A Tracer Study on How Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has transformed Lives of People with Disabilities in Zimbabwe [2010 to 2014].

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Abstract

Generally, tracer studies have gained popularity in conventional institutions while a dearth of knowledge exists on how ODL impacts on diversified learners, such as, people with disabilities (PWDs) in Zimbabwe. ODL was established after Zimbabwe’s 1980 independence with a view to meet the scramble for education by people who had failed to access existing conventional institutions due to their conditions, families, financial status and many other reasons. This academic revolution and expansion then, gave birth to ODL whose goals aim to transform the lives of all the disadvantaged and vulnerable learners including PWDs. The authors observed that the majority of ODL learners with disabilities live better lives after successfully attaining their tertiary and higher education qualifications. On the other hand, many PWDs and the society at large do not seem to notice the benefits PWDs could gain through ODL. In regards to that, many resented the idea. The study employed the qualitative technique to trace the life-styles of ODL graduates with disabilities with views to give insights about its civility to all people and also add value to ZIM-ASSET goals where every individual is expected to contribute to transform Zimbabwe to a sustainable socio-economic country. Data was collected through snow-balling selected ODL graduates from 2010 to 2014 using triangulated data obtained through in-depth interviews, observation and non-participant observation. Guided by research questions and thematic content analysed data, the study noted that despite unemployment challenges, ODL is a license to sustainable socio-economic lives for PWDs and their countries. While ODL is reported a relevant learning mode for PWDs because they studied within their natural settings, the experiences in this study varied from individual to individual but they recurrently recommended ODL institutions to always consider PWDs in all their plans; dreams and also create user-friendly learning environments and provisions for all learners.

Key words: tracer study, ODL, transformations, People with disabilities, Zimbabwe, 2010 to 2014

Introduction

The opportunities and flexibility created by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has provided an alternative route to access higher education (HE) by adults who could not further their education through the conventional higher and tertiary education mode. More specifically ODL provides opportunities for a diversified population which includes people with disabilities (PWDs), with a view to make them attain equal status with able bodied people. In Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as an ODL institution has made remarkable contribution to higher and tertiary education through admission of both the able bodied and PWDs across all its degree programmes. Thus this tracer study aims to establish how ZOU’s ODL mode of delivery
has transformed lives of PWDs from 2010 to 2014 with a view to further increase the access for PWDs, so that they equally contribute to the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim-Asset) goals.

Background to the study

The provision of higher and tertiary education to all citizens has a remarkable improvement in Zimbabwe as many PWDs who acquired higher and tertiary education through ODL have a story to tell. This study traces how ODL has transformed the lives of PWDs who completed university education through ODL to share their experiences and achievements after they completed their studies from 2010 to 2014. Generally, tracer studies have gained popularity in conventional institutions while a dearth of knowledge exists on how ODL impacts on diversified learners, such as, people with disabilities (PWDs) in Zimbabwe. ODL was established after Zimbabwe’s 1980 independence with a view to meet the scramble for education by people who had failed to access existing conventional institutions due to their conditions, families, financial status and many other reasons. This academic revolution and expansion then gave birth to ODL whose goals aim to transform the lives of all the disadvantaged and vulnerable learners including PWDs. The authors observed that the majority of ODL learners with disabilities live better lives after successfully attaining their tertiary and higher education qualifications. On the other hand, many PWDs and the society at large do not seem to notice the benefits PWDs could gain through ODL. In regards to that, many PWDs resented the idea of acquiring professional status through ODL.

ODL, according to van den Berg (2012) and UNISA (2011) is an institution where the students have no or limited face-to-face contact with the academics; they only meet each other as students through technological tools like telephone, email, online discussion forums and other organized contact sessions. In Zimbabwe, the nature of ODL has removed barriers to access to education and increased equal opportunities to all citizens regardless of their disabilities. This has been also alluded to by Mutasa, Goronga and Tafangombe (2013) when they revealed that since its inception as an ODL, ZOU has been accepting students with disabilities into its varied programmes. As observed by the authors, this is a good gesture which is spoiled by lack of clear inclusive plans which are further prompted or ignited by unavailability of lack of statistics.

