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ACCESS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES TO HIGHER EDUCATION: OPENING UP HIGHER EDUCATION FOR INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES.

Introduction

Not much is happening in the world in terms of accessing higher education by people with disabilities. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) affirms that all people with disabilities have a right to education. This means that there should be no discrimination as education is a fundamental human right. UNCHPD (2006) proceeds to say that all countries should ensure inclusive education at all levels and lifelong learning. Statistics available on those with disabilities show that only a handful are accessing meaningful quality education.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) World Report on Disability published in 2011 estimates that more than a billion people in the world or 15% of the entire world population live with some form of

disability. Most of these are found in the low income countries and in the poorest sector of the developed countries. This is further confirmed by Mariga, McConkey, and Myezwa, (2014) in their study of Lesotho, Zanzibar and Tanzania. The Secretariat of the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2012) in a study on education for children with disabilities in Southern Africa found out that the children with disabilities are mostly marginalised. This means that access to education and other services are beyond their reach. This failure to access education has a major effect on the quality of their lives as they end up living at the periphery of humanity without any opportunities to come out of their rut. Zimbabwe has embraced the idea of giving access to people with disabilities creating conducive learning environments (Chimonyo, Mamvura, Kaputa, Hlatywayo, Munemo, Nyatsanza and Mutandwa, 2011; 2014)

Access as a means of creating Inclusive societies

Access means the entry by People with disabilities in to higher education. This can only be achieved by providing inclusive education which enables

all people to access education at different levels and focus. Inclusive education according to UNESCO (2009) is a way of addressing and responding to the different needs of all children, youths and adults by increasing their participation in learning, cultures and communities and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. Chimonyo et al (2011; 2014) says that it involves changes in:

- Modifications in content;
- Approaches;
- Structures and strategies.

Inclusive education is based on the following;

1. a thorough needs assessment
2. provision of assistive devices
3. assistance with transport
4. training of communities, parents, guardians, teachers, lecturers and other students
5. development and adaptation of infrastructure to provide access to all students

6. formation of support groups
7. curriculum and policy reviews
8. continuous capacitation of all academics in all faculties so as to make them inclusive

People with disabilities live with different types of disabilities. According to Kaputa, Hlatywayo, Munemo and Mupandasekwa (2014) these may be physical, making it hard for them to move freely and access parts of their environment. They may be sensory involving poor or lack of vision or hearing making them incapable of moving in their surroundings freely and without any hindrances. They may also be mental disability resulting in low intellectual capacity. However, there are other invisible disabilities like learning disabilities which may affect the ability to read, write and do calculations. By implementing the bases of inclusive education listed above, Higher Education will become accessible to all.

Models of Inclusive societies

There are many models which explain inclusive societies but two are pertinent in this particular situation. Ratcliffe (2004) points out the

following two models of inclusive society explicate inclusive societies. The first one is the liberal model, according to Ratcliffe (2004:6) ‘There is a single political culture in the public sphere but substantial diversity in the private lives of individuals and communities’. The second one is the plural Model; here ‘there is both unity and diversity in public life and in communities. Identities overlap and are interdependent and develop common features’ (Ratcliffe, 2004:6). The second model explains the type of inclusive society which should be created if access to Higher Education is to be afforded to PWDs. It means that the different communities of PWDs for example, those with physical disabilities, those with visual impairment, and those with invisible disabilities should be able to be provided for in a single institution and ultimately should live in harmony in the inclusive societies in the country.

An inclusive society has the following attributes:

- Respect for difference
- Spirit of mutual tolerance

- Acceptance that groups or communities might want to exercise their right to be different (Ratcliffe, 2004)

There are challenges which are encountered in the endeavour to create inclusive societies namely the difficulty of defining what exactly should be done.

One of the first priorities is the creation of enabling legislation as shown in the literature. Enabling policies have been put up over the decades and some of them have been revised with parties ratifying them and domesticating them in their countries but positive outcomes have been elusive. Legislation alone, the world is learning, cannot create inclusive societies. This is because issues of diversity are embroiled in attitudes and beliefs. There is no consensus on how access to higher education, even in basic education, should be handled. Chimonyo et al (2011) observed that issues of accessibility through inclusive education have been a subject of global meetings such as:

- The world conference on education, in Jomtiem Thailand (1990) – Education for all

- World conference on special needs education in Salamanca (Spain) – accommodate all children regardless of disability and other conditions
- The world education forum in Dakar (2000) – positive action to remove barrier to education
- The convention on the rights of persons with disabilities 2007, ratified by Zimbabwe in 2013 – provide an inclusive education at all levels (including higher education) and lifelong learning.

Access of People with Disabilities to Higher Education

How accessible are universities, tertiary institutions to people with physical disabilities.

Researchers like Kochung (2011) and Mutswanga (2013) in studies in Kenya and Zimbabwe found that Persons with disabilities are unable to access higher education due to external and internal barriers like unclear legibility criteria, negative attitude, and inaccessible infrastructure.

For people with visual impairments Chikukwa and Chimbwanda (2013) in a study of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) established that visually impaired students face numerous challenges in their effort to access the higher education.

Mutswanga (2014) for people with hearing impairments, he found that Zimbabwean Universities had exclusive policies and practices. This is characterised by ad hoc support services to deaf education.

Chataika (2010) in a study of personal experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Zimbabwe proved that they faced attitudinal, physical and institutional barriers.

Opening up Higher education for inclusive societies

Opening up higher education for inclusive societies can only be achieved if the following are done.

1. Consensus: In line with Ratcliffe (2004) Universities and other tertiary institutions together with society need to come up with a consensus on how accessibility can be achieved for the various communities which make up those people living with disabilities.

There should be a transformation between the majority with power and the minorities with less power the PWDs.

2. Attitudes: Attitudes should change in line with the consensus building. Some researchers advocate for the adherence to the Ubuntu/unhu philosophy as a way of ensuring accessibility for PWDs.
3. Policy: There is need for adherence to international, national and local policies. Higher Education must put in place domesticated policies to enable access to Higher Education in specific contexts. Munemo and Tom (2013) in their study of PWDs in ZOU recommended that comprehensive legislation should be enacted to ensure unconditional access to modern assistive technology by people with visual impairments. Chataika (2010) recommends the improvement of policy development and practices linking up government, university support departments and faculties.
4. Resources: Resources must be provided to eliminate attitudinal, environment, institutional barriers. The use of technology must not be underestimated in the endeavours to provide access to PWDs to

Higher Education. Open and Distance Learning aligns itself to the use of e learning and other technologies as students are able to access quality higher education in the comfort of their homes. Human resources both academics and administrative staff must be capacitated to provide high quality service both online and face to face to the PWDs. This will improve retention as PWDs are prone to drop out once circumstances are hostile to them.

5. Consultations: Needs assessment with PWDs and their organisations are important to establish if the education being offered is of value to them and the whole society. during the monitoring and evaluation of the programmes
6. Monitoring and evaluation: This should be research based focusing on identification of strengths and weaknesses. Chataika in Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika and Bell,(2014) recommends the need to monitor policy implementation across universities in Africa.
7. Grants: A financial vehicle must be put in place to award grants and scholarships to PWDs. These can also be used to support students

with disabilities during attachments, teaching practice, field work and internships.

8. Community and industry linkages: These should be the life line of all endeavours for the promotion of access by PWDs to Higher Education. Community and industry links by Higher education will guarantee that students are gainfully employed after graduation.

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