

Disability inclusivity in employment transition programmes: perspectives of African graduates with disabilities

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Abstract

Purpose – This study evaluates the effectiveness of African Career Networks (ACN) disability inclusion efforts by examining barriers and facilitators experienced by youth with disabilities participating in employment transition programmes, assessing the role of reasonable accommodations and analysing stakeholder attitudes that influence employer and university engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed-methods study employed an online survey ($n = 92$), focus group discussions and individual interviews with youth with disabilities who were current students and alumni of African Leadership Academy or Mastercard Foundation Scholars programme. Data analysis utilised a critical occupational perspective informed by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health framework. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis across environmental factors that influence participation.

Findings – Results revealed diverse participation patterns among youth with disabilities, with mobility (40%) and visual impairments (31%) representing the largest demographics. Key barriers included inaccessible technology platforms, physical infrastructure limitations, negative stakeholder attitudes and inadequate communication systems. Facilitators included assistive technology, disability-sensitised staff, supportive peer networks and understanding employers providing reasonable accommodations. Participants emphasised the need for universal design principles, mentorship opportunities and comprehensive disability awareness training for employers rather than focusing solely on training persons with disabilities.

Research limitations/implications – The study's findings are limited by the relatively small sample size of 92 survey participants and the total population of 12 youth who participated in ACN's customised Career Readiness Curriculum, which may restrict the generalisability of results across the broader population of African youth with disabilities. Qualitative methods of research, however, emphasises the transferability of findings to similar contexts over statistical generalisability. The reliance on online data collection methods through MS Teams and Zoom platforms may have inadvertently excluded youth with disabilities who lack reliable Internet access or appropriate assistive technology, potentially underrepresenting the experiences of those facing the most significant digital barriers to participation.

Originality/value – This research provides contemporary empirical evidence from an African context on employment transitions for youth with disabilities, addressing a knowledge gap in disability employment research from African scholars. The study contributes novel insights into the effectiveness of targeted inclusion strategies and offers evidence-based recommendations for improving equitable access in graduate employment transition programmes across Africa. The findings inform policy implications for programme design of youth



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Introduction

Youth unemployment represents a global challenge that threatens economic stability and social cohesion worldwide. With a global youth unemployment rate of 13,6%, and regions such as Northern Africa experiencing rates as high as 30% (ILO, 2020), young people face substantial structural barriers to meaningful employment. These barriers include limited economic opportunities, poor job quality and a fundamental mismatch between the oversupply of skilled workers and insufficient high-skilled employment opportunities (ILO, 2020).

Within this challenging landscape, youth with disabilities face even more pronounced obstacles to employment. As a minority group within the youth population, they encounter barriers that extend beyond those faced by their non-disabled peers. Additional challenges stem from inaccessible environments, inadequate resources, poor health outcomes, negative societal attitudes and limited access to affordable transportation (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2017; Morwane *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, youth with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in workforces both in Africa and globally.

The African Career Networks (ACN), an initiative of the African Leadership Academy supported by the Mastercard Foundation, represents a targeted response to these challenges. Established in 2022, ACN aims to bridge the gap between university graduates and employers across the African continent by connecting young Africans to early-career opportunities and providing tailored skill-building programmes (African Leadership Academy, 2022). The organisation's disability inclusion strategy, developed in 2019, specifically prioritises career support for alumni and Mastercard Foundation scholars with disabilities through strategic partnerships with universities and employers.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of ACN's disability inclusion efforts by examining the barriers and facilitators experienced by youth with disabilities participating in ACN activities, assessing the role of reasonable accommodations in enhancing participation and analysing stakeholder attitudes and systemic factors that influence employer and university engagement with this population. The research aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving ACN's offerings to ensure equitable access for youth with disabilities.

Literature review

Employment outcomes for youth with disabilities in high-income countries

Research from high-income countries reveals a complex picture regarding employment transitions for youth with disabilities. While post-secondary education substantially improves employment prospects for youth with disabilities compared to those with lower educational attainment (Fichten *et al.*, 2012), graduates with disabilities continue to experience poorer employment outcomes than their non-disabled counterparts (Thoresen *et al.*, 2021).

Several specific barriers impede successful employment transitions for this population. Sánchez and Justicia (2016) identified inadequate training in contemporary technologies, resume writing, interviewing skills and business practices as significant obstacles. Their research in Spain further highlighted the role of academic self-concept as a predictor of student performance, emphasising the necessity of support services that address individual characteristics that affect academic self-concept, expectations and overall satisfaction among students with disabilities.

The importance of institutional support systems emerges as a recurring theme in the literature. Vincent's (2020) study of UK university graduates with autism demonstrated the

role of social networks and dedicated university personnel in facilitating successful employment transitions. Career advisors, disability support workers, and academic staff provided mentoring and work experience opportunities for these graduates. Conversely, the research identified institutional barriers, including an inadequate understanding of disability among university staff, insufficient resources and non-inclusive recruitment procedures employed by potential employers.