Statement of the problem

How has ODL university education transformed the lives of people with disabilities (PWDs) in Zimbabwe between 2010 and 2014?

Research questions

1. What academic and professional qualifications did you have before joining the ODL institution?
2. What are the experiences of people with disabilities in ODL?
3. How have the attained qualifications transformed your life?
4. What mechanisms ought to be put in place by ODL institutions to attract people with disabilities?

Related literature reviews

Brief history of ODL university education

ODL university education is the current force contributing to social and economic development as it has been accepted as part of the mainstream of educational systems (UNESCO, 2002). The recognition of ODL
has led to traditional ways of organizing education being reinforced by innovative methods to meet fundamental right of all people to a lifelong learning. UNESCO’s initiatives in ODL are based on its overall priority to ensure the right to education for all regardless of disability. Kaputa (2013) also opines that ODL is not a preserve of a selected few, but was meant for all those who had an opportunity for tertiary education for various reasons. Mutsawanga (2014) also views ODL as the only way of meeting the growth and diversified participation of all people including PWDs. In addition, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as an ODL institution has a vision to be at the doorstep of every individual regardless of disability (Kaputa, 2013). ODL University education has also opened the avenues for PWDs to enroll and achieve their dreams of acquiring a professional status and contribute immensely to the Zim-Asset goals.

**Brief history on the establishment of ODL institutions in Zimbabwe**

Open and Distance education at tertiary level in Zimbabwe has been widely accepted and adopted by many people whose life constraints could not allow them to undertake conventional learning. According to SAIDE (1999) Zimbabwe has a long history of distance education starting from the 1930s which was traditionally delivered in the form of correspondence courses. ODL has fast become indispensable as more and more students are taking part in the new dispensation of academic learning. Statistics from the Vice Chancellor’s 2011 speech showed that since its inception in 1999, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has graduated over 21 000 students through open and distance learning and statistics from ten open universities of the world including University of South Africa (UNISA) had graduated 3, 417, 000 students through distance learning mode (Oladokun 2002), as observed by the authors, these statistics are inclusive of PWDs though their actual statistics is unknown and is probably always insignificant.

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the mega state university offering distance learning mode in Zimbabwe. UNESCO (2002) posit that distance education started when the Centre for Distance Education was established by the University of Zimbabwe in 1993 and in 1996 became the University College for Distance Education, which later in 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20) paved the way for Zimbabwe Open University. Kangai et al (2010) reiterate that the university was established to cater for a substantial component of people who, by design or unintentionally, could not be accommodated in conventional universities by offering them an opportunity to study in their homes and in their workplaces through distance education.

**Statistical analysis**

Although the World Report on disability (2011) says 15% of a billion people in the world live with some form of disability, it is hard to make accurate estimates as societal attitudinal and total exclusion of PWDs in the socio-economic societies still take toll. Observations by Lang and Charowa (2007) also revealed that PWDs in Zimbabwe constitute one of the poorest marginalized and socially excluded groups, and is difficult to come up with real reliable statistics, as some could not articulate their disabilities and remain behind the scenes. PWDs have less involvement in social constructs; therefore coming up with real statistics is a mammoth task. However, Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) citing (Cappa and Loeb, 2012) estimated the figure of PWDs in Zimbabwe as 1.9%.
Transformation of lives of people with disabilities through ODL

