



Higher and Further Education Disability Services Association

HEDSA

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*Accepted as a community of practice by Universities South Africa.
Registered as an NPO no. 078-484*

9 June 2016

Dear HEDSA family and friends,

I did promise that I wouldn't let you wait so long for the second newflash after that shocking late one, so here it is.

My head is full of symposium. I personally have had a bit of an emotional block around it as I convinced myself it wasn't going to happen because of austerity measures no one is going to be able to afford to come!

But during an Exco telecom we resolved that the symposium **will** take place.

That we must do the necessary marketing and if necessary fund raising to ensure that it does and that it is going to be the best, meatiest symposium ever!

So we are tightening up the rather broad strokes draft which we distributed with the last newflash, and by the time I finish writing this I hope to be able to tempt you with a much more tantalising programme. Please, please advocate and agitate for funding for your institution to attend this symposium. Given our emphasis among other themes on reasonable accommodation for students with mental health disabilities it would be a good idea to get your colleagues from your Student Health and Student Counselling services to attend the symposium. Responsibility for disability support and disability rights cannot be solely addressed by staff from Disability Units; we need our colleagues to share this responsibility and it is vital that the broader community in various institutions become familiar with the debates we have and the challenges for which we seek solutions. Just by way of further inducement, November is a great time to be in the Western Cape and it would make perfect sense for you to postpone your flight back a day or two and spend the weekend in this beautiful part of the world.

IMPORTANT

It is really important that we have the disabled student voices at the symposium, and so I would urge you to forward at least this part of the newflash to your Student Development Office with the hope that, even if the DRU's don't have the funding the Student Developers in the institutions will recognize the value of funding disabled students to attend the symposium.

PEOPLE ARE ON THE MOVE!

Those of us who have worked with Celeste Wolfensberger-Le Fevre or attended any of her presentations were devastated to hear that the Australians have stolen her from us. I need to find out whether Celeste is still with us, but I hope she reads this newsletter because I want her to know I will never forgive her! We can't afford to lose the good people in a sector where hares skills are scarce!

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*Mrs Reinette Popplestone (Chairperson, UCT); Dr Nina du Toit (Vice-Chairperson, CPU);
Ms Roshanti Subrayen (Secretary, UKZN); Dr Diane Bell (Treasurer, USB-ED); Mr Duncan Yates (Publicity and Communications,
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Another top post in the Disability Service is coming vacant at the end of June when Dr Nina du Toit retires as Head of the Disability Unit at CPUT, having created from scratch and headed up the Disability Unit in a difficult context, not least because it is one of those merged universities with campuses scattered far and wide across the Western Cape. Nina learnt a lot in a short time. She is an ace fund raiser, and in that capacity has been invaluable on the exco, having drafted, along with Kaylyn some really potent funding proposals, about which we have high expectations.

CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER...

We also have not; I think congratulated two colleagues who have recently been appointed as Heads of Disability Units.

In December Maria Ramaahlo took up the reins as head of the DU at Pretoria University.

And earlier this year Martie Miranda was promoted to fill the post at the University of the Free State, Hetsie Veitch having left to take up a study opportunity in the states in the field of sport for people with disabilities. Come to think of it, we'll have to start a "news from far flung friends" column in this newsletter.

SOME NEWS FROM UCT

In the previous newsletter I chose not to include UCT news as I thought there was enough to keep you interested from other universities. But our students have made us proud in various ways during the course of 2015 and 2016.

Qobo Ningiza, who featured in the previous newflash as having been the first Deaf person to graduate from NWU at the end of last year with a BA Law degree was accepted in the LLB programme at UCT at the beginning of 2016. We have in total 4 Deaf students registered at the University who currently require interpreters and other support services. Given that we now have two post grad Deaf students and two in their senior undergraduate year, students are increasingly asking for text captioning instead of or in addition to interpreters in their lectures. This becomes increasingly necessary as course material becomes more technical and discipline specific. This we have found to be a particular challenge in the Law lectures. Of course interpreters will still be needed for many interactions such as one-on-one meetings with teaching and other staff, social and political functions on campus, and much more. But like everything new it has been something of a learning curve to us and we are particularly indebted to Andrew Sam of Wits for assisting us with the technological aspects of getting the text captioners laptops, talking to the students' tablets, iPads and other devices.

Jessica Bothma, a Deaf student in her final year, has cause to be proud as she excels academically. During the June Exams in 2015 she achieved the highest mark in her entire Sociology class, and appeared on the Dean's Merit List at the end of 2015. On 5 May she was honoured along with a few other Humanities students for their academic achievements at a special function

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A lesson in persistence

In 2003 Joan Byamugisha had just finished high school and was waiting to start her studies in medicine at the Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, when life threw her the ultimate curveball.



