

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students need more support from their universities: South Africa study

May 21 2024, by Tonny Nelson Matjila



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Adjusting to university life tends to be tough no matter who you are. But what happens when deafness makes the usual demands even more difficult? Deaf students or those who are hard of hearing need extra accessibility measures to ensure they're able to participate in even basic academic activities like lectures and tutorials. Tonny Matjila, who [studied the experiences](#) of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students at one large South African university, tells The Conversation Africa what he learned.

How many Deaf and hard-of-hearing students are enrolled in South African universities?

We do not have accurate statistics for students who are Deaf and hard of [hearing](#) in higher education in South Africa. It is known that less than 1% of the [student](#) population has disabilities, with no real distinction between [visual impairment](#), hearing, mobility issues and so on.

Statistics for the population are easier to come by: the country's 2011 Census reported that there were [more than 4 million](#) deaf or hard-of-hearing people in the whole country; the figures were nearly identical in the [2022 Census](#).

Many students in tertiary institutions choose not to disclose their hearing challenges because they worry about how people might react.

Of course this fear isn't true for all students who have hearing-related difficulties. Some identify as proudly Deaf, using the capital "d" because they don't see themselves as disabled. Instead, their challenge is a [language barrier](#) because they speak South African Sign Language rather than a verbal language.

What was the purpose of your research?

This study built on [previous research](#) I'd conducted to understand deaf students' experiences in higher education.

Here, I was evaluating the [support services](#) for students at one university. I wanted to know what support was offered to deaf students and to find out whether they were using these services.

I sent questionnaires to just more than 100 students who were deaf or hard of hearing, as well as 123 staff members. I also interviewed eight students and 11 staff members.

What did the participants tell you about their experiences?

Some of the participants used [assistive devices](#) like hearing aids or [cochlear implants](#). Some had the use of just one ear; others were profoundly deaf.

My interviewees felt abandoned by the university. In all cases, they had identified themselves as deaf or hard of hearing when they registered. The institution admitted them knowing that they had hearing challenges. But then, the students told me, they were left to fend for themselves without the support they were promised. For example they couldn't benefit from career counseling, funding and tutoring opportunities and internships.

It's not that these services don't exist. But students weren't given follow-up information about where to find them. Students who sought out services found there were language barriers. There were no sign language options, nor was there anyone who spoke their home languages

if they had some hearing ability.

Students were unable to participate in online events like tutorials, lectures or events. Where slides were used, there were no captions or sign language interpreters.

This led to feelings of exclusion and isolation. One respondent told me:

"People who hear have everything they need; we depend on the interpreters, we are not catered to, and it is lonely."

The students told me that the university developed, planned and implemented interventions for them without consulting them. They wanted to be involved in solving their own challenges.

The staff members I interviewed didn't know how to assist students who were deaf or hard of hearing. They usually referred these students to the university's disability unit, which has sign language interpreters on staff. But while interpreters can help with basic language issues, most find it difficult to interpret academic terms from lectures.

The staff tried to communicate through notes on paper. Deaf students found this stressful.

What can be done to improve students' experiences?

Though my research focused on one university, the problems I've identified are hardly unique.

It's clear that the country's [policy framework](#) on disability for post-school education and training, introduced in 2018, is not being taken seriously or enforced by institutions and that the department of higher education and training isn't monitoring how it's being applied (or not).

There are ways to improve the situation.

First, universities should review their language policies, especially now that Sign Language has been made the country's 12th official language.

It could, for instance, become official policy at the institution that staff must learn South African Sign Language, or that universities must employ far more interpreters than they currently do.

Communication channels should be made accessible, too. Universities should provide sign language interpreters, real-time captioning, and other assistive technologies to give deaf and hard-of-hearing students access to lectures, seminars and other academic activities. Visual or audio learning material should include captions, transcripts and other alternative formats.

There needs to be specialized academic support: tutoring services, study skills workshops, and academic advising tailored to the specific needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. This will help them navigate the challenges of [higher education](#) and achieve their academic goals. The curriculum should be developed with the students and not for them. This would allow alternative tests, assignments and exams without compromising university standards.

Also, universities should actively engage with the broader Deaf community, collaborating with Deaf organizations such as the [Deaf Federation of South Africa](#) to promote cultural events and activities that celebrate Deaf culture and foster a sense of belonging for students.

Lastly, it is essential for universities to provide internship opportunities and job placement to help deaf and hard-of-hearing students make the transition to the workforce. In that way, they will see the value of completing their qualifications.

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