The integration and advancement of information communication technologies (ICTs) has enabled ODL to take different forms of learning modes and has transformed the lives of PWDs. This current dispensation has also come with the demand for equal access to education and employment opportunities despite one’s disability. Access to quality education at all levels has become a basic human right to every citizen in any country of the world. In response to this worldview, governments of the world are crafting legislations and policies with an inclusion of all humankind despite any disability. Gunawardena and Lekamge (2010) have the view that ODL has emerged as the panacea for all ills faced by educational systems in both developed and developing countries. They say that ODL as a mode of learning has the prime objective of facilitating learners who were mostly disadvantaged due to gender, age, lack of formal education, residence in remote locations or employed, who were denied tertiary, adult, or lifelong education due to the various barriers that prevented them from continuing education. Gillies (2012) pinpoint that critical disability theories also assert that PWDs ought to have equal access to all aspects of social life and key sites of power including education and employment. Duquette (2000) and Fichten et al., (2012) both opine that there are an increase number of students with disabilities attending university and obtaining degrees. All the authors agreed that this has been enabled by anti-discrimination laws; increased support services offered to PWDs and increasing need for higher education to obtain employment. However, Fichten et al., (2012) note that even though university education provides students with knowledge and enhanced skills that will assist them in the workforce; it appears that many educated PWDs will not obtain the jobs they desire upon graduation. This was also supported by the National Organisation on Disability (2002a) as it opines that discrimination, negative attitudes towards PWDs and physical workplace barriers can prevent PWDs from obtaining meaningful employment. Stevens (2002) also alludes that while employers have been encouraged to remove physical barriers in the workplace, not much can be done to remove attitudinal barriers which still bar PWDs from employment opportunities.

In her study Smith (2011) also revealed that ODL has transformed the lives of PWDs as the Open University of the UK enrolled 250 000 students and 12 000 of them were PWDs in 2011. Equal access to university education has transformed PWDs as they have equal opportunity and chance for employment with the able bodied people. A study conducted by the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2012) revealed that although human rights legislation and government incentives would enable PWDs to be meaningfully engaged in the labour force, the existing lower employment rates for PWDs suggest that there are still obstacles to overcome, both in the workplace and in the community at large. The Statistics Canada (2008) reported that the employment rate for Canadians with disabilities was 49.3%, while a study conducted by the US Department of Labour (2001) noted that 52% of the non-working PWDs in America felt discouraged from looking for work, because they perceived that no appropriate jobs were available. The Canadian Council on learning (2007) and the United States Department of Labour (2001) indicated that PWDs are more often unemployed than their non-disabled counterparts. In their study, Fichten et al., (2012) found out that while there was little difference in the employment rate between graduates with and without disabilities, the graduates with disabilities were employed less often in the job related to their field of study.
Advantages of preferences for ODL by people with disabilities

According to UNESCO (2002) and Moisey (2004) ODL is available to persons of all ages and never embraces discrimination on any ground including disability. In this respect, it has provided learners with materials that meet their needs and continued working on equal access to every student despite disability. Moodley (2002) also further advances the view that ODL create a learning environment that offers learners the opportunity to advance, develop and enrich themselves, both intellectually and materially. ODL has also cut the physical barrier, as time and space are no longer constraints to humankind, since such environment offers flexibility to learning opportunities among all individuals despite their disability. Through ODL, students have become managers and leaders of their own learning endeavours. One greater advantage is that ODL eliminates factors that have hindered increasing knowledge and practical skills to many individuals that are known to be access, quality and cost (UNESCO, 2004). An institution such as Gallaudet University in USA is a living testimony which has produced many PWDs professors as an indicator that they are educable and employable.

Challenges of people with disabilities at ODL institutions

In normal sense, Moodley (2002) pinpoint that all learners regardless of their disabilities deserve nothing less than a quality education and training that would provide them with opportunities for lifelong employment and meaningful participation in society as productive citizens. This entails any education and training system to respond to the equity and thrive to improve the quality of life of all people regardless of the disabilities and attitudinal views of society in general. In this regard, ODL institutions must also make their teaching and learning mode friendly to all people, as they provide a study opportunity to those, maybe by social design cannot afford conventional classroom teaching.