Challenges in middle and low-income countries

Employment transition challenges for youth with disabilities become considerably more pronounced in middle and low-income countries. Research from Ghana provides insight into the unique obstacles faced by students with sensory disabilities in these contexts. [Odame et al. \(2021\)](#) found that the absence of formal transition programmes at universities, combined with pervasive stigma associated with disability disclosure, profoundly impacted employment transitions for this population.

The study revealed that students often chose not to disclose disability-related needs to potential employers due to fear of stigmatisation, consequently forfeiting access to necessary supports and reasonable accommodations. Additional barriers included limited support for entrepreneurial endeavours among persons with disabilities and inadequate access to information about employment opportunities and workplace support services ([Odame et al., 2021](#)).

Recommendations for institutional support

The literature consistently emphasises the need for comprehensive institutional responses to support employment transitions for youth with disabilities. [Gatto et al. \(2021\)](#) recommend that public policy and resource allocation should prioritise the development of disability management programmes and resources specifically designed for work-integrated learning and career development activities at post-secondary institutions. Their recommendations include hiring specialised professionals with expertise in both disability services and work-integrated learning, and providing targeted training for practitioners on supporting students with disabilities during employment transitions.

The African context and knowledge gaps

Despite growing recognition of employment challenges faced by youth with disabilities globally, limited empirical evidence exists from African scholars to inform the design and development of contextually relevant employment transition supports. This knowledge gap is particularly evident given that limited educational and employment resources for African youth with disabilities contribute to ongoing cycles of socio-economic exclusion. Moreover, access to reasonable accommodations, including assistive technology and adaptive resources, remains scarce across the continent's under-resourced regions.

The ACN initiative emerges as pertinent in this context, designed to enhance employability among young Africans as well as to address the "brain drain" phenomenon affecting ALA alumni and Mastercard Foundation scholars who pursue tertiary education abroad ([African Leadership Academy, 2022](#)). By promoting retention of skilled professionals on the continent, ACN represents a strategic approach to building African capacity while addressing employment challenges faced by youth with disabilities through targeted inclusion strategies and partnerships with universities and employers.

Methodology

A convergent, mixed-methods study was conducted to unearth multifaceted experiences of youth with disabilities who engage with ACN. A critical occupational perspective ([Njelesani et al., 2013](#)) informed the study design to guide the focus on perceptions and experiences of youth with disabilities as they engaged with ACN. Such a perspective further supported the

development of an understanding of the intersections of factors and strategies that enable these youth to transition and succeed in employment (Shaw *et al.*, 2012). A disability-inclusive twin-track development approach further informed the study, ensuring that youth with disabilities influence the outcomes of the research alongside stakeholders without disabilities.

Methods

A convergent, mixed-methods study design was used comprising an online survey, focus group discussions and individual interviews. The use of multiple methods allowed for comprehensive analysis and blending statistical trends with in-depth narratives to understand how factors affect engagement of youth with disabilities (Creswell and Zhou, 2016).

The survey (Robb and Shellenbarger, 2020) involved questions pertaining to demographic and career information of participants to establish where participants had transitioned to and their current employment status. Questions further pertained to ACN programme elements that participants may have participated in or not, as well as barriers and enablers of participation in ACN activities. The survey questions were developed in consultation with the ALA Institutional Learning Department, which is knowledgeable about the organisational offerings that facilitate employment transition for ALA alumni and scholars (Holtum *et al.*, 2021). A convenience sample of participants was selected by distributing the survey online via ALA's database of current and past programme participants who had previously self-identified as persons with disabilities, and via ACN's university partners to their scholars. The invitation to participate included a short information brief about the research, and statements pertaining confidentiality and autonomy in participation.

Criterion sampling was used to select participants for three distinct focus groups, namely youth with disabilities who had participated in a customised ACN Career Readiness Curriculum at an African university, university partners of ALA, and employer partners of ALA. The findings from the focus group with the youth with disabilities are reported in this article. Focus groups as an interview method promote interaction between participants that allows deeper exploration of a topic in which the participants have shared experiences (Willis *et al.*, 2009). ALA informed youth with disabilities who had participated in their offerings over the past five years about the study, and obtained their permission to be invited to participate. ALA supplied a list of these youth to the researchers, and the total population ($n = 12$) was invited to participate. An interview schedule with semi-structured questions was used to guide discussions with a focus on exploring participants' experiences of barriers and enablers to participation in ACN activities and programme offerings. Questions also invited comments and discussions about reasonable accommodation and support measures available or lacking from ACN activities, processes and offerings.

