**Stellenbosch University**

**POLICY REGARDING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS/DISABILITIES[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

**Approved by Senate: 25 November 2011**

**“… *in the South African context a social model perspective involves recognizing, understanding and addressing disability as a human rights and development issue, where the key principles such as the non-discrimination and equity entrenched in our Constitution are appropriately applied to the experiences of disabled people in this country” (Council on Higher Education, p. 3***).[[2]](#footnote-2)\*[[3]](#footnote-3)\*

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1. **Background and the current state of affairs**

In 1994, Stellenbosch University appointed an *ad hoc* committee to investigate the accommodation of persons with disabilities on campus (Rossouw, 2005). This process, up to the establishing of the Advice Forum for Students with Disabilities in 1997, is explained in full by Rossouw (2005).

As of 1 January 2006, the services for students with special learning needs/disabilities has resided under the Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD).

Up to now the official policy regarding students with special learning needs/disabilities (SU, 1997) has directed the advisory role of the Advice Forum and basic service delivery to such students. The definition of disability, in terms of the previous policy, was based on the obsolete medical model of diagnostic entities. (See Brand (2005) for an explanation of the different approaches to defining the concept disability.The main limitation in the previous process of service delivery to students with special learning needs/disabilities at the University was therefore the result of its decentralised nature.

**2. Legislation and the National Plan for Higher Education**

Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution (1996)¹, the Bill of Rights, guarantees fundamental rights for all South African citizens. This includes an equity clause, as well as the right to freedom from discrimination, based on a number of social criteria. Discrimination based on disability is one of these criteria. Thus, the Bill of Rights explicitly states that an individual may neither directly nor indirectly be discriminated against on grounds of a disability.

The Higher Education Act (1997)² requires that more effective measures be put in place to address the needs of students with special learning needs/disabilities and that specific changes to the system be considered, such as to the curricula and teaching, in order to accommodate a more diverse student body. The Higher Education Act (1997)³ is also based on values that promote tolerance and an appreciation of diversity.

The *National Plan for Higher Education*4 of 2001 also clearly states that higher education establishments should better provide for the needs of students who experience barriers to learning and development, specifically those that are intrinsic to disability. Therefore, these institutions have to indicate the steps and strategies, and the relevant timeframe, in their respective institutional plans for the optimal accommodation of such students. Higher education establishments are also expected to ensure, where possible, that students with physical disabilities can easily access physical facilities.

**3. The position of Stellenbosch University**

The University’s vision as set out in *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond* (2000) describes a campus culture that welcomes diversity of people and ideas. Students with special learning needs/disabilities enrich any environment with their unique knowledge, skills and characteristics, adding value to such an environment. The principle of fairness/equity in *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond* (2000) means that the University is committed to welcoming a student body that is more representative of South African society as a whole. This implies that more disabled prospective students should be encouraged to study at tertiary level. The principle of tolerance in the vision can be understood as a willingness to accommodate, as far as is possible, disabled students’ diverse (and often complex) academic needs. *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond* (2000) sets out unequivocally that the University will “continue to give attention to accessibility for people with disabilities” (p. 20), and is viewed as the basis for this policy regarding students with disabilities. The University’s vision and strategic priorities are therefore taken into account in this way.

The University is committed to the promotion of equal opportunities for all. The University protects, within reason, the rights of individuals with special learning needs/disabilities, as well as their participation in activities related to higher education. In addition, the University wishes to foster a positive and non-prejudicial attitude among staff and students toward persons with disabilities, and will, as far as is financially viable, provide for the needs of persons with disabilities.

With this policy on students with special learning needs/disabilities, the University wishes to serve the broadest possible spectrum of the South African society, within the framework of its goals and with due consideration of the viability of providing such a service on all the different levels, by:

3.1 accepting students with special learning needs/disabilities, who meet the necessary academic requirements, into the student community as fully integrated members;

3.2 providing for the needs of such students where necessary, where doing so is practicable and without impinging on the rights of other students; and

3.3 maintaining a central office and employing a specific person or persons to coordinate and promote academic accessibility and support for students with special learning needs/disabilities.

**4. Definition**

For the purposes of this policy, the term disability is used to refer to a person with (a) verifiable physical, non-visible, and/or psychological limitation/s that negatively affect(s) his/her daily activities in a specific way.

The implementation of this definition is done in accordance with the social model of disability, in which the focus is placed on the environment as a potentially limiting factor in terms of participating and engaging in activities, rather than on the diagnostic entities regarding disability as such.

**5. The rights of students with special learning needs/disabilities**

This policy aims to provide for the needs of students with special learning needs/disabilities, within the limits of what is viable, and taking financial constraints into consideration, by:

5.1 facilitating access to modules, programmes, academic adjustments and/or aid;

5.2 keeping up to date about changes in the accommodation needs and other needs of the students with disabilities;

5.3 ensuring that all confidential information concerning the disability is only disclosed with the written consent of the student involved; and

5.4 promoting communication between staff members and students with special learning needs/disabilities, inter alia by obtaining academic and other information in an appropriate format.

**6. Admission and registration**

Admission to the University will not be refused on grounds of the prospective student having a disability, as long as the applicant meets the set academic requirements (which might in fact exclude persons with specific types of disabilities).

6.1 It is the applicant’s responsibility to provide information concerning his/her disability in the application. In cases where applicants did not disclose their disability beforehand, the University is in no way obliged to provide support to any such student during his/her studies at the University.

6.2 Upon receiving the application/information, the Admissions Division will submit it to the Office for Students with Special Learning Needs (Disabilities) (OSSLN), which will identify the applicant’s unique needs and the implications thereof by means of a questionnaire that the applicant will be required to complete.