In addition, the South African National Plan for Higher Education (2001) allude that it is unacceptable for graduates in general and those with disabilities to be denied the provision of high quality programmes, as this would not only impact on their ability to improve their own life chances, but would also adversely impact on the broader agenda for social and economic development. However, in their study on ODL accessibility to learners with disabilities, Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) revealed that learners with disabilities face many-folds challenges including financial, as there are no clear-cut policy on financial assistance for students with disabilities. In many instances, students with disabilities drop from studies citing financial challenges as they have other family responsibilities. Chataika (2007) also identify institutional challenges that affect accessibility of higher education as:

- Physical access to the buildings;
- Inappropriate application and admission procedures;
- Inappropriate teaching methods;
- Inadequate support services;
- Resources; and, Political will.

Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) further propound that physical accessibility barriers are the major as without buildings being accessible, students with disabilities cannot enter or move around within. They also cited transport as another major challenge, as without accessible to transport, PWDs cannot get anywhere outside their homes. In agreement, the authors say that most buildings in educational institutions are inaccessible to students with disabilities. In bringing their ideas home, a good example is the ZOU Harare/Chitungwiza Regional
office which is in the third floor and students on wheelchairs face mammoth tasks to get there, as there are no elevators and cannot go up with steps. However, Jung (2003) and Johnson (2006) also identify negative attitudes of society towards PWDs that may prevent them from disclosing their disabilities. This was also supported by an audit done by Technikon South Africa (2002) which revealed that learners with disabilities do not articulate their special needs and tend to hide from public view.

Improving ODL access by people with disabilities

In view of some challenges, Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) allude that ZOU has come to fill other gaps in a Zimbabwean society as it allowed students regardless of their disabilities apply for Prior Learning, where normal entry requirements are not fulfilled. ZOU also established a Quality Policy Manual (2013) with a quality objective ‘to provide adequate facilities and services for staff and students with disabilities and special needs. In contrast to this assertion, Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) note that there are still constraints in accessibility to some ZOU offices by PWDs.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative design known as phenomenology to define how ODL university education had transformed the lives of people with disabilities (PWDs) in Zimbabwe between 2010 and 2014. The qualitative approach was found most appropriate because it gave the depth of matters underlying the study and also allowed natural understanding of participants’ experiences from their point of views. Phenomenology is also the rightful design because it also sought to understand the phenomenon of lived experiences of PWDs on the advantages of ODL and how they benefited through ODL university education. The design also enabled the researchers to enter into the lives of PWDs who had completed ODL education in Zimbabwe.

The study participants were selected through snowballing and point of saturation determined the sample size. Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews from 5 interviewees, 2 narratives and non-participant observations. Participant recollected personal insights of their lived experiences to supply the information in this study. The approach enabled this study to present data which represented the participants’ actual lived experiences and insights since the finding are presented in verbatim. Thus, through the collected reflections the study also collected opinions concerning the effectiveness of ODL as a driver of Social Economic Transformations to PWDs in Zimbabwe. Thus, in-depth interviews were used with a view to enable each individual graduate participant to define the perception and viewpoint on how ODL studies had socially, psychologically, spiritually and economically transformed them.

The regional coordinators and student service managers informed the authors on the whereabouts of PWDs who had completed their ODL studies between 2010 and 2014. The authors then sought the participants’ consent. The collected data was analysed from one session to the other by coding key information and later on merging it into patterns and themes. The study discussed how the findings and the generated themes addressed the research questions and the topic understudy. The collected data was presented and analysed using the thematic approach. The discussions addressed the research questions and supported the findings with reviews of related literature where possible. With supporting evidence the study also established where the findings converged and diverged. Conclusions and recommendations were then, drawn and gaps requiring further studies were highlighted. Since the collected data was triangulated the
findings are dependable, creditable, trustworthy and confirmable although their generalisability is questioned because of its less representative sample size as shown in the Table 1 below. However, considering the depth of the study and depending use of data the authors propose that tentative generalizations could be made.

