



## **Disability, Ability and Productivity: A Personal Experience in Moi University, Kenya**

Yungungu Alice  
Moi University, Kenya

**Email Address:** [aliceyungungu@yahoo.com](mailto:aliceyungungu@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*Kenya's 2019 census report indicated that 0.9 (2.2%) million people of the country's population are disabled with at least 36% having visual, hearing, and cognition impairments. However, lack of rehabilitation therapies, limited access to education and socio-economic limitations have often prevented the disabled from receiving equal opportunities to fully participate in the country's workforce. Environment is a key factor in human development. It is even more so to a physically challenged person. As a Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate student with visual impairment at Moi University, I sought to look at the environmental circumstances in the institution and how they influenced my self-driven character and unquenchable thirst for success. This article is therefore based on experiential explanation. It is based on my own experiences as a student with visual impairment. The paper unveils how disability combined with unfriendly environmental circumstances, motivated me to develop a positive attitude towards life. Possible solutions to these circumstances that were put in place by Moi University making me a strong inspiration in my academic and social success will be discussed. The paper further makes recommendations on how Moi University can create an enabling environment not only for the ordinary, but also with particular interest for the visually impaired students. It is hoped that awareness created through this paper will encourage Moi University and other institutions of higher learning to create a more conducive learning environment for the visually impaired students. This will enable such students to unwrap their hidden potentials knowing that disability is not inability.*

**Keywords:** Visually impaired, Disability, Environment, Braille and Adaptive Technology, Productivity, Inclusion

### **INTRODUCTION**

Individuals living with disabilities in Kenya are at a disadvantage of access to equal opportunities as well as participation in societal development. This according to Kabare is brought about by the restrained access to education to enable them build skills, lack of rehabilitation and counseling services and, the political and socio-economic challenges (Kabare, 2018).

In its definition, the Academy of Certified Counselors (ACC) refers to disability as a lack of or any form of restriction (resulting from an impairment) of one's ability to execute an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being (ACC, 2018). In particular, with focus of this paper, visual impairment is considered as the loss of one's ability to see even when the person wears corrective lens (Maindi, 2018). Nevertheless, Maindi emphasizes that all students and children in regular schools should take medical assessments to establish the level of visual impairment to determine their needs for use of optical devices. Notably, majority of the

Visually Impaired (VI) students in regular schools are yet to receive medical examination or be trained on how to appropriately use optical devices (Maindi, 2018). Olmstead (2005) in his study observes that visual impairment makes less effective the vision of affected children hence adversely affecting their performance in education. This outcome brings forth the need to understand how disability relates to productivity as depicted in a personal experience in this paper.

Productivity in this paper is defined by the words of Merriam Webster in whose opinion, measures human work as an integral part and a means to an end. Productivity is therefore 'the quality or state of being productive' (Webster, 2019). This paper thus follows a narrative of the author of what constitutes disability and productivity based on a personal experience while a student at Moi University. The author thus uses an ethnographic approach to research hence narration is reported using the first-person point of view. According to Sharma and Sarkar (2019), the Ethnography approach explains one's life history in a qualitative manner and is also longitudinal in nature. It is also worth noting that the strength of an Ethnographic study dwells in the observation of natural behavior that is experienced in real life settings (Best & Khan, 2002).

In the context of this paper, I was not able to comfortably interact, learn and enjoy my life in Moi University during my undergraduate studies as a visually impaired student. Ability is the power or capacity to do something (Webster, 2019). As used in this paper, ability refers to how Moi University empowered me socially, academically and psychologically as a visually impaired student. Productivity on the other hand refers to the positive manifestations of what one is able to do which in this paper is attributed to my achievements after being empowered.

Bianquin and Bulgarelli (2016) observe in their study that disabilities are diverse in nature and occur in different types including visual and hearing impairments, sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, psychosocial disabilities as well as intellectual disabilities. Nevertheless, in each of these cases, individuals often seek to understand their abilities in order to know what best they can do and how they can achieve their maximum productivity. Therefore, for every form of disability, there is a range of connected; particular needs that if met, productivity of individuals living with disabilities can be maximized. For instance, in the case of this study, people with VI need unique attention and use of assistive technologies and devices such as Braille to enhance their communication. Otherwise, the variation in the circumstances of disabilities may impact on an individuals' development and abilities to be productive (ILO, 2007a). Therefore, when considering the issues associated with productivity of people living with disability, it is crucial to shun homogenization and stereotyping and instead acknowledge the diverse nature of disabilities and their differing impact on individuals.