6.3 After the evaluation by the OSSLN, faculties will be advised on the implications for support, including financial support, should the student be accepted. Faculties can then decide themselves what forms of support they can offer the student.

6.4 After admission, the student will be considered for the field of study of his/her choice. The Registrar’s Division, the relevant academic department/s, other professionals and the OSSLN (in consultation with the applicant) will jointly consider recommendations for admission. If necessary, and with cogent motivation, certain measures will be taken to make teaching accessible for the disabled student concerned as well. Other adjustments (such as the use of special equipment by a lecturer and/or the student) may also be made, provided that such adjustments do not undermine the integrity of the graduate programme or make unrealistic demands on the lecturers. The student will be expected to provide a list of modules being followed, as well as his/her contact details to all the lecturers concerned, as well as to the OSSLN.

**7. Accommodation**

The existing accommodation/admission requirements and regulations, as they relate to placement in university housing, also apply to students with disabilities. Applications for admission to university housing will be considered and dealt with on an individual basis.

7.1 Special concessions will be made in the consideration of students with special learning needs/disabilities for admission to residence in university housing, as far as is practically and financially viable. Should a prospective student be dependent on the aid of an assistant, the accommodation of such a student together with the assistant will be considered, provided the housing units developed especially for this purpose are not already occupied.

7.2 Should a student with a special learning need/disability be accepted into residence or university house, the housing already equipped with such facilities will enjoy preference. The OSSLN may be asked to provide guidance to the management of the residence/house concerned in respect of the student.

**8. Physical facilities**

The University aims, where possible and financially viable, to improve accessibility to specific buildings and other facilities for students with special learning needs/disabilities.

8.1 In cases where a specific problem with access to an existing building is identified, either for a registered or prospective student, the University will attempt to rectify the problem as soon as possible. Such rectification may include a cost estimate or the consideration of other options (such as moving lectures to a more accessible venue). Academic and housing needs will enjoy preference.

8.2 Accessibility to students with disabilities will be taken into account as priority in the planning of new buildings and other physical facilities (for teaching, research, housing, sport, recreation, etc.) This also applies during the upgrading of existing facilities.

8.3 A representative of the OSSLN will maintain close contact with Facilities Management, in order to ensure that building project teams take the needs of persons with disabilities into account.

**9. Support services**

In consultation with the OSSLN attention will be given to the specific needs of persons with disabilities, while taking practical and financial viability into account.

The following divisions are involved in supporting these students:

* 1. The Division Student and Academic Support, and more specifically the OSSLN (point of service of the CSCD), coordinates all such activities aimed at supporting these students.
  2. The CSCD facilitates, amongst others, personal therapy and development, extended time allowed for examinations and career development.
  3. HUMARGA provides a variety of software packages, Braille facilities and other specialised tools.
  4. The Department of Sport Science/Maties Sport provides for participation in sport, wherever possible.
  5. If individual tutors are needed by students with special learning needs (even after their first academic year), the faculties concerned should, in conjunction with the OSSLN, perform a needs assessment for the following year and budget for tutor funding for those students. This informs the budgets for subsequent years. Should additional funds be required, the faculty may approach the OSSLN for support.
  6. The student committee, Dis-Maties, is responsible for awareness drives, support and the promotion of the overall institutional climate with regard to students with special learning needs/disabilities. Dis-Maties receives organisational support from the OSSLN, but is a registered society like other student societies on campus.

9.7 Housing arrangements are finalised by the Centre for Student Communities with input from the OSSLN where necessary (see also point 7 in this regard).

**10. University societies and clubs**

When someone applies for membership of a University society and/or club, membership will not be refused solely because of his/her disability, but practical considerations and viability are significant.

**11. Grievance procedure**

In the case of academic grievances, the academic grievance procedure has to be followed via the Academic Affairs Council and the Dean’s Office concerned if personal discussions between the student and the lecturer and/or departmental chair did not solve the problem.

Academic grievances are grievances regarding:

* the content and/or presentation of modules/graduate programmes;
* the learning environment and/or supportive aids; and
* the evaluation of graduate programmes.

Administrative grievances concern matters pertaining to, amongst others, registration, subject choice and study fees, and should be discussed with the administrative official involved, the faculty secretary, or, if necessary, the Registrar.

If the problem cannot be solved within the immediate environment, a written complaint should be filed with the Division Student and Academic Support, specifically the OSSLN. If a solution is still not found, the Director of the CSCD will then follow the official grievance procedure, in consultation with the Academic Affairs Council of the Students’ Representative Council. As a last resort, the case should be reported to the ombudsman.

All other complaints (such as those of a physical or practical nature) can be reported to the relevant divisions or sections (such as Risk and Protection Services, Student and Academic Support, and more specifically the Centre for Student Affairs and the OSSLN).

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**References**

¹ *South African Constitution, 1996*. Chapter 2.

² *Higher Education Act: Notice 1196 of 1997.* S1.18 and S1.27.2.

³ *Higher Education Act: Act No. 101 of 1997*.

4 *National Plan for Higher Education*,2001.

5 *Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*, 2001.

**Additional resources**

Brand, HJ. 2005. *A counselling model for students with disabilities.* Paper delivered at the Conference on The Future of Social Services for Students. Catholic University of Louvain.

Rossouw, C. 2005. *Gespreksvoeringdokument: Viserektor: Akademies insake die Adviesforum vir Studente met Gestremdhede*. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.

Stellenbosch University (SU). 1997. *Beleid ten opsigte van Studente met Gestremdhede*. Stellenbosch.

Stellenbosch University (SU). 2000. *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond.* Stellenbosch.

1. \* In this document the terms *special learning needs/disabilities* are used alternately. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \*\* CHE. 2005. South African higher education responses to students with disabilities. Equity of access

   and opportunity? *Higher Education Monitor*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)