The study deliberately sought Nicky’s consent as the 11th participant to write a narration of his experiences with a view to find out reasons behind delays in completing his degree since he had good results.

**Findings and discussions**

What can be drawn from the research findings is, first, that the individuals who participated in the research demonstrate understanding of ODL after completing their 4 year programmes and they could fluently articulate how these studies had variably transformed their living conditions and living styles. Thus, the findings spelt out how each individual had been transformed with a view to attract more prospective PWDs to do their studies with ODL institutions as the most appropriate mode of delivery where, considering their impairments they can exercise a lot of flexibility and study as they earn or as they fend for their families. Living testimonies in this study are expected to widen the access of PWDs into ODL institutions and equally promote Zim-Asset goals through increasing the number of PWDs who can fend for themselves, their families and equally contribute to the economical status of their country, Zimbabwe. This would in turn

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promote the recent shift in the focus of Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where empowerment of the vulnerable groups is encouraged as an essential focus if worldwide Development Goals are to be accomplished in Post 2015 expansion of the previous policy. As observed by the authors ODL institutions could play a leading role in the education of PWDs if they adopt and adapt their systems in line with the principles of SDGs and the Zim-Asset goals. In this study, the excerpts of Rossa, Pessy, Nicky, just to mention a few, are living testimonies on how ODL services had transformed everything about themselves despite the few highlighted challenges to which they have again given improvement recommendations in section below.

This has resulted in diminishing the educational limitations, financial dependence and social exclusion. Participants of this study unanimously supported these views as evidenced by their preferences for ODL programmes and the changes these studies brought into their lives as evidenced by some participants’ verbatim echoes: This is an uplifting from a nobody to a somebody [Tesa]; Though blind I can now at least afford to take my family for shopping and also carry around a shopping basket in supermarkets [Feyi]. This is as well supported by literature which despite high rates of unemployment saw educational attainments as instrumental to high social recognition of most PWDs in this study and high reduction of social exclusion. Thus, besides economical transformation all participants seem to agree that it also classified them into a new social strata as evidence by a few selected excerpts where [ Pessy] echoed, after obtaining my ODL degrees, work-mates greeted me with humble voice as their HOD and at church I was given a role which they had never done before and [Meek] reported that, when I bought an automatic car my neighbour started to speak well about me unlike before and to also greet me.

Preferences for ODL by People with Disabilities

The majority of study participants had various reasons ODL preferences as noted below:

I chose to study with an ODL institution because it is ideal since I spend three quarters of the time within my context which I was advantageously familiar with and comfortable to carry out my studies in [Pessy].

I was at liberty to compensate for disturbed days by registering courses I could manage depending on the weight of my circumstances. Thus, I am currently meeting the educational costs of my children using self employment earnings obtained from servicing people’s computers and hope to resume my studies when my financial status improves [Nicky].

I like ODL programmes for their flexibility, received empowerment and for training me to be accountable for my destiny. It also makes me do informed risk management in my work without fear [Rossa].

Distance learning constitutes a method suitable for people with disabilities and, more particularly, for people with a visual impairment, as it can contribute to their easier integration into the educational and social environment. The philosophy underlying distance learning is the creation and provision of alternative educational opportunities, as well as the open access to these opportunities for everyone so that the ideal of open education may be fulfilled. As equally stressed by Liakou and Manousou (n.d.), ODL offers open education to all people including PWDs thus by so doing it fulfils the education for all (EFA) obligation a focus also supported and emphasised by current inclusive practices.
Professional and Academic Background of Participants before Joining ODL Institution

The above highlighted excerpts seem to show that a majority of ODL graduates with disabilities felt elevated from helplessness; objects of charity; beggars to empowered individuals where they took part in decision making about their finances, families and spoke in authority in social circles and even at workplaces Tesa excerpts’ has pregnant statements:

... although my work-mates were in the education field, they used to exclude me and even call me names that described my condition. However, after attaining my 4 year ODL degree and the ministry promoted me to a leadership positions, this was a wake up call to most of my colleagues who had shunned my ODL studies and even began to come to ask me how they could also gain access into the programme. God is good to those who humble themselves. Today am leading people who used to laugh at both my condition and ODL education [Tesa].