Moi University (MU) is one of the public Universities in Kenya. It was founded by the second president of Kenya His Excellency the late Hon. Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi, in 1984 (Kiboii, 2013). Since its inception, MU had not been admitting visually impaired (VI) students until 1990 when I became the first Joint Admissions Board (JAB) student with visual impairment in the institution. Initially, all the VI students admitted by the then JAB in Kenya, would be absorbed at Kenyatta University (KU) which had a well-developed unit for the visually impaired. However, in this year, KU declined to absorb the VI students from other universities. This change compelled all the public universities to admit and support students with visual impairment notwithstanding the fact that they were unprepared. Such were the circumstances that saw me become the pioneer of the VI students in MU.

As a student, the environment in MU was not only academically unfriendly but also socially and psychologically hostile. This paper therefore gives an analysis of the unfriendly environmental circumstances that I faced while undertaking my studies. The challenges have been categorized into academic, social and psychological. Efforts to solve the challenges by Moi University are also discussed and way forward provided as depicted in the works of Okoli and Onyema (2013).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It has widely been acknowledged that people living with disability are not a homogeneous group. Like any other population, the identities of the disabled individuals, their needs and personal situations are determined by various factors among them, age, gender, location, personality, education, color and ethnic group as well as their family, class, sexual orientation and religion. Therefore, disability is simply another human diversity dimension, a normal part of human experience. According to Gilbert (2007) and Powers (2008), disability in the society may be experienced by anyone in society at some point in their lifetime. Recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the particular circumstances that may bring about disability also vary and can therefore influence an individuals' development as a potential worker and their ability to be productive (ILO, 2007b). Notwithstanding, the productivity of the people living with disabilities is fundamental both in developed and in developing economies. It is for this reason that appreciable attention particularly by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has been given to human and fiscal impacts of excluding people with disabilities (ILO, 2007b).

Thomas and May (2010) also opine in their study that the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has embraced and developed inclusivity in institutions of higher learning in order to improve on equality, participation and diversity that would consequently enhance students' retention and success through a series of change programs, research, events and publications. Elsewhere, the study conducted by Hindle, Noble and Phillips (2000) under the assumption that the average productivity levels would depict varying results for disabled workers and those without any disability, showed no significant discernible differences. The study was carried out to investigate selected work-performance data in a big call centre. Their research established that there was a significantly better performance by workers with disabilities, a finding that strongly rebuts the 'intuitive wisdom' that disabled workers are less productive.

### **Challenges Faced as a Visually Impaired Student**

#### **Social challenges**

Before I embark of these challenges, it is proper to point out with reference to the works of various scholars in whose opinion, the social identity and potential of students in higher institutions of learning should be recognized. This will enable the students use their newly found social capital for economic, national and social development (Lopez, 2009; Morley; 2012). Since the social potential of students with VI encourages their feeling of independence, they will be able to participate meaningfully in their education and lead independent lives after graduation (Clayton et al., 2010).

Negative attitude from students was one of the unfriendly circumstances that I found myself in, when I joined MU. Most of the students, whom I expected to be friendly, started it off by exhibiting an attitude that simply said: 'you do not belong to my social space'. Majority of them had neither seen nor interacted with a VI person in their lives.

To most of them, I was simply misplaced. Some of them, would loudly wonder –a blind person in the university? Doing what?! My disability seemed to create so great a rift between me and other students that tension was quite evident at all levels of our interaction. A few of them would be willing to assist me while majority treated me as a bother. It has been said that one can only choose friends but not neighbors. To me this was not true. In my case, my disability could not allow me to choose true friends since no one was willing to freely associate with me. There is a proverb that says: ‘birds of the same feather flock together’. However, the opposite is hardly mentioned. It is then that I realized being the only VI student; I had to bear it all alone.

In as much as institutions of higher learning are considered as centers where people of all diversities meet, socialize and make friends, some who end up becoming life partners, I was denied this opportunity, not because I did not want but because no matter how much I tried I could not find any willing person to trust me as a friend. This meant that I would only have casual friends who would merely be described as acquaintances. I had to struggle living as an island so close to the mainland yet separated by my disability. As a VI student, mobility was a serious challenge in the new environment. As mentioned earlier, I had no real friends hence getting someone to take me out to the offices for consultation or just for leisure was quite difficult. Accessing medical services at the University’s health facility was a major challenge due to lack of means of transport to the facility which was a few kilometers away from the hostels. Some of the hostel officers were intolerable to my frequent calls for assistance. My need for special attention in the hostels where I would be allocated specious rooms was an unnecessary burden in their line of duty. My request for fair services in the cafeteria due to the queuing system then, was even a greater problem.