The population of youth who had not participated in the customised ACN Career Readiness Curriculum was, similarly, invited through ALA to participate in a focus group. Only two participants indicated a willingness and their availability to participate and it was, therefore, deemed practical to conduct an individual interview with each. The same interview schedule that was used with the focus group was used in individual interviews.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted online on MS Teams or Zoom platforms. These were recorded and saved in the Cloud and on the lead researcher's computer. Artificial intelligence software was used to transcribe the recordings and the lead researcher and research assistant checked transcriptions for accuracy.

Data analysis

A critical occupational perspective was employed in the data analysis approach to examine structural and social factors that impact access and participation of youth with disabilities (Njelesani *et al.*, 2013). Such a perspective pays attention to the underlying and unseen philosophies and foundations of ACN that may influence how youth with disabilities are enabled, or prevented from, participating in programme elements.

Quantitative survey data were cleaned by checking for missing values and inconsistencies in the dataset. The data were exported to Excel, organised, and analysed descriptively to summarise participant characteristics, participation rates and the frequency of reported enablers and barriers. Qualitative data collected from the survey were analysed thematically according to a framework informed by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (World Health Organization, 2013).

Transcripts were analysed deductively using the analysis framework that comprises the five categories of environmental factors influencing participation according to the ICF (World Health Organization, 2013). Transcripts were read and codes were developed from phrases, words, and other units of information that reflect meaning related to the analysis framework and the research aim. Similar codes were grouped together or collapsed into categories where meanings were more accurately reflected through certain codes.

During interpretation, quantitative frequency data were merged with qualitative thematic findings to create a comprehensive understanding of participation patterns. Qualitative themes were used to explain and illustrate quantitative patterns, and frequency data highlighted which qualitative themes were most salient. Such integration allowed for the identification of factors that most commonly affected participation, as well as to develop an understanding of nuanced ways in which these factors operated in participants' lived experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was given by the Health Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University (Ref. no. N24/03/024).

Findings

Demographic overview and participation patterns

The survey study sample included youth with disabilities who were current students and alumni of ALA or the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Programme. A total of 92 ($n = 92$) youth participated in the survey, with demographics indicating a majority male representation (55%; $n = 51$) and an average participant age of 28.

The survey revealed that youth with disabilities participating in ACN activities have diverse backgrounds, including 47 different languages and 40 different ethnicities. A major portion (29%; $n = 27$) of the participants indicated English as their spoken language. While most respondents who answered the career-related question ($n = 83$) were students at the time of the study, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (81%; $n = 67$), a small percentage were in internship (5%; $n = 4$) or employment roles (8%; $n = 7$).

One hundred and eight ($n = 108$) responses were gathered about the types of disabilities youth reported, with some participants reporting more than one disability. Youth with mobility (40%; $n = 43$) and visual impairments (31%; $n = 33$) formed the largest demographic, highlighting that these groups may face unique barriers in navigating ACN programmes (see Figure 1). Other participant responses included hearing and speech impairment (10%; $n = 11$), psycho-social disability (7%; $n = 8$), barriers to learning (6%; $n = 7$) and neurological impairment (4%; $n = 4$).

At a response rate of 76% ($n = 70$), youth indicated that in-person events were the most attended ACN activities (43%; $n = 30$), showing a preference or need for in-person, face-to-face interactions despite the availability of online resources (see Figure 2). Virtual professional development sessions, which include webinars, Masterclasses, workshops and hangouts, were participated in by 37% ($n = 26$) of participants.

Barriers and enablers of participation among youth with disabilities

Qualitative and quantitative analyses revealed factors that either facilitate or impede the meaningful participation of youth with disabilities in employment transition. The findings are