Before accomplishing my ODL degree I did not feel human enough until I acquired the new identity and personality. Education is good it transforms one’s personality, character, social goals and financial plans [Feyi].

The majority of study participants equally had similar reflections to Feyi’s experiences although they were express differently but they had a lot of common elements. Feelings of positive changes in various positions seem to have been experienced by the majority of participants after completing their ODL. However, they caution prospective candidates with disabilities to be aware that the journey is not easy because of various institutional, personal, impairment and attitudinal limitations which participants pointed out as challenges to their successful access and enjoyment of the programmes.

Experiences of People with Disabilities in ODL Institutions

ODL is characterised by the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (White, 2002).

People have a tendency of scornfully laughing at PWDs when they embark on studies by passing negative commands. This is worse when the studies are done through ODL because you are called names related to ODL, such as, corresponding person; ODL was the only resolution to slow thinkers as PWDs; what can come out from candle light readers; this a wastage of resources for PWDs to study through ODL. All sorts of negative comments are given to us. But if you do well and obtain equal educational status as able bodied people the same people reserve their comments. However, they slowly try to rebuild relationships with you as a sign of appreciating your efforts while others remain shy to comment [Busie and idea was equally expressed by Feyi and Meek].

ODL has empowered me to do things by myself although when I initially joined I had many fears to fail; to be a laughing stalk in the community; that I was an incapable person because of my physical condition and fine motor challenges which cause me to be a slow writer too [Kessie].

I have had the privilege to successfully complete my secondary education and advance through ODL studies but I feel systems in Zimbabwe are not as inclusive as they portray to be on papers. I have had the experiences of living in the same village, suburbs and learning with people with various disabilities and I have observed that despite claims of shifts to inclusive practices both ODL and conventional institutions have failed to shake off integration practices where they allow us entry into educational systems but without meeting our learning needs. Such a
system is not of benefit to us and it is the main reason for most drop outs among PWDs [Meek].

Liakou and Manousou (n.d.) equally propose that despite the goodness improving one’s educational status, crossing the bridge was not an easy task for PWDs. Thus, these two authors further propose that naturally, an individual’s impairment brings with it limitations which they encourage ODL institutions to provide the most needed supplementary materials to counter-balance limitations imposed by the impairment so as to reduce and amend for the caused delays.

How ODL transformed lives of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe

Table 1 indicates that the majority of PWDs who completed their ODL studies gained positive self-esteem plus their workplaces realised their gained strengths, the new approach to their work by upgrading their employment grades as evidenced in Table 1:

ODL has not only upgraded my workplace status but it has also uplifted by social status both at workplace and in the community. Despite the condition of my impairment, students consult me as a very knowledgeable teacher in English and literature matters and that has made me very popular in the school. Thus, this community found me deserving the upgrading to Head of Department status [Pessy and the idea was equally expressed by Feyi].

Yes, ODL systems have transformed my life socially, economically and even spiritually but I propose that it should improve in teamwork towards the learning of PWDs because sections and department seem not to share information about disabilities yet it has no borders. I propose that departments of students’ affairs should play a leading role on tracer studies on PWDs [The studies revealed that the majority of PWDs have high preferences for ODL institutions even though they equally criticise them for not practicing inclusivity. It therefore implies that ODL institutions should take their learning practices to the drawing boards and also reconsider tracer studies as a means to an end to the long mentioned weaknesses observed by PWDs. According to Liakou and Manousou (n.d.). Distance learning constitutes a method suitable for PWDs and, more particularly, for people with a visual impairment, as it can contribute to their easier integration into the educational and social environment. The philosophy underlying distance learning is the creation and provision of alternative educational opportunities, as well as the open access to these opportunities to everyone so that the idealness of open education may be fulfilled but as observed by the authors the systems would need to critically analyse how ODL could be a plausible mode of delivery for people with various disabilities. In other words, though ODL is considered a credible delivery mode it also has its own limitations some of which the study participants highlighted below. As observed by the authors, every situation has its own limitations just as reflected in this study. However, a majority of PWDs who accessed ODL seem to report gainful experiences, such as, gaining new statuses at workplace, upgrading and many others, this study could not ignore faced challenges. In support, Mutswanga (2014) regards universities as the moral fibre for sustainable development in a country because they are the hub of the educational systems. Despite the observed challenges, findings from this study particularly regard ODL programmes as most appropriate for PWDs as already alluded in preceding sections.

