



Making Open and Distance Learning Inclusive: The Zimbabwe Open University's Experience with People with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

People with disabilities (PWDs) have always been at the peripheral of formal education programmes. Historically their education has been a result of handouts from benevolent missionaries and NGOs. Studies have shown that people with disabilities if afforded the chance to learn can also perform as well as any able bodied person benefiting and achieving adequate independent living standards (Chimedza and Peters, 2001). Key to meaningful and effective inclusion is the creation and provision of suitable study materials (Modesto and Tau, 2009). This study, therefore, was on how Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is including PWDs in its programmes specifically focusing on the creation and provision of appropriate study materials. A qualitative survey design using a semi structured interview schedule was used to collect data from Department chairpersons, the Academic registry managers and the Materials Development Unit (MDU) editors. Themes were developed from the collected data and analysed. The findings show that ZOU is including PWDs but is facing problems of developing and providing adequate study materials for some disabilities. The study recommends that disability specialists be involved in the creation and development of study materials both in print and electronically. Collaboration with organization of and for people with disabilities and other Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions will help bring critical expertise together to improve the inclusion of many PWDs into ODL.

INTRODUCTION

Open and distance learning (ODL) is not the preserve of a selected few but was meant for all those who had not had an opportunity for tertiary education for various reasons (Peters 2000). People with disabilities (PWDs) have always been at the peripheral for formal education. This naturally places them as one of the candidates of ODL. Historically their education was a result of handouts from benevolent Christian missionaries and non Government Organisations (NGOs). Current studies have shown that PWDs if afforded the chance to learn can also perform as well as any able bodied person, benefiting and achieving adequate independent living standards (Chimedza and Peters (2001). The history of ODL unfortunately shows that PWDs were not to access it due to their inability to get on board like the other marginalized groups. Peters (2000) points out that in South Africa the University of South Africa (UNISA) was able to offer university education to many of black Africans who were denied this by the apartheid education system which favoured white people. Zimbabwe was not an exception, although they were many correspondence colleges these mainly catered for the hordes of black youths who were denied a university education by the narrow selection entrance system after the completion of primary education which existed before independence in 1980. Peters, (2004) mentions that, the provision of primary education was highly restricted to people with disabilities. In this paper I will focus on what is being done by the Zimbabwe Open University to provide access to PWDs through the development and provision of study material in some of its programmes.

Background to the study

The world health organization says that ten percent (10%) of the world population is made up of people with disabilities. Lindqvist (1999) writes that the major problem in the field of disability is the lack of access to education for both children and adults with disabilities. He proceeds to say that as education is a fundamental right for all, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and protected through various international conventions, this is a serious problem. Because of the various disparities in the provision of education in the different African countries between those with disabilities and those without there is need to make inclusion a priority if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 2015 on education are to be realized. The Dakar Framework for Action adopted a World Declaration on Education for all (EFA) in 2000 which identified Inclusive Education (IE) as a key strategy for the development of EFA. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in (1994) endorsed by ninety two (92) governments and twenty five international organizations at the world conference on Special Needs Education had previously agreed to the development of

inclusive societies and achieving education for all in the entire education system (Peters 2004). The development of ODL has been part of this process of providing inclusive settings for all learners in order to achieve education for all.

Modesto and Tan (2009) points out that key to meaningful and effective inclusion is the creation and provision of suitable study materials. ODL institutions can enroll as many PWDs as they want but if these are not provided with suitable study materials they experience a more pronounced segregation than those who are not in the programmes. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the largest ODL institution in Zimbabwe and its vision is to be at the door step of every individual regardless of disability. Naturally in response to this vision people with disabilities have enrolled themselves at this institution. This study therefore was on how ZOU is including PWDs in its programmes specifically focusing on the creation and provision of appropriate study materials as a means to fulfilling this object.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following questions;

- Who are the excluded learners?
- What is the current policy on the PWDs in ZOU?
- How has the university catered for their study material?
- What are their experiences in the ZOU?
- How should ZOU address their study material needs?

Definitions

In an inclusive environment the definition of ODL needs to take into consideration the characteristics of people with disabilities. Freeman (1997:1) defines an open learning system as “a system where learners are substantially responsible for their own learning but are still formally enrolled in a system which includes others learners.” This means that the Learners with disabilities or PWDs (as I will call them in this study) must be have access to their study materials without significant hindrance to their performance just like the other students. The ODL institution must avoid placing them in a double jeopardy from both the disability and the inaccessibility of the study material. Learners with disability who are part of the people with disabilities exhibit limitations in the use of various parts of their bodies which make it necessary to provide them with assistive devices and a barrier free environment. The adaptation of study materials is one way of ensuring their inclusion to the ODL environment.

Inclusion is the principle that all learners learn together, whenever possible, regardless of any

difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive settings like ODL institutions must meet all their needs.