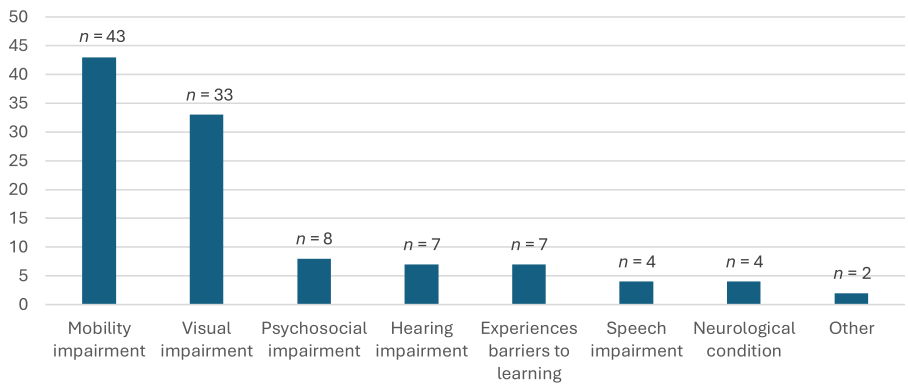


Figure 1. Type of impairments of participants. Source: Authors' own work

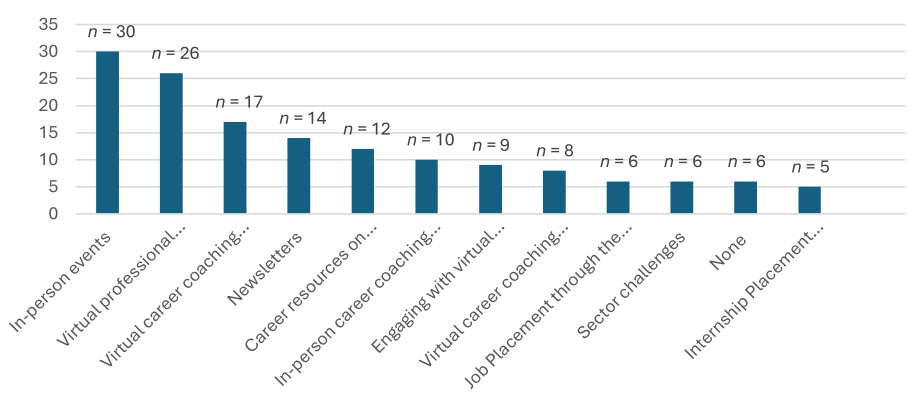


Figure 2. ACN activities participation. Source: Authors' own work

organised according to three key domains that emerged from participant narratives: products and technology, support systems and attitudes, and services and policies.

Products and technology. Technology emerged as both a powerful enabler and a barrier to participation. Participants consistently identified assistive technology as pertinent to accessing opportunities, with personal computers, smartphones equipped with accessible software and basic assistive devices serving as essential tools for engagement with ACN resources and employment preparation.

One participant expressed the importance of accessible assistive technologies as follows:

In essence, these accommodations and resources are not just tools for accessibility, but keys to unlocking my full potential. With the right support in place, I am confident that I can overcome obstacles, actively engage in opportunities, and thrive within ACN's dynamic environment. (SP 12)

Converse to this, only 16% of participants found available technological platforms to be sufficiently accessible to enhance their participation. Other respondents cited barriers more frequently than facilitators across all categories, which may suggest that, on balance, products and technology are currently hindering participation more than helping. The majority struggled with platforms that lacked compatibility with screen readers and other assistive technologies, creating notable barriers to full engagement. Table 1 summarises how more youth experienced products and technology to create barriers to their participation in ACN activities, than facilitating participation.

Table 1. Products and technology influencing participation in ACN activities

Environmental factors	Facilitators	Barriers	Total responses
<i>Products and technology</i>			
Appropriate assistive devices	6% (<i>n</i> = 4)	27% (<i>n</i> = 19)	23
Assistive technology of computers or phones	20% (<i>n</i> = 14)	24% (<i>n</i> = 17)	31
Accessibility of software technology platforms	16% (<i>n</i> = 11)	14% (<i>n</i> = 10)	21
Physical accessibility of environments	19% (<i>n</i> = 13)	26% (<i>n</i> = 18)	31
	40% (<i>n</i> = 42)	50% (<i>n</i> = 64)	106

Source(s): Authors' own work

The physical inaccessibility of environments compounded these technological barriers, creating multiple layers of exclusion that participants had to navigate simultaneously.

Support, relationships, and attitudes. Similar discrepancies were found in terms of support, relationships and attitudes that either promoted or deterred participation of the youth. Table 2 shows how disability-sensitised stakeholders in certain instances (45%), and limited disability knowledge or insensitivity from stakeholders in other instances (55%), influenced the youth's ability to participate in ACN activities.

The value of in-person interactions was particularly emphasised, with participants recognising face-to-face engagement as irreplaceable for building confidence and professional skills:

One thing I propose to not only focus on virtual meetings but if possible, try to do the physical meeting that can produce more because the physical presence has also its benefits such as interactions. (SP49)

Understanding employers who provided reasonable accommodations were also valued. Peter, a participant with sight impairment, shared his positive experience:

The good part [is] I have understanding bosses who allowed me to attend classes, compensate [in terms of work hours] over the weekend, and sometimes I would get free breaks to go do exams or test.

Systemic attitudinal barriers. Despite positive examples, participants encountered pervasive negative attitudes and limited disability awareness from various stakeholders, including employers and ACN instructors. These attitudes often resulted in discomfort and restricted participation, forcing youth with disabilities to constantly prove their capabilities beyond what was expected of their non-disabled peers.