Computer science PhD student Joan Byamugisha is focusing on natural language generation in her mother tongue of Runyankore.

At first she thought she was coming down with a bout of malaria, but a lab technician picked up that she had an extremely high white blood cell count. The diagnosis was leukaemia and within weeks the disease had irreparably damaged her optic nerves, which robbed her not only of her sight but also her dream of becoming a doctor.

What followed was a period of rapid adjustment. Joan was still determined to pursue a university education, but although Makerere allowed her to enrol for some science courses, she was at sea.

“Obviously I couldn’t do it. I had never used a computer with screen-reading software. I didn’t know braille. There was no way of reading back what I needed to.”

So Joan spent four months learning braille and the necessary computer skills. When her brother, who had a background in IT, suggested she consider studying computer science, her academic career was born.

“You just come”

From the outset, Joan loved programming – “it’s completely text-based and I didn’t have to worry about images.”

With Makerere University unable to assist, she enrolled at the Uganda Martyrs University (UMU) in 2005, which welcomed her as their first visually impaired student.

“UMU were very, very good,” she says. “I remember the registrar saying, ‘You just come and we’ll see what we can do.’”

Three years later she emerged with a first-class bachelor’s degree in computer science and economics, but she soon found that nobody wanted to employ a blind person. Undeterred, she studied further, enrolling for a distance-learning master’s in software engineering at De Montfort University in Leicester.

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After completing her master's in 2011, Joan landed a job at UMU lecturing in the IT department and heading their new special needs department. The academic bug had bitten, however, and by 2013 Joan realised that she needed to start working towards a PhD before she got "too comfortable".

Programming for indigenous languages

At first, she considered focusing on speech recognition software in her local language of Runyankore, but soon realised that she would need to take a step back.

"If you want to teach a computer how to talk, it has to learn how to process the words. But if the language itself does not have computational resources, that has to be the starting point."

Instead, she is now focusing on natural language generation (NLG) and is working on a grammar engine that will be able to recognise the grammar rules in Runyankore to output sentences for computer-generated prescriptions in the health-care sector.

While her research is specific to Runyankore and a particular application, the underlying principles can be generalised to languages such as isiZulu and isiXhosa. What they have in common is that the grammar is based on the noun-class system, which determines the rules for verb conjugation and noun categorisation.

Initially, she applied for and was accepted to do her PhD at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia but funding was not forthcoming.

"In a way, that helped", says the ever-positive Joan, "because there is so much I did not know regarding natural language processing and computational linguistics."

Instead, she took a year out to brush up her skills in both these areas, and to write papers which would help her applications for PhD studies elsewhere.

Settling in at UCT

Then the UCT opportunity came up in 2014 via the Hasso Plattner Institute. She found herself having to complete a flurry of forms and to pack up over a weekend to make it in time for registration.

To help Joan settle in, her mother travelled with her. She now lives at Obz Square, which she says is an easier environment to get around – "you can count doors". Also, Pick n Pay is close by and UCT's Disability Service provides transport to upper campus.

She is full of praise for the Disability Service, which has helped to settle her in and to jump a few additional hurdles.

One such hurdle was the fact that she arrived with only a paperback copy of the Runyankore dictionary that she needed for her studies. Denise Oldham arranged for student volunteers to transcribe the entire dictionary – a process that took around three months.

And then there was her recent trip to Pretoria to the Turkish embassy for a visa interview so that she could go to the conference she'd been invited to. It was her first solo trip since losing her sight and the Disability Service made all the transport arrangements.

She is hoping to travel to Turkey with Dr Langa Khumalo, who is one of the co-authors of the paper she is to present. But if that's not possible, she says she'll have to "bite the bullet again" and tackle the trip on her own.

With her funding set to carry through to 2018, she hopes to graduate in June of that year.

Is she proud of what she's achieved thus far? She laughs: "Not yet, but I will be when I wear the cap and get the doctor title."

And what happens after that?

"I want to work where I'll be most productive. I don't care where." the willingness to seek solutions that will in the end bring success, almost dare I say irrespective of what kind of support is available to a student.

Story Andrea Weiss. **Photo** Michael Hammond.

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I have taken the liberty of including the full article here from the UCT daily news on 29 March because I believe it highlights the most important ingredient in the recipe for success for disabled students – the recognition that no matter how jacked up the disability support is at your university, in the end it is your capacity for self-advocacy and the need probably to work harder than any of your peers, and your ability to identify solutions for the limits and limitations constituted by your impairment.

Well, that is all for now, but we'll be back in July with more news and updates on the symposium.

Let me, in concluding this newsletter, urge colleagues to let us have news for this publication. Share with us your achievements, your challenges and your plans.

With sincere best wishes

REINETTE POPPLESTONE

HEDSA: Chair

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