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the concepts of inclusion and ODL as fundamental principles which can be used to meet the needs of people with disabilities. I have

adopted the UNESCO (2001) input –process-outcome – context framework for Inclusive Education which was generated from the EFA 2002 Monitoring report (UNESCO) to guide this study. This framework in figure 1 is adopted for use with Open and Distance Learning in order to help them provide adequate study materials to their learners.

Figure 1: An Input- process-outcome-context framework for Inclusive Open and Distance Learning

Inputs	Process	Outcomes
ODL Institution • Curriculum content • Textbook and learning materials • Morale and commitment • Accessible facilities • Braille/ Sign language support	ODL Institution Climate • Flexible curriculum • Incentives • Integrated whole institution system • Collaborative support teams	Achievement • Good Citizenship • Personal development • Positive attitude towards learning • Self esteem Attainment • Formal completion • Diploma/ Degree qualification Standards • Desired outcomes • Institution level objectives • Impact on family & Community • Supportive Policy
Student Characteristics • Diverse characteristics valued and supported • Disability, gender at risk, refugees minorities low income	Teaching/ Learning • Sufficient learning time • Active teaching methods • Adopted curriculum Material to meet individual needs • Active student participation • Appropriate supports • Clear roles and responsibilities	
Family/ Community Characteristics • Attitudes • Household income • Economic conditions • Culture/ religious factors • Multi-sector coordination and collaboration		
	Contextual Factor	
• Policies • Coordination	• Goals • Funding Allocation	• Management • Community participation • Community sensitisation and awareness

Adapted from Peters 2004. Inclusive Education: An EFA Strategy for all Children.

This framework must be viewed from two angles; the inclusive and the ODL. Inclusion must be seen as a dynamic process of participation of people within a network of relationships. UNESCO (2001) quoting the Brazil Ministry of Education, Secretary of Special Needs Education sees inclusion as a democratic perspective of regular and universal public education. In figure 1 the framework is divided into inputs, process and outcomes. Under inputs three factors are crucial, that is the ODL institution, the student characteristics and the family or community inputs. The ODL institution provides textbooks and materials and also accessible facilities. Modesto and Tan (2009) mention that the course writers must consider the way course material will be used. This is a vital input which hinges on the characteristics of learners for whom materials are to be written. In ODL it is incumbent of the course team to also include specialists in disability issues who would help in ensuring that the study material responds to the different needs of the PWDs. Multi Sector coordination and collaboration is essential in bringing together elements into the course team which will ensure the relevance of the material.

During the process stage the material should be flexible enough to allow the PWDs to participate in tutorials without hindrances. An integrated whole institution system which ensures that the study material is issued to the PWD upon registration should be put in place. The teaching learning period must make sure of the adapted material through necessary supports in the form of on line material or teams of disability specialists created to support students. Such teams will assess the effectiveness of the material through student feedbacks.

The outcome section shows issues to do with achievement, attainment and standards. The learner achieves personal development enhancing a positive attitude towards learning. They manage to complete their degree or diploma. The ODL institution reaches appropriate standards and this has a positive impact on society.

The framework is affected by three fundamental contextual factors these being policies, funding and management. A positive disability policy will ensure that everybody is aware of what should be done when meeting the needs of the PWDs. Adequate funding is important if appropriate study materials are to be provided and barrier free environments developed. Lastly the inclusion of PWDs needs to be properly managed it cannot be left to chance alone.

Literature Review

The literature looks at the following areas; who are the PWDs who have self included themselves into ODL programmes; current policy on inclusion in ODL; the development and distribution of study material; the PWDs experiences of ODL study material and provision and lastly ways in which study material challenges can be overcome.

There are many categories of disability being used in the world and these either define the person by their educational needs or biological makeup called "objective causes". Thus in the Warnock report of 1978, in Britain, disability is defined on the need for special education service (Gipps et al 1999). Objective cause looks at the type of disability, which have a clear biological cause (Peters 2004). Most countries use the following four categories; physical disability, blindness, deafness and mental retardation to allocate services.

The World Health Organization (WHO) International classification of functioning and Disability (ICF) organizes disability along two dimensions: Functioning and disability (including body functions and participation in society) and contextual factors (environmental and personal). Disability should therefore be viewed as constructed through the interaction between the individual and the environment. ODL institutions should therefore focus on kinds and levels of interventions appropriate to the needs of PWDs within specific programmes.

In 1991 the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights estimated that about ten percent (10%) of people in the world have a physical, mental or sensory impairment (Peters 2004). Ultimately this affects about 25% of the world population since these persons reside in families and communities. Habibi (1999) estimates that 1% to 5% of children and youth with disabilities attend school in developing countries from an estimated population of 120 million children with