Table 2. Support, relationships and attitudes influencing participation in ACN activities

Environmental factors	Facilitators	Barriers	Total responses
	<i>Disability-sensitised</i>	<i>Limited disability knowledge or insensitivity</i>	
University staff	27% (<i>n</i> = 19)	17% (<i>n</i> = 12)	31
ACN instructors (or staff)	4% (<i>n</i> = 3)	10% (<i>n</i> = 7)	10
Peer supporters	14% (<i>n</i> = 10)	21% (<i>n</i> = 15)	25
Employers	3% (<i>n</i> = 2)	11% (<i>n</i> = 8)	10
	45% (<i>n</i> = 34)	55% (<i>n</i> = 42)	76

Source(s): Authors' own work

Munya, who has a physical disability, provided an insightful critique of current approaches to disability employment:

ACN does a lot in connecting scholars with internships and job opportunities. I think we make one big mistake. We talk to persons with disabilities about their employment too much . . . instead of talking to people with the jobs, the employers . . . it's about the employer's mindset. Even if you train persons with disabilities and they become the best in the world, as long as the employer's mindset is the same, you've done nothing. Persons with disabilities need to be job ready, but the employer should also be willing to indiscriminately give the ready lot an opportunity.

The need for representation and mentorship. Participants identified mentorship as a critical need and pathway to development. Peer mentorship and self-advocacy opportunities were particularly valued. However, social norms often limited their participation in leadership roles, with non-disabled individuals frequently speaking on their behalf, undermining their autonomy and voice.

The concept of universal design emerged as a solution to these systemic issues. Participants advocated for accessibility to be integrated from the outset rather than retrofitted, as Munya explained:

I always try to say that, let's naturalise disability inclusion and accessibility, especially so that you are not thinking about disability because it will become expensive. But if you think of everybody else in this programming, then it becomes cheaper because you are doing something for everybody, not for a specific group of people.

Services, systems and policies. More youth attested to the enabling effect of services, systems and policies (68%) than these aspects creating barrier to their participation (33%). Table 3 shows the youth's responses to questions about the role of transport, funds, and access to information in their participation.

The most striking feature of the table is the high responses citing various forms of information accessibility as critical for participation, more specifically, university information as a primary touchpoint.

Physical infrastructure and transportation. Accessible housing and transportation emerged as requirements for participation in ACN activities and broader opportunities. Some participants expressed that private accommodations would enable freer participation without self-consciousness about their disability:

Since [I'm] still studying, I would like to get a favourable accommodation; that is, staying alone in a good place. Thus I would be freely participating in any ACN programmes because if I participate

Table 3. Services, systems and policies influencing participation in ACN activities

Environmental factors	Facilitators	Barriers	Total responses
<i>Services, systems and policies</i>			
Accessible transport	13% (n = 9)		9
Access to sufficient funds	9% (n = 6)		6
<i>Accessibility of information from</i>			
-Universities	40% (n = 28)	19% (n = 13)	41
-ACN	27% (n = 19)	13% (n = 9)	28
-Employers	4% (n = 3)	9% (n = 6)	9
Availability of sign language interpretation	3% (n = 2)	6% (n = 4)	6
	68% (n = 67)	33% (n = 32)	99
Source(s): Authors' own work			

when someone is around I always feel so sensitive that someone will hear what I'm saying about my disability and also how they look at you. (SP62)

Communication systems. Youth with hearing impairments specifically highlighted gaps in communication accessibility, requesting sign language interpreters, captions, and assistive technologies for ACN events. There was also recognition that awareness of available programmes was limited, particularly among those with sensory impairments. Peter emphasised the continued importance of physical presence alongside online engagement:

Looking at the location of being best online, it is the most convenient way to reach out to a larger audience. However, maybe the partner university has some physical office that would be available to support other scholars within the primary environment that would be much more appreciated.

Health services and medical support. Participants identified gaps in health services that directly impacted their participation. Specific needs included regular eye tests, prosthesis maintenance and financial support for medical equipment. One participant detailed practical challenges:

I use [a] prosthesis [for my] lower limb. If there could be a way to offer support in maintenance . . . crutches easily slips on wet floors. The rubbers of it [that] makes contact with [the] ground lose friction with wet floors resulting in slipping and falling while walking at times . . . if there's a way to work on that. (SP38)

Educational and employment support. Academic support was reported as a need, with participants requesting mentorship and tutoring to address learning challenges related to their disabilities:

I sometimes depend on people to help and support me especially academically; I face challenges in understanding things easily and requesting a mentor or tutor to help me with some work. (SP30)

Lesly highlighted the need for inclusive communication in training programmes:

Now people they decode differently. The [ACN Career Readiness Training] is there to teach or train people [with] disability and how to get ready for job and everything . . . but the way they talk, like, they should ensure that everyone has understood or decoded what exactly they were talking about or they were meaning.

