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Students with disabilities getting a helping hand in their studies

The Disability Service at the University of Cape Town (UCT) is playing a critical role in enabling students with disabilities cope with their studies, thanks to funding from the FirstRand Foundation (Tshikululu Social Investments).

These students are in turn inspiring others with their stories of perseverance and resilience and have expressed gratitude for the way they have been assisted with tailor-made support such as Braille readers and South African Sign Language interpreters.

Professor Loretta Feris, UCT's Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Transformation, explained how the support has been geared towards the individual needs of each student. "Disability is often the forgotten part of transformation in our society, but this should change. Many students with disabilities grapple with layers of disadvantage. If we want to ensure the success of all students, we need to ensure the equity of success of students with disabilities."

The FirstRand Foundation granted the Disability Unit over R11 million earlier this year to support students who rely on the unit to thrive at the university and excel academically. This has enabled the unit to appoint South African Sign Language interpreters, note takers and similar human support, technical aids, improved transport and bursaries to assist students with both learning and physical disabilities.

Ms Jamie Adams, a Psychology honours student who lost her right leg in a motorbike accident in 2013, said the staff of the Disability Service had been "an amazing" source of encouragement, while her bursary had helped immensely. She has also been able to write her exams in the Disability Service unit instead of in the usual exam venue, which has many steps to navigate. Adams is full of enthusiasm and is a role model to others. She has been admitted into the global Golden Key International Honour Society, a non-profit organisation based in the United States that recognises academic excellence, for being in the top 15% of her class.

Ms Edwina Ghall, Manager of Disability Services at UCT, said it is very important for the students to feel included. "This is their space and we want them to own it and feel at home here. This is all about inclusion and we hope to bring about further change in this environment."

Students with disabilities have been helped in many ways. A PhD student who was experiencing handwriting difficulties and considered giving up her studies was helped with Dragon Naturally Speaking dictation software. A mechanical engineering student with low vision has been using a Transformer HD magnifier to help with the technical drawings he

needs for his course. Another visually-impaired student uses the portable Zoomax Snow 7 magnifier to access lecture materials.

A student who is a wheelchair user has been helped with a wheelchair bag in which to transport heavy books while a blind master's student will soon benefit from a portable Orbit Braille reader.

The fund has also paid for a carer for a blind master's student so that he can get to lectures and other venues. Students also have assistance from note takers in lectures and tutorials, as well as scribes during exams. Several students with disabilities have been supported by the fund through bursaries that include tuition fees, accommodation and a book allowance.

The service has acquired a new vehicle which will be adapted to transport students and staff with disabilities, making the unit the first at an academic institution in the Western Cape to provide accessible transport. The vehicle will supplement UCT's nine-seater accessible bus, which can accommodate three wheelchairs, as well as another smaller vehicle.

Students who have learning challenges are also assisted, such as Mr Tumishang Selamulela who described how he had battled to keep up with the pace of his mechanical engineering degree. "It took me eight years to get to the end of a four-year degree. Eventually an educational psychologist determined that I had a learning disorder.

Said Mr Selamulela: "Somebody gave me a chance and I appreciate it. The extra time is a relief and it's made such a difference. I am on a journey and I will get my degree. It's given me new hope."

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