### **Academics challenges**

In any academic institution, consultation is fundamental and a way to help students gain knowledge and skills through teaching and learning. Clayton et al. (2010) opines that consulting is a very useful model that can be adopted in every instructional setting based on the needs of students (Clayton et al., 2010). Institutions of higher learning for instance ought to employ full-officers or advisers of students with impairments so as to consistently give assistance to the students at all times (McCarthy & Hurst, 2001). In particular, as it is a legal requirement for students with VI to be given mobility training and orientation from specialist mobility officer and it is advisable that such training should be continued throughout the students’ university life.

Besides the social circumstances, were notably the academic challenges that directly frustrated my academic dreams. As earlier mentioned, the institution was academically unprepared to handle VI students and I was to come to terms with this unpreparedness in actual learning. At the time of my admission to MU, there was no single Braille book on the shelves of the university library. This in effect locked me out from my academic right of accessing content from books. In essence, it was a violation of my academic rights as a bona-fide student in the institution. The only option left was to seek the assistance of colleagues to audibly read to me. However, as indicated earlier in this paper, I could not get reliable assistants and so was the case with reading. The few friends I would get would only read to me at times of their convenience. This had far-reaching effects as it subjected me to unfair competition with my classmates since we would eventually take the same examinations. In a study conducted by Agesa (2014), it was found that the visually impaired students’ academic performance was in deprived state such that the students were faced with the challenge of being unable to understand the academic concepts as well as in taking their assignments and examinations as required due to lack of special needs teacher. Another challenge was

that the university did not have even a single Braille machine. It is true to say that for what a pen is to an ordinary student is what a Braille machine is to a visually impaired one. To emphasize on this, Zelalem (2018) posits that for visually impaired students to meet their academic needs, there should be specialized services and equipment to facilitate the same. The use of Braille materials and books and specialized technological equipment is necessary to ensure effective competition with their peers in regular classes. It goes against all logic to place a visually impaired student in a class without a Braille machine and Braille writing papers and expect him or her to listen and learn. They can simply not make notes to revise later, yet this was the helpless situation I found myself subjected to. The effect was that I could only listen and try to comprehend as much as possible during class time. As it is commonly said in academic corridors, the lecturer only gives 30 per cent, yet in the circumstances I could hardly get that. I would resort to seeking assistance from colleagues most of whom were never willing to assist with notes let alone reading to me.

In the lecture rooms, lecturers were at a loss on how to assist me especially in courses that involved mathematical calculations. Information written on the white boards was not useful to me if the lecturer failed to read it out loudly or spell out loudly. This situation would compel me to sit in front of the lecture room to act as a constant reminder to them, though many still did not notice me. Though sitting in front presented itself as a favor, it was isolation and discrimination in disguise. When sited among students while using the Braille machine, some of them would complain that the machine was too noisy. Therefore, sitting in front was good riddance. As depicted by Ghafri (2015), visually impaired students are faced with the challenge of speaking and listening as the students rely on auditory data. It is therefore inevitable that I would have learned without the help of the Braille machine which appeared to be an issue to most students in the class.

Unavailability of professional staff to help the VI students was yet another major hurdle in my academic life. The institution had not employed Braille transcribers who would be handy in assisting the visually impaired students. This meant that I could not access both the transcribed copies of the lecturers' handouts and books hence I was unable to read them on my own. In addition, most lecturers would conduct their classes oblivious of my presence or my inability to read from the whiteboards further worsening my situation. This was more evident with those who tended to write on the boards more than talk. It would take my efforts on countless times to remind them to at least spell names and difficult terminologies. In addition, the university lacked adaptive technology for the VI students. In other words, there were no computers with JAWS software which is tailor made for use by the VI persons. The effect was that I had to depend on others for my research and term papers.

### **Psychological challenges**

Psychologically, during my academic life in Moi University, I had my own fair share of psychological problems whose effects were troubling. At this point, it is important to note that at that time there was no popular campaign for the rights of persons living with disability as it is today. The society then was less accommodative of such people than it is now. The effect was that I lived in an environment that rudely reminded me of my disability and how different I was from others. This was basically stigmatizing. Although I had fought this at all other levels of my academic ladder, I found the same challenge yet again in MU.