Employment-related support was further identified as a priority, with internship programmes through ACN receiving particular praise for providing valuable job preparation. John reflected on the value of early exposure:

[An internship] gives us the earlier exposure and it helps acquaints us with the details and how to navigate [work] as early as now . . . [it prepares you for] how do you navigate [work]? How do you set yourself up for the world after?

Some participants suggested that funding for entrepreneurial ventures could further empower youth with disabilities and improve economic opportunities.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the importance of adopting a comprehensive and holistic approach to inclusivity in career transition programmes that are specifically designed for young graduates with disabilities. Following a disability justice framework, such a design ought to include the input of those using the programme support to ensure that they are relevant and effective. The approach also needs to adopt an intersectional and transformative approach to disability justice in order to address the root causes of exclusion rather than accommodating

individuals within a flawed system. For example, rather than implementing superficial accommodations, effective programmes must encompass multifaceted support systems that address the complex interplay of individual needs, technological requirements and systemic barriers that characterise the transition from higher education to employment. Research evidence has also shown that successful employment transitions are inextricably linked to supports for graduates with disabilities that begin during university education and extend into professional contexts, rather than discrete interventions that are offered only after graduation (Moriña and Biagiotti, 2022).

The central role of assistive technology

Over the past two decades, research has extensively documented the central role of assistive technology in facilitating education and employment integration for persons with disabilities (Getzel, 2008; McDonnall and Crudden, 2009; Stumbo *et al.*, 2009; Ritter *et al.*, 2014). These studies established that technological interventions serve as enablers of access, participation and success in both educational and professional contexts. The present study's findings not only corroborate this established research trajectory, but also provide contemporary empirical support for these principles, specifically within the context of graduate career transitions.

Building on this foundation, both participant experiences and existing literature consistently emphasise the centrality of appropriately tailored assistive technology for persons with disabilities (Rae Ro *et al.*, 2024). This customisation requirement extends beyond basic functionality to encompass multiple intersecting considerations, namely, personal learning styles, specific disability characteristics, environmental contexts and individual career aspirations. The research evidence demonstrates that such customised technological solutions are fundamental in supporting meaningful participation and facilitating successful employment transitions.

However, the technological barriers identified by participants reflect broader systems of digital exclusion that intersect with disability, economic inequality, and colonial legacies within African contexts. Linked to this is a cycle of exclusion. That is, while physical accessibility and the lack of assistive technology of computers or phones directly impact access to education, opportunities for economic participation in the digital economy would be limited without this same education. These intersecting vulnerabilities extend beyond material constraints and technological access to encompass psychological dimensions and ongoing systemic inequalities. Thus, it is crucial to understand that, when standardised technological solutions fail to serve youth experiencing multiple marginalised identities, they reveal misunderstandings of these individuals' needs, in particular those related to linguistic diversity, economic constraints, and infrastructure limitations shaped by historical inequalities (Annamma *et al.*, 2013), and the psychological toll of navigating persistent, intersecting barriers (Mastroukoku *et al.*, 2024). This intersectional perspective highlights the inadequacy of retrofitting approaches to assistive technology provision.

Physical accessibility as a foundational barrier

Physical accessibility emerged as a determinant of employment participation among youth with disabilities, manifesting across interconnected domains that include educational institutions, workplace environments, residential accommodations and transportation infrastructure. The multifaceted nature of these physical access barriers creates compounding effects that systematically exclude youth with disabilities from meaningful employment participation.

Accessible transport serves as a gateway to employment opportunities. Research conducted across low-to middle-income African settings shows that inadequate accessible public transport infrastructure operates as a compounding barrier that intersects with existing socio-economic disadvantages to further marginalise youth with disabilities in employment markets (Morwane *et al.*, 2021; Charles *et al.*, 2023). While transportation is generally a

primary environmental barrier in disability studies literature (Antonelli *et al.*, 2018; Lund and Cmar, 2020; Bjerkan *et al.*, 2013; Grisé *et al.*, 2019), in this specific study, it appears to be a secondary concern compared to the specific information and communication environment, which is acting as a strong facilitator for some and a significant barrier for others. These challenges become even more pronounced within African contexts, where systemic inequalities and resource constraints create additional layers of exclusion for youth with disabilities.

The broader built environment presents pervasive barriers that limit employment participation for Africans with disabilities. Evidence indicates that inaccessible physical infrastructure, coupled with restricted access to information and communication technologies, creates multiple points of exclusion throughout the employment pipeline, from initial job searching and application processes through to workplace integration and career advancement (Charles *et al.*, 2023). For example, even if an individual can afford an AT device, the lack of basic infrastructure renders it ineffective, particularly in rural areas, which were historically marginalised under colonial and apartheid systems.

