Inclusive Education: Meeting The Needs Of People With Disabilities Through Open And Distance Learning

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Abstract

Inclusive education should be viewed as making the invisible visible. The most marginalised groups are often the invisible in society. This includes people with disabilities. Inclusive education, therefore, seeks to address the learning needs of all people with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. The paper focuses mainly on the inclusion of people with disabilities in open and distance learning. Against this backdrop, the paper critically examined the challenges they face; benefits of inclusive education and lastly, recommended ways and strategies that would help open and distance learning through inclusive education to make Education for All a reality.

Key words: Inclusive Education, Disabilities, Meeting, Needs, Open and Distance Learning.

Introduction

Education has been recognised and adopted as a tool par excellence for individual, communal and national development. There is no gain saying that education is the bedrock of development in any nation. Education is therefore, a fundamental right and key to social and economic development. Nigeria, like other progressive countries in the world continues to reaffirm the goals set by the World Conference on Education for All (Jometin, 1990) through the Delhi Declaration (1993) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) to meet the basic learning needs of all citizens. “Education for all” is the slogan of this millennium Nigeria is a party to the global movement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). All of these are to ensure that due attention is given to provide equal access to quality education for all. The right to education is a basic human right and nobody should be denied the opportunity to go to school. Disability definitely should not be a barrier to acquiring skills and education.

Disability is very common worldwide. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that about 500 million people live with disability worldwide, with about 75% living in the developing countries (Mickailakis, 1997, Lang and Upah, 2008). In Nigeria WHO estimates put the number of people with disability at 19 million or approximately 20% of the country’s population (Lang and Upah, 2009). Learners with disabilities are those with physical and mobility difficulties, hearing impairments, visual impairments, specific learning difficulties including dyslexia, medical conditions and mental problems. The people are often excluded from the mainstream of society and hence may not contribute to the development of the society at all or optimally (Mji et al, 2009). For people with disability, teaching and learning approaches of the conventional formal setting may be inappropriate or even behaviourally counter-productive. The Open and Distance learning (ODL) system provides opportunities for marginalised groups of learners such as the...
disabled to access educational opportunities. ODL is ideally equipped to address the issue of this group of learners.

**Statement of problem**

Disability is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Poverty makes people more vulnerable to disability and disability reinforces and deepens poverty (Mji et al., 2009). Persons with disabilities are regarded as some of the most socially excluded groups in all societies today. It is increasingly being recognised that bringing people with disabilities into development mainstream will have a significant effect in the plan to cut poverty and contribute to development in the developing world. Yet, not much has been achieved in this regard, even in Nigeria where the government has formulated a few policies and legislations regarding the education of people with disability. It is against this background that this paper has made an attempt to discuss inclusive education in ODL as a strategy for reaching the disabled, barriers which the students with various disabilities face in getting equal educational opportunities, benefits of inclusive education in ODL as well as recommendations that can make inclusive education through ODL deliver and increase educational opportunities for the disabled.

**Purpose of study**

The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that inclusive education through ODL can eradicate the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in education, thereby helping in the realisation of the goals set by the Jomtien World Conference on Education for all (1990), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), the Millenium Development Goals (2000), Education for All (EFA) and Disability United Nations Conference (2005).

**Inclusive education**

Inclusive education means that “schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, children street and working children from remote or nomadic populations, children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups”, (UNESCO, 1994, Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, p. 6). Inclusive education can be defined as ‘the disabled and non-disabled young people learning together in colleges and universities with appropriate networks of support (Fuller, Bradley & Healey, 2004). Inclusion here simply means enabling students to participate in the life and work of mainstream institutions to the best of their abilities in accordance to their needs.

According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive education means creating schools that welcome all learners regardless of their characteristics, disadvantages or difficulties. It is concerned with all learners, with a focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities such as learners with special needs and disabilities, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities.

The vision of inclusive education is that education is to be seen as a right for all and not a privilege for the few. Inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to overcome the barriers that prevent some learners from participating fully in education. It enables both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment rather than see it as a problem.

Inclusive education is therefore about access and quality and is a means for achieving the fundamental aspirations as highlighted in the EFA and MDG Action Framework (Stubbs, 2002).

