“Coming to the university, I’ve seen changes... There are so many alternatives for us.”

Theme 2: Academic Engagement and Support

Students actively participated in class and practical lessons, often seeking help when needed. Vocational activities like sewing and design were found to be inclusive when materials were provided and instructors were hands-on.

“We did a fascinator in class... the lecturer guided us and I was able to do it easily.”

Theme 3: Social Integration and Peer Relationships

Though initial interactions were challenging, especially for deaf students, many eventually formed supportive friendships. Hearing peers often provided informal help, such as translating, explaining lessons, and learning sign language in return.

“Hearing people mingle with me... they type, write or show me how things are done.”

Theme 4: Emotional Well-being and Self-Confidence

Many students reported feeling comfortable and confident within the university, citing supportive faculty and non-discriminatory practices as key reasons.

“The lecturers did not discriminate... it made me happy and also boosted my confidence.”

Theme 5: Negative Experiences and Emotional Struggles

Despite some success stories, students also shared deep challenges. These included initial isolation, lack of peer acceptance, mockery from hearing students, and feelings of being visibly different.

“People don’t like me... they mock me... they don’t select deaf people during games.”

Barriers to Access and Success in TVET Education

Theme 1: Interpreter Shortage and Communication Breakdown

The most recurring barrier was the unavailability or inconsistency of sign language interpreters. This directly impacted students’ academic comprehension, especially during lectures.

“Sometimes there are no interpreters during lectures... we are given assignments, but it’s difficult to understand.”

Theme 2: Social Exclusion and Digital Disconnection

Deaf students were often excluded from group work and communication platforms like WhatsApp, where information was usually shared via voice notes or audio messages.

“The hearing student will just be sending audio into the group... this makes us late for class.”

Theme 3: Discrimination from Hearing Students

Students recounted being stigmatized, mocked, or left out during class and practical sessions. Many expressed that hearing peers avoided them due to communication gaps or prejudice.

“Some hearing people think we are of no value... they lie on deaf people.”

Theme 4: Faculty Bias and Lack of Inclusive Pedagogy

Some lecturers were described as dismissive or inattentive, grouping students by ability or failing to communicate effectively during lessons.

“Lecturers focus on the hearing students only... some group the deaf people separately.”

Theme 5: Inadequate Tools and Unsafe Training Conditions

Participants, especially those in technical fields like welding and fashion, highlighted a shortage of training equipment, safety gear, and accessible tools tailored for physical limitations.

“Because of my legs, I can’t use the industrial sewing machines... There are no manual ones.”

Theme 6: Infrastructure and Classroom Limitations

Basic learning infrastructure was lacking- students reported inadequate chairs, classrooms, and relaxation areas, impacting their participation and comfort.

“Some students stand till class ends... There are few places to sit during leisure.”

Theme 7: Financial and Family Constraints

Many students came from underprivileged backgrounds, lacking funds for food, learning materials, and healthcare.

“My parents are not well-to-do... life is a little bit hard... we don’t get proper care.”

Adequacy of Institutional Support Systems

Theme 1: Interpreter Services

Interpreter services were praised when available, but criticized for being too few and irregular. Students requested more specialized interpreters trained in their academic fields.

“They are not enough... some lecturers don’t cooperate with the interpreters.”

Theme 2: Counselling Services

Formal psychological support was minimal. Though some lecturers provided emotional guidance, structured counselling was inconsistent and mostly unavailable.

“We need counselling... it will help boost our confidence and support us emotionally.”

Theme 3: Positive Instruction and Lecturer Support

Certain lecturers were commended for encouraging students individually and providing academic and moral support.

“My lecturers advise me not to follow bad friends... learn hard and become better.”

Theme 4: Gaps in Teaching Methods

There was a strong call for lecturers to adopt inclusive teaching techniques, such as using visuals, simplifying speech, and learning basic sign language.

“They just speak and leave... they need to use visual representation.”

Theme 5: Peer-Led Inclusion

Support from hearing peers emerged as a valuable informal resource, with many students forming learning partnerships and cultural exchanges.

“They write it down for me... I also teach them sign language.”

Theme 6: Access to Learning Materials

Students lacked access to critical resources, from laptops to specialized equipment and manuals. They expressed the need for institutional support in this area.

“I need pattern books, laptops, and counselling... we don’t know how to keep up with trends.”

Theme 7: Disability Awareness and Training

Participants suggested that sensitization programs be instituted to educate hearing students and staff about inclusion and respectful engagement.

“When we sign, hearing people think we are insulting them... awareness is needed.”

Theme 8: Support During Industrial Attachment

Some students had positive experiences during internships, especially when supervisors were informed and made accommodations.

“I went with my dad to inform them I am deaf... they wrote things down for me.”

