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# A comparative study of the inclusion of students with visual and hearing impairment in Rwandan universities.

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**2014-01-03**
http://hdl.handle.net10539/13338

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# Abstract

Over the past two decades, increasing attention has focused on inclusive education and how it can contribute to improved teaching and learning experiences and thus to the attainment of better learning outcomes for all learners, including those with special educational needs. Initially, attention centred on inclusion in primary and secondary schools, but increasing interest is now being shown to students with special educational needs and their inclusion in tertiary institutions of learning as well. Research on the inclusion of students with special educational needs has largely focused on either one particular group of students, such as students with a particular disability, or on students with disabilities in general, such that these findings are often either only applicable to a specific group or are too general. Not many studies have attempted to compare the experiences of students with different educational needs without being too general.

This study explores issues related to the experiences of deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students in relation to their inclusion in three Rwandan universities. Inclusive education as an educational policy has a very young history in Rwanda and there is insufficient empirical evidence about its implementation. This study therefore adds to the little knowledge there is about this subject.

The study addressed the following questions: what are the experiences of deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students in Rwandan universities in terms of educational access and social inclusion in the university environment? What are the similarities and differences between the experiences of deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students? What are the underlying causes of these experiences? In what ways do these experiences, either negative or positive, influence the academic performance of these students? How do these experiences influence these students' perspectives, expectations and hopes for the future? How do the attitudes of students and lecturers in universities with deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students concerning inclusion influence the interaction between these students and lecturers on the one hand and the deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students on the other?

The study was conducted using the mixed methods research approach. Triangulation was the research design employed. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were completed by 220 students who were neither deaf/hard of hearing nor visually impaired and 55 lecturers without disabilities from three of the five Rwandan universities with deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students. Interviews were conducted with six deaf/hard of hearing students, nine visually impaired students, and three lecturers from the same universities.

The study found that deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students had both positive and negative experiences in their inclusion in Rwandan universities. There were, however, major differences between the perceptions of deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students concerning their inclusion in these universities. There were also differences between the deaf students and hard of hearing student about the level of their inclusion. Finally, there were significant differences between the efforts of the three universities to meet the needs of deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students.

This work concludes by making some recommendations for improving the inclusion of deaf/hard of hearing and visually impaired students in Rwandan universities, recommendations which could be useful to other higher institutions of learning as well in their efforts to include students with special educational needs.