Inclusive Education through Open and Distance Learning
According to Philips (2000), Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as defined by the Commonwealth of Learning, is the physical separation of learner from the teacher and the use of unconventional teaching methodologies and informational and communication technologies (ICTs) to bridge the separation. ODL provides education to anyone, anytime and anywhere with the use of multiple media and technology. The ‘Open’ nature of distance learning might be formally institutionalised in such policies as open admissions and freedom of selection of what, when and where to learn. The openness of distance learning is also seen in relatively flexible organisational structures, delivery and communication patterns as well as the use of various technologies to support learning (Chikukwa and Chimbwanda, 2013).

Open and distance learning represents an approach that focuses on opening access to education and training, provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of internet-based information technologies, and in particular the Worldwide levels. There is evidence that it can lead to innovation in mainstream education and may even have effects beyond the realm of education itself. It is committed to increasing access, equality and equity and achieving the education for all goals set in Dakar and the Millennium Development Summit (www.unesco.org/bpi). Open and distance learning techniques include new technologies such as CD-ROMS, television and radio satellite broadcasting).

The open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education with several in-built flexibilities of place and pace of education has emerged as a potential alternative mode of education. The increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) under the ODL mode of education has enabled the learner to increase the duration of didactic interaction with tutor (Pant, 2007).

Education of disabled people has come a long way; from special to integrated and now from integrated to inclusive. “Education for all” is the slogan of this millennium. Providing education to the unreached including people with various disabilities is one of the prime goals of all conventional, correspondence and distance education institutions. Quality education not only ensures an all-round development but also produces masterminds who can contribute to the growth of the nation. The growth and development does not mean the development of a single individual, but the development of all sections and all groups in the society. The educational needs of people with various disabilities can be addressed through open and distance learning system to a large extent (Ramakrishna and Nembiakkim (2012). Open educational institutions are moving towards making education individualised and need based for people with special needs.

ODL is seen as flexible and appropriately inclusive to deliver inclusive education. The advent of technology and open and distance learning could go a long way in widening accessibility to education for the majority of people with disabilities, flexibly so that the learning process can go on. The disabled may be able to access materials from home, which is seen as the safest, least expensive environment. This indeed could be incorporated with occasional attendance at local study centres and a form of blended learning that incorporates Open Educational Resources (OERs) such as openlearn. (Khokhar, 2007).

It may be impossible to bring together a group of people with a common desire to increase their knowledge but it is possible to bring the University to them by adapting study organisation and study contents to the need of the disadvantaged students in general and
specifically for disabled. This group needs a system of services and aids in order to be able to realise independent forms of studying and learning. It can easily be achieved by adopting inclusive practices and various support mechanisms.

Benefits of Inclusive Education

- Inclusiveness creates a classroom environment that respects and values diversity
- Inclusive education develops individual strengths and gifts, with help and appropriate expectations for each child
- It is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes
- It helps to develop friendships with a wide variety of other students, each with their own individual needs and abilities
- It fosters a school culture of respect and belonging, inclusive education and provides opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences
- Inclusive education positively affects both the school and community to appreciate diversity thereby building a sense of strong community and it helps to achieve education for all
- It improves efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system
- It helps the disabled to develop social skills, better academic achievements and promotes citizenship

Despite the declaration of full participation in the disability agenda of the United Nations by developing nations, people with disabilities in developing nations are still faced with some challenges.

The following are some of the barriers which the disabled students face during their studies:

- Lack of adequate funding
- Lack of adequate facilities
- Lack of effectiveness of legislation and policy on disability issues and special education programme
- Mobility problems
- Shortage of qualified staff
- Regular teachers are not adequately trained to provide diversified instructional methods or to cope with the needs of diverse learners (UNESCO 2003).
- Lack of learning materials such as assistive technology devices
- Lack of appropriate assessment method
- Discrimination from non-disabled peers
- Problems in accessing the study materials

The above challenges have contributed to a minimal enrolment of students with disabilities at higher learning institutions and graduation of skilled individuals (Kitula, Minnago & Mntambo, 2012).

As a result of these challenges, a good number of these disabled students are likely to leave the university before attaining a degree than their counterparts without disabilities.