Practical Recommendations for Greater Inclusion

Theme 1: Promote Sign Language Literacy

A common suggestion was to train all university staff and students in basic sign language to foster inclusion.

“Inculcate teaching of basic sign language for everyone.”

Theme 2: Raise Disability Awareness

Students emphasized the importance of educating the broader student population on how to interact respectfully and supportively with differently-abled peers.

“Educate hearing students on how to treat the hearing impaired.”

Theme 3: Expand Interpreter Services

The need for more interpreters—especially subject-specific ones—was strongly highlighted.

Institutional Recommendation: “Increase availability and consistency of interpreters.”

Theme 4: Train Lecturers in Inclusive Pedagogy

Lecturers should be trained to use visual aids, speak clearly, and adopt disability-friendly instructional strategies.

Institutional Recommendation: “Use visual representation and slower speech.”

Theme 5: Improve Learning Resources and Equipment

Students requested more accessible tools and materials for practical courses, including manuals, laptops, and alternative machinery.

Institutional Recommendation: “Provide practical tools for deaf and physically challenged students.”

Theme 6: Expand Counselling and Emotional Support

Participants called for regular access to professional counselling services for stress management, academic planning, and personal well-being.

Institutional Recommendation: “Expand counselling services.”

Theme 7: Foster Inclusive Social Events

Joint social programs were recommended to reduce isolation and build friendships between deaf and hearing students.

“Organize tours and activities to help us engage and interact more.”

5. Discussion of Findings

This study examined the academic and social experiences of students with disabilities at a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) university in Ghana, focusing on the obstacles they face and the effectiveness of the support provided by the institution. Participants had a positive view of their transition from Senior High School to

university, valuing the improved accessibility and teaching approaches, which resonates with the findings of Garg et al. (2024) and Alshutwi et al. (2020), who stress the importance of inclusive designs and assistive technologies in achieving better results for students with disabilities.

Nevertheless, communication issues remained, particularly due to the inconsistent availability of sign language interpreters, revealing shortcomings in the 4As framework of inclusion (Naidoo et al., 2024). According to symbolic interactionism, communication failures contribute to stigma and marginalization (Carter & Fuller, 2015), although support from peers and reciprocal learning can promote informal inclusion (Quist-Adade, 2019). Conflict theory places these challenges within the context of systemic inequalities, highlighting the disparities in resources and economic difficulties that impact students (Saroj & Dhanju, 2019; Li et al., 2024). The lack of sufficient counseling services further undermines student well-being, in contrast to the recognized need for mental health support (Makibinyane & Khumalo, 2021). Instances of stigma and discrimination align with Hardini et al. (2022), while conflict theory emphasizes how social hierarchies diminish the institutional status of students with disabilities (Mishra, 2013).

Although some forms of institutional support are available, they are irregular, leading to recommendations for systemic enhancements, including an increase in interpreters, faculty training, and awareness programs (Altaf et al., 2023). The industrial attachment program showed that raising awareness externally can improve inclusion. In summary, this research confirms that true inclusion necessitates comprehensive reforms addressing social interactions, resource distribution, and power dynamics, highlighting the need for investment in professional support, inclusive teaching, and assistive technologies to fulfill the potential of students with disabilities in TVET education. Students with disabilities at a Ghanaian TVET university saw better access to educational resources but encountered significant obstacles such as sporadic availability of sign language interpreters and insufficiently adapted equipment (Garg et al., 2024; Naidoo et al., 2024). Despite some level of peer support, social stigma and discrimination persisted (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Hardini et al., 2022). Financial challenges and a lack of counseling services further obstructed their success (Li et al., 2024; Makibinyane & Khumalo, 2021). Institutional support was irregular, leading to requests for more interpreters, faculty training, and awareness initiatives (Altaf et al., 2023). Positive experiences during external industrial placements illustrated that inclusion is achievable when organizations are adequately informed. Reliable interpreter services, adapted resources, professional counseling, and disability awareness are essential. Inclusion must tackle both material and social challenges to fully unlock the potential of students with disabilities in Ghanaian TVET institutions.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights the intricate academic and social experiences of students with disabilities at a Ghanaian Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) university, revealing a blend of supportive elements and ongoing difficulties. Although students appreciate hands-on learning opportunities and some assistance from peers and instructors, they encounter obstacles such as communication issues, insufficient interpreter services, a lack of adapted resources, and biases that impede full integration. The findings emphasize the necessity for strong structural supports, including ongoing counseling, qualified interpreters, and inclusive teaching methods, while advocating for institutional changes such as enhanced disability awareness and sign language training. To advance beyond mere symbolic inclusion, the TVET must bolster support services, enhance facilities and faculty readiness, and promote a culture of respect to ensure authentic equity and participation.

7. Acknowledgments

Authors are very thankful to the differently-abled students who availed themselves for this study, the interpreters, and all other persons involved in making the interviews and this paper a reality.

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