In addition, my loneliness immensely contributed to my psychological problems. I not only lacked true friends but also lacked somebody sharing the same challenge as

myself. Being the only visually impaired student in a community of thousands of people, I felt misplaced and isolated. I always felt I should have been in Kenyatta University (KU) where my colleagues were. According to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2010), a multitude of the educational hindrances associated with visually impaired students is negativity brought about by self and other individuals. As with society in general, stereotyping and negative attitudes stem from understanding and knowledge of this group of people. The attitudes of the teachers for special needs education particularly for the visually impaired majorly limit their educational process (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). Given the circumstances that I found myself in, stress was inevitable. It was at this time that I went to the brink of committing suicide. Whenever I would find myself in the thick of things, suicide would often present itself as a friendly solution. On this particular day, I was alone in my hostel room and I reasoned it was time to relieve myself of life and its cruelty. I was going to do it, then came the planning. Ironically, the very disability which led me to that decision is the one that saved my life. I suddenly realized that I needed someone's assistance to do it. I could not get a rope or poison by myself and even if I got the rope, I could not hang myself since I would need someone to tie it up for me. For once, I felt so bitter that my disability could not even allow me to end my life. It is for the very reason I am alive today.

### **Remedies**

This section addresses some of the suggested solutions which either resolved or abated the challenges earlier discussed. A careful scrutiny of the challenges mentioned above reveals that, devastating as they are, they can be contained to enable persons with disability and more, so the VI students run their lives normally in institutions of higher learning.

#### **Remedies for social challenges**

The guidance and counseling office under the Dean of students' affairs should have counseling sessions with students. In these meetings, the counselors should emphasize on the importance of helping the VI students in reading, mobility in the hostels, cafeterias and the health facilities. This was to my advantage because to some extent it worked. As earlier on indicated, the hostel officers could not understand the fact that due to my disability, I required a spacious room given the bulk of my materials and the challenge of mobility. They were rather ignorant of that need and therefore needed to be informed or trained on. However, it took a lot of effort to explain to them and eventually I succeeded. I was allocated a spacious and convenient room in an easily accessible hostel. I also stayed with only one roommate who would assist me in most of my activities.

In addition, accessing services at the cafeteria was a big challenge, unlike now; public universities used the queuing system where all students were expected to queue for serving. This was before 1991 when the cost-sharing policy was introduced (Kiboiy, 2013).). Being a VI student, this process proved torturous enough, yet the concerned officers had difficulties understanding my situation. It however took a lot of effort to explain to them, an issue which was always humiliating to me. In the long run, they understood my need and would have me wait at a table from where I would be served together with the other challenged students.

As noted earlier, this was the first time; MU was admitting a VI student. It is therefore worth noting that, during my undergraduate studies in this institution there were no sensitization/awareness campaigns about students living with disability in the wider MU community.

### **Remedies for academic challenges**

Lecturers who are key in determining the classroom environment have a big role to play. This paper has already highlighted the challenges I faced in the classroom. Most of the lecturers would only write on boards. This would subject me to difficulties especially with calculations and drawings in courses involving such. My concerted efforts of talking with the concerned lecturers bore fruits to the effect that, they began organizing some remedial classes for me. This made things easier for I would grasp concepts that would have been otherwise difficult to understand. However, not all the lecturers were able to organize remedial classes. Throughout my undergraduate studies, I took it upon myself to notify the lecturers of my presence in the lecture halls. This was so especially in courses whose lecturers had never taught me. This was quite hectic and disturbing. Further, there was still a gap in the provision of Braille textbooks in all the courses throughout my undergraduate studies. My take would have been that key textbooks in all the courses to be transcribed into Braille. This would have enabled me to comfortably undertake my studies and even be able to fairly compete with the sighted students.

Towards the end of the second month of my first semester in first year, the university employed two Braille transcribers, and this came as relief in my studies. Earlier on, it was impossible to read on my own but then I could read the Braille versions of handouts given out by lecturers and textbooks. This enabled me to do my assignments without difficulties. Worth a great mention in this paper also, is the access to Braille machines that was initiated later in my studies. If an ordinary student without a pen and a writing material can walk into a class and effectively learn, then a visually impaired student can learn without a Braille machine. The purchase of Braille machine by the University made learning easier and efficient as I could then take notes for my private revision.

It was also a new era for me as I could interact with professionals who understood me. For the first time, I felt I could now have colleagues in my life in MU; this completely revolutionized my academic life in the institution. With these major developments, my academic life was no longer at the mercies of well-wishers as before. Psychologically, I too found some solutions which immensely boosted my impetus for pursuing the dreams of my life.

### **Remedies for psychological challenges**

Initially, my life was never stable, at least in my heart. As stated in this paper, I was an object of stigma and the effects were not negligible. My mind was a theatre that played tragedies; high in spirit this moment, only to tumble to the lowest levels the other minute. This too was not without a remedy for this is the time when my spiritual life grew to great heights. I reasoned that, if there was God, he was to be the only friend and true friend and this I believe he did. I believed God was my shepherd (Psalms 23:1) and that he would never leave nor forsake me (Hebrews 13:5). I took him for my shepherd to lead me beside quiet waters and have me lie down in green pastures. As I walked in the thick of things, I believed He was there for me (Psalms 23:1-2). I reasoned that He created me to be the head and not the tail (Deuteronomy 28:13) and that he would finish the good work he began in me (Philippians 1:6) (New International Version, 1978/2011).

