



SUPPORT: Having a disability is not just about someone who might be using a wheelchair or crutches to move about, or having a guide dog to assist with arriving safely at a place. Disabilities are much more diverse, the writer says. PICTURE: LEON LESTRADE

Disabilities a chance to celebrate our diversity

Embrace opportunity to think more holistically about one another

EVERY year on the first Friday of September, South Africans from all walks of life celebrate Casual Day to raise funds for and create awareness about people with disabilities. Together with other campaigns aimed at improving the lives of these people, Casual Day shows that society is increasingly becoming more responsive to acknowledging that people with disabilities are like others – they just happen to have a disability, too.

Having a disability is not just about someone who might be using a wheelchair or crutches to move about, or having a guide dog to assist with arriving safely at a place. Disabilities are much more diverse.

For example, many people have health difficulties, which include mental health challenges such as debilitating depressive disorders or neuro-developmental disorders that can become quite disabling at times. Such disabilities are rather silent, as one cannot visibly see them. It is this diversity in disability that we are celebrating on Casual Day.

The importance of recognising diversity in disability and striving to be truly inclusive of people with disabilities was also something that I tried to address in my recent doctorate in psychology at Stellenbosch University (SU). The study specifically reflected on the experiences of SU staff who support students with disabilities as well as on

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students' understanding of the support received at the university. It also examined practices of inclusion and exclusion from the perspective of people with disabilities.

Interviews with staff across campus revealed a clear understanding that diversity and disability are intertwined. For example, one staff member said: "Diversity does not refer only to colour, it also refers to disabilities... the designated groups... in addition to ethnicity and gender, and there is a disability category. So if we talk diversity, we also talk disability."

Staff who engaged with students with more diverse disabilities gained a better understanding of the disability and how best to support the student. Their experience of support was enriched with new knowledge which they could then use as part of the subsequent academic support for that particular student.

This also encouraged and gave other staff members the confidence to support students and engage further with their disability. As one staff member noted: "We learn out of experience from our current students. If we accept a student, each year there are challenges. We have a student this year who sits with a camera in class... he must focus on the board and the camera zooms in on the board, and then on a screen in front of him and he can see what is there... But if I get such a student next year again, then I will know how I will manage such a student – which bench or which seat I will typically reserve for such a student... but because we have a bit of experience of what happened this year or what happened last year, we try to bear this in mind and do a bit of forward planning."

What my study also highlighted was that some students face ongoing struggles regarding the impact of less visible disabilities on the academic functioning. One student said: "In general, people on campus are not accessible if your sickness is not observable. I struggle much with my studies and have missed classes and tutorials as a result of circumstances."

Another student commented: "My disability prevents me from studying late at night, given

that sleep is needed to prevent attacks. Sometimes I get attacks created by flickering lights, too little sleep, a broken down immune system... and this makes it difficult to attend classes and to write tests. My chronic migraines that I also experience resulted in my missing lectures recently."

What these accounts show is that there is diversity in disability.

That is why the 2017 Casual Day theme, "Celebrating Diversity", is so significant. This theme aims to open our minds to the diverse ways in which disability is represented in society and how we respond to this, (sometimes) unwittingly, by disregarding and not fully understanding the severity of functioning in different contexts. It also wants to remind us of how society is sometimes disabling us and actually the cause of disability.

We should embrace Casual Day as a chance for us to think more holistically about each other and the different and unique ways we function in this world. It's a good opportunity for us to show that we are serious about the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in all spheres of society.

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