Relationships and stakeholder awareness as determinants of success

The research findings further revealed that relationships function simultaneously as facilitators and barriers during employment transitions, with stakeholder awareness emerging as an important determinant of success. Participants consistently identified relationship dynamics as pertinent factors in their employment experiences, aligning with established evidence that demonstrates how employer attitudes, specifically those stemming from a lack of disability understanding, compromise employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Lindsay *et al.*, 2015; Nolan and Gleeson, 2017; Odame *et al.*, 2021).

Participant emphasis on transforming employer attitudes aligns with disability justice principles that explicitly reject individualistic approaches to addressing systemic exclusion (Berne *et al.*, 2018). This perspective recognises that sustainable change requires structural transformation rather than individual adaptation. The current study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating how the personal attitudes of individuals with disabilities themselves shape their approach to employment opportunities, corroborating recent findings by Charles *et al.* (2023) on self-perception's influence on career engagement.

The significance of relationship dynamics extends beyond employer attitudes to encompass the complex disclosure decisions facing individuals with disabilities. International evidence has shown that graduates with hidden disabilities often choose to decline workplace accommodations that they may need for fear of stigmatisation and discrimination (Kiesel *et al.*, 2018). Such potential failure to disclose accommodation needs creates a paradox when participants in the current study identified employer awareness as conducive to successful integration.

Furthermore, this study illustrates how stakeholder awareness, social interactions and relationship management directly influence the range of employment opportunities available to youth with disabilities. These findings complement previous research that established that developing self-concept, self-acceptance, conflict resolution, and social skills enhance employment prospects for this population (Sánchez and Justicia, 2016). Mastrokoulou *et al.* (2024) confirm the vulnerability of students during transitions to employment, and establish the importance of addressing aspects such as emotional regulation through psychological skills development for this group. Participants in the current study specifically attributed improvements in their career readiness to focused development of these interpersonal competencies. Within African contexts, where youth with disabilities experience intersecting marginalisation that is rooted in colonial legacies, economic inequality and limited mental health infrastructure, these psychological vulnerabilities may be further pronounced and require specific attention in transitioning this group into employment.

The study's key contribution lies in demonstrating that systematic disability awareness initiatives within graduate employment transition programmes can cultivate supportive organisational cultures that prioritise diversity and inclusivity. Such initiatives create environments that facilitate more successful employment transitions for youth with disabilities by addressing both individual skill development and the broader systemic and attitudinal barriers that perpetuate exclusion. These findings collectively emphasise the necessity of moving beyond traditional, medicalised approaches to disability support, towards more comprehensive, justice-oriented frameworks that address the interconnected nature of barriers faced by youth with disabilities in their transition to employment. Evidence importantly illustrates that the competencies relevant to successful transitions, including self-advocacy and emotion regulation, can be systematically developed through targeted interventions rather than assumed as prerequisites (Moriña and Biagiotti, 2022; Mastrokukou *et al.*, 2024).

Such comprehensive approaches must simultaneously operate across multiple levels, i.e. addressing individual skill development, transforming immediate environments and challenging systemic structures. Within African contexts a multilevel approach assumes particular urgency to counter the influences of colonial legacies in the shaping of resource distribution, infrastructure development and social attitudes towards disability. Failing to address these intersecting barriers risks the reproduction of exclusion of youth with disabilities who continue to navigate systems that were designed without their participation or needs in mind.

Study limitations

The study's findings are limited by the relatively small sample size of 92 survey participants and the total population of 12 youth who participated in ACN's customised Career Readiness Curriculum, which may restrict the generalisability of results across the broader population of African youth with disabilities. Qualitative methods of research, however, emphasises the transferability of findings to similar contexts over statistical generalisability.

The reliance on online data collection methods through MS Teams and Zoom platforms may have inadvertently excluded youth with disabilities who lack reliable Internet access or appropriate assistive technology, potentially underrepresenting the experiences of those facing the most significant digital barriers to participation.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings carry implications for programme design and implementation as they challenge the prevalent practice of deploying standardised technological solutions in learning and working environments. This research demonstrates that generic approaches may inadvertently perpetuate systemic barriers by failing to address the diverse spectrum of needs present within the disability community. Standardised solutions contradict the principles of reasonable accommodation and may result in tokenistic rather than transformative support. By implementing technology that is responsive to individual needs and contexts, career transition programmes can move beyond deficit-based approaches to embrace asset-based models that leverage individual strengths and preferences while addressing specific accommodation requirements. The implications of these findings extend to multiple stakeholders within the career transition ecosystem, including higher education institutions, employers, assistive technology providers and policy makers, who should collaborate to ensure that technology solutions are appropriately matched to individual needs and integrated into broader support frameworks. Specifically, policy should incorporate individualised assistive technology assessments before job placements occur, and should establish funding mechanisms for customised technology solutions that support persons with disabilities.