The Role of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in Inclusive Education

In view of Nigeria’s huge population of
over 140 million and the positions the country occupies on the African continent, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is appropriately positioned to drive the United Nations declaration of “Education for All” in Nigeria through open and distance learning (ODL). ODL is a vehicle for enhancing access to, and democratising education. Access and equity bring education to the door step of every Nigerian, thereby taking the burden of distance out of education and making it reachable to all. NOUN is providing high quality, innovative and need based education at different levels in a flexible manner and at a reasonable cost.

NOUN is involved in inclusive education which provides functional, accessible and equal education for all. In providing opportunities for previously marginalised groups of learners to access educational opportunities, the university established a functional collaborative relationship with the Anglo-Nigeria Welfare Association for the Blind (ANWAB) to transcribe study material, assessment and examination packs into Braille. The outcome of this collaboration has culminated in the production and distribution of study material, assessment and examination packs transcribed into Braille using computerised Braille embossing facilities for blind NOUN students.

The University started with the enrolment of a visually impaired student in its Bauchi Study Centre in 2006. Ever since this breakthrough the number of physically challenged students who are enrolling for programmes in NOUN has continued to increase. It is instructive to mention here that not less than 300 of such persons are studying various programmes in the university all over the country.

NOUN uses the emerging media formats as effective tools to address the needs of every learner with disability. NOUN is a single mode distance learning institution and one of its goals is to attain the goals of education for all (EFA) to which the Federal Government made commitment at the World Forum in Dakar, 2000. It is worth mentioning here that during the 3rd Convocation Ceremony of the university on the 18th of January, 2014, a visually impaired student graduated with a masters degree in Peace and Conflict Resolution.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the ODL system by virtue of its openness, flexibility, trans-model educational delivery and use of ICT, is ideally equipped to address the issue of inclusion of disabled persons in higher education. If the right to education for all is to become a reality, persons with special needs must be integrated into the knowledge economy which ensures that they are provided with a learning environment that is akin to that of their peers. Education is not simply about making schools available for those who are already able to access them. It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion.

Recommendations

Given the challenges facing students with disabilities and the extent NOUN has gone in providing educational opportunities for the visually impaired in particular and the disabled in general, much needs to be done. It is in this light that the following recommendations are made:

- Appropriate provisions for learners with disabilities should become a core element of ODL institutions and be reflected in their policies, management processes, strategic planning and resource allocation
- The learning schedule and evaluation system for learners with disabilities should be necessarily protean, allowing
for breaks and interruptions, rescheduling of assignments and examinations additional time for completion and provision of support services which should take into consideration the individual needs

- Academic facilities like placement, counselling as well as academic resources such as online libraries and others must be made available to learners with disabilities
- Core modules in ODL institutions should be presented in a way that it will meet the requirements of each and every learner. This may be expensive but it will help in achieving the goal of Education for All
- All staff should be provided with relevant training in providing support and services in the context of special education as well as new I.T. devices.. I.C T. training for staff in the ODL institutions especially the academic staff would enable them to maximise the use of all internet features and emerging I.T. devices.
- Special education committees should be set up in ODL institutions to address the special needs of learners with disabilities, ensure their participation and provide effective mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation policies, and collection of feedback from the learners who are its beneficiaries
- Adapted equipment such as talking computers, alternative keyboard, mouse or speech input to gain access to internet based course materials and other software that are inclusive of people with sensory and mobility impairment should be introduced in ODL institutions
- Universal design principles which allow all potential students to access course material and fully participate in activities should be applied in ODL institutions
- In addition to universal design, assistive facilities such as Braille typewriter, printout, screen reader software, large print or electronic text for visually impaired and blind students should be made available. Sign language interpreter Telecommunication Relay Service (TRS), captioning and audio-taped books should be provided for the learning of the visually impaired and deaf students.
- Disabled students should be valued as active meaning makers with the potential power to transform their own and others’ educational experience to fulfill their educational goals.
- Issues of preparedness of the learners should be addressed by ODL providers to allow disabled learners engage successfully and not dropout because of technological and social limitations
- ODL materials should address the need for pedagogy of recognition where diverse learners can recognise their own experiences and identities in the curriculum. This means that the disabled would find themselves “visible in the materials”
- Segregation or stigmatisation of students should be avoided. The privacy of all students be taken care off.
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