Challenges

The majority of participants with disabilities in this study convincingly found the ODL
mode friendly to their conditions. During informal discussions they pointed out that the principles of ODL were themselves favourable to most disabilities. They then suggested that it was the implementers of the systems who inconvenienced them by developing their plans and dreams which excluded PWDs. Further to that they considered that to be the contributing factors to unfriendly environments and teaching styles which only applied to people without disabilities thereby excluding them in effective learning where they had chances to showcase their capabilities and creativity.

I am an ODL student with hearing impairment. In my first year I performed quite well in my exams but could not proceed to second year due to financial constraints. It is now more than four years since I dropped my studies but nobody has dared to come to my rescue even though before my initial entry into this programme I was promised to receive free education which never materialised. I got so disappointed even though am still hoping against hope that one day someone will come to my rescue [Nicky].

Lack of provisions spoil the good works of ODL institutions yet their focus positively goes hand in hand with conditions of PWDs because the system allows us to study in environment we are used to which are homes. We therefore continue the comfort of our homes and workplaces while at the same time we improve ourselves both academically and profession. A lot of value addition takes place as we immediately apply learnt matter at our farms, homes and workplaces [Tesa].

Tracer studies on PWDs seem very few because of institutional negative attitudes at both conventional and ODL institutions. It is because the able bodied communities look down as PWDs as with power cognitive abilities as their impairments. People forget that when someone is blind it is only the eyes that cannot see and that cannot stop the person’s intellectual functioning even though the approach to knowledge acquisition differs. Negative attitudes are therefore the culprit resulting in seeing the carrying out of tracer studies on PWDs as a waste of time and resources. These are enough educators to show that universities are fertile grounds for the little consideration even given to PWDs by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [Pessy].

The Zim-Asset goals may not be easy to attain in Zimbabwe if issues of equality and equity in relation to PWDs are not properly addressed [Rossa].

Kariwo (2007) estimates that despite the rapid expansion of higher education (HE) systems in Zimbabwe in response to after independence demands an excess of about 8,000 students meeting the entry requirements failed to secure university places in the country. One wonders why issues of PWDs continue to be a cause of concern when as equally noted by Chataika (2010) Zimbabwe is counted as one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa with legislation on disability due to its 1992 Disabled Persons Act, amended in 1996 and 2006. Can this Act be taken as the Bible to disability issues in Zimbabwe. If not there is probably need to critically analyse it in relation to current inclusive practices calls. This Act should be a biding force mandating institutions of HE to establish vibrant Disability Resources Centres (DRCs) which should strictly carry out tracer studies on PWDs and keep accurate records and statistics of PWDs who access HE, complete their, get employed; fail to get employed and/or drop-out and reasons for drop-outs. Such information as proposed by the researchers should always stay within reach whenever institutions, organisations and governments want to use them and not carry survey every year because there are no statistics in institutional data bases.
This is supported by CATEA (2006) who recognises the goodness and robustness of ODL programmes to PWDs but goes on to propose that lack of opportunities for people with visual impairments [PWDs] to use supportive technology with a software which widens their understanding prohibits them to engage in gainful learning. As observed by the authors, the availability of resources equally needed to be supported by students’ efforts and self determination too. In view to all that, Arditi, (2012) proposes that it may be safe to say that accessibility of ODL programmes by people with visual impairment (VI) is defined by the existence of relevant educational material and the learners’ characteristics and personality. In other words, ODL programmes were not fully equipped to respond to the learning needs of people with VI. Presley, (2009); Ko & Rossen (2001) and Race (1989) confirm that provision of educational materials for varied PWDs was an absent issues in most plans of institutions of HE.