Such broader support frameworks should incorporate accessible transport planning with employment initiatives for persons with disabilities. In practice, this could involve requiring employment service providers to assess transport accessibility as part of job placement

services, and establishing transport subsidies or specialised transit services for youth with disabilities transitioning into employment. Given the evidence from African contexts showing how transport poverty compounds employment exclusion, policies should prioritise accessible transport infrastructure in areas with high concentrations of persons with disabilities. Participants in this study directly attributed limited employment opportunities to transport inaccessibility, signifying the need for employment service providers to treat transport as a core, rather than a peripheral, concern. Policy should mandate that no placement is considered complete without a verified accessible transport solution, and funding mechanisms must include transport subsidies as standard employment support.

The research identified accessibility barriers throughout the different employment stages, emphasising the need for proactive accommodations that support the full employment cycle. Both policy and practice should adopt universal design principles across the employment ecosystem, from educational institutions preparing youth for work to workplace environments. This implies developing and enforcing accessibility standards that go beyond minimum compliance to create real inclusive environments. Practically, employers should be trained on accessibility requirements, providing technical assistance and financial incentives for workplace modifications, and establishing certification programmes that recognise accessibility leaders. Policy should mandate accessibility audits for all employment programme venues and require universal design in digital job application platforms.

Given the evidence that restricted access to information compounds physical access barriers, policies should mandate that employment services, job placement platforms and workplace communications be fully accessible through multiple channels and assistive technologies. This has practical implications for how employment programmes are delivered, requiring investment in accessible digital platforms, alternative format materials and staff training on disability communication protocols. The documented failure of standardised solutions for youth who face intersecting marginalisation necessitates policy investment in context-specific technology. African governments and institutions must fund the development of assistive technologies that operate offline, support multiple African languages and function on low-bandwidth infrastructure to ensure that digital access does not create new exclusions.

In relation to this study's findings about the impact of disability awareness on employment transitions, policy frameworks should require comprehensive disability awareness training as a standard component of all graduate employment transition programmes. This training should target multiple stakeholder groups, including employers and career counsellors, to address the documented negative attitudes rooted in a lack of understanding. Given the evidence that stakeholder awareness directly influences available opportunities, policy mandates could establish minimum training standards and certification requirements, ensuring systematic rather than ad hoc approaches to disability inclusion in employment transitions. Policy should create penalties for employers who fail to complete such required training.

Employment transition services should, furthermore, integrate social skills development, conflict resolution and self-concept building into their core programming rather than position these as supplementary elements. Participants in this study credited employment successes to their development of self-acceptance, relationship management and conflict resolution skills. As such, practitioners should design holistic interventions that simultaneously address technical job skills with relationship management capabilities, self-acceptance and social interaction skills, recognising these as essential rather than optional components of successful employment transitions. Policy should mandate that social skills training be integrated into technical modules, and that the assessment of interpersonal competencies should be core outcomes of job readiness training.

These policy implications are grounded in disability justice principles of interdependence and collective access, recognising that meaningful inclusion requires transforming systems rather than retrofitting accommodations. An intersectional approach further demands that solutions address the compounding effects of disability with other marginalised identities present in Africa's diverse contexts.

Recommendations for future research

Given the emphasis highlighted in this study on employer mindsets and their influence on employment transition, future research should examine the effectiveness of targeted interventions aimed at changing employer attitudes and practices. Comparative studies could evaluate different approaches to employer engagement and their impact on hiring and retention rates.

Further research should be pursued with a focus on developing and testing universal design principles in digital environments for use across both educational and employment domains. Similarly, the emphasis placed by participants in this study on peer mentorship and self-advocacy suggests a need for evaluation of different mentorship models, in particular to compare peer-led and professionally led approaches and their impact on employment participation and outcomes.

Long-term prospective studies that follow youth with disabilities from education through employment could provide insights into how barriers and enablers evolve over time, and identify relevant transition points where support is most needed.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that effective employment transition programmes for youth with disabilities require comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approaches that address technological, physical and attitudinal barriers simultaneously. The findings show that, while ACN provides valuable career transition support, gaps remain in accessibility infrastructure, stakeholder disability awareness and the implementation of universal design principles. The research emphasises that successful inclusion extends beyond accommodating individual needs to transforming systemic practices that perpetuate exclusion, and highlights the need to shift focus from training youth with disabilities to educating employers and service providers about disability inclusion.

The study's African context provides empirical evidence for a region where disability employment research remains limited, offering practical insights for programme design and policy development across similar contexts. The research establishes that meaningful employment transitions for youth with disabilities depend on integrated support systems that combine accessible technology, inclusive physical environments, disability-aware stakeholders and comprehensive communication systems. These findings call for policy frameworks to mandate universal design principles that require comprehensive disability awareness training for employers and service providers, and that integrate accessible transport planning with employment initiatives to create real inclusive employment ecosystems for African youth with disabilities.

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