The Christian Union meetings were all I longed for. Whenever I could attend these meetings, my troubles left, and my heart grew lighter and optimistic. For once I would feel human as the voice of sweet melodies hung in the air before vanishing high above.

The challenge was that these moments would only last minutes and immediately I would be out and the reality of life would rudely hit back. It is as if the agents of doom would wait by the door side to capture their captive once again. The guidance and counseling sessions were highly therapeutic to my psychological problems. When no meeting was taking place at the chapel, the chaplain and counselors in the Dean of Students' Office were my alternative. Their counsel was extremely instrumental to my life throughout my undergraduate studies.

### **Achievements**

Notably, against all unfriendly circumstances in my environment, I beat all odds to succeed. It is worth noting that most of the environmental challenges discussed in this paper far from discouraging me, inspired me to fight on to my academic success. Academically, I was able to undertake my undergraduate studies successfully. This later on encouraged me to pursue masters and doctoral degrees in the same university. Moreover, owing to my academic success, I have become a role model not only to the ordinary students but more so to the VI students.

I have created awareness about persons with disability and especially the VI in MU and in the community at large. Through speeches and academic papers, I have spearheaded awareness campaigns on the rights of persons with disability within and outside the country. I have also in particular sensitized parents with challenged children to develop a positive attitude towards them for disability is not inability. My academic success has earned me a noble job as a full time lecturer in Moi University in the School of Education, teaching and supervising curriculum studies at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I am also a member of the university's Disability Mainstreaming Committee. Finally, today I have achieved the status of being the first VI lady holder of Doctor of Philosophy in Kenya.

### **CONCLUSION**

While there are many VI persons who would have academically achieved like me or even better, it is regrettable that this has not been the case. Although MU has had tremendous achievements in making better the social and academic environment for the visually impaired students, they still encounter major bottlenecks in their academic life. If the discussed challenges are fairly dealt with, the endowments locked up in these persons can be harnessed. This talent and potent will revolutionize every sector of the economy in the country. This change could ultimately bring the paradigm shift much-needed in Kenya and the world as pertains to the equality of the Visually Impaired (VI) vis-à-vis the rest of the human race.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper makes several recommendations that if adopted will give VI students a more conducive environment to effectively exploit their natural endowments. Although the plight of persons with disability and more so the visually impaired is not as it was two decades ago, this paper highly recommends that a lot more should be done.

More awareness should be done to have people become more friendly and ready to assist the VI. The results would be tremendous if the challenged would be given a friendlier social environment. In order for the new VI students to have good working knowledge once they are in MU and its environs, the management of the university together with the guidance and counseling department under the dean of students'

office, should organize specific orientation sessions for the VI students. Here, they would be able to deal with their specific concerns.

The disability mainstreaming committee deals with issues of people living with disability in the university. It ensures that their concerns are well taken care of as per the MU Disability Policy. The information in the policy should be made available to all the newly admitted students living with visual impairment. This would be an eye opener to them on what the institution has for them.

The staff and students in institutions of higher learning need to be sensitized on living with persons with disability and more so the VI persons as fellow humans equally created and enabled. The VI should not be stigmatized for whatever reasons.

In the lecture rooms, lecturers should be sensitive to the presence of the VI students and make adjustments to accommodate them. They should deliver much of their content orally and/or by giving handouts instead of writing on the boards. Further, the university should occasionally organize for refresher courses for all the academic staff where they could be empowered with basic knowledge on how to teach learners with disability. Additionally, key reference materials in all the courses should be made available in Braille. If there are no books in some courses, then the University should start a work study program whereby ordinary students would be requested to volunteer to assist the VI students in reading the printed reference materials. The university would in return give them a token of appreciation.

There should be occasional curricula reviews to ensure that different curricula especially those that involve statistics are modified to suit the VI students. This can be done with the help of lecturers in special needs education.

Institutions with VI students should also employ sufficient staff to handle such students. MU in particular should for instance employ more transcribers and computer personnel to assist the visually impaired students to achieve their academic goals. The institution should purchase sufficient learning and teaching equipment including Braille machines, Braille writing papers and adaptive technology for use by the VI students.

If productivity in general is a measure of how resources are efficiently used, then it should be ensured that there is optimal use by people living with disability as a labor market resource.

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