Ways of making ODL institutions accessible to people with disabilities

Basing on the challenges the authors went through in obtaining the statistics of PWDs who had completed their studies at one of the ODL institution in Zimbabwe the study recommended that academic registry and student affairs department should improve on their record keeping methods or be work-shopped by specialists from the Records and Archives Department. The ODL institution in Zimbabwe seems reluctant to replace lecturers skilled in sensory impairment. For example, at one regional centre a visual impairment specialist left the region years back but is still not replaced yet created gaps in other departments are always timely filled [Kessie and idea also raised by Pessy].

Government should come up with a policy that mandates all universities to provide and accord them similar facilities so that PWDs have a wider choice rather than have one university monopolizing the recruitment of PWDs [Nicky and idea was also supported by Busie].

Universities should keep records of PWDs who study with them and keep tracking them to establish the strengths of their programmes and continue to improve them with a bias towards learning needs of PWDs [Rossa].

Despite gains made in legislation PWDs continue to be invisible in plans of government, organastions and institutions. Thus, Liakou and Manousou (n.d.) comment that, states and countries have fought many battles of independence and won but the battle of formidable barriers limiting PWDs from enjoying equity and equality opportunities seems to be a battle with victory uncertainty. In view to this, Ko & Rossen (2001) call on ODL institutions to establish enabling strategies and restructure deliberate legal frameworks which recognise PWDs as equal recipient where ODL is applicable across all levels of education to maintain a balanced recruitment where the access of PWDs is widened and reinforced. According to Liakou and Manousou (n.d.) PWDs should be able to live with dignity and self worth in this age of technology equally contribute to their social and economical transformations and of the development of their country, such as, Zim-Asset where they enjoy their citizenship status both as independent being and contributors to local and international developments.
Conclusion

In view of the above discussion this study concludes that tracer studies are not a choice but an area indispensable in education which ODL institutions cannot afford not to offer. ODL universities cannot afford to operate without quality instrument in particular tracer studies given that tracer studies help to institutions to transform their images with the public. The study established that tracer studies on ODL graduates and even those from conventional institutions promote independent living and also enhances the social and economic transformations of both PWDs and their communities.

Recommendations

The findings from the study recommended the following:

• That ODL institutions keep an annually updated tracer study which provides comprehensive information in the following areas whereas about of their graduates with PWDs through encouraging them to be members of the alumni where the keep in touch on their progress, challenges, and share new on how best ODL institutions could continue to improve their systems so that PWDs maximally benefit in their studies.
• There is need for the students affairs department to help the ODL institutions maintain its relationships with alumni graduates with disabilities.
• That ODL institutions consider issues of tracer studies as matters of quality assurance and quality control for sustainable quality.
• That Faculties and departments development interest on tracers studies as monitoring and evaluation instruments to further improve their systems towards PWDs.
• That the government equally plays an active role into ODL institutions by developing policies which mandate universities to take tracer study as quality control instruments.
• There was need for further studies on tracer studies to enhance the quality of programmes offered by ODL and conventional institutions. Such studies should present statistical analysis in levels to enable planners to establish where most PWDs drop out from their studies, that is, from pre-school to tertiary education.
• There was need for the Zimbabwean country to carry out a survey to find out why few PWDs completed their secondary education resulting in insignificant numbers accessing tertiary education with a view to come up with informed strategies which will promote post-primary and secondary education entry by PWDs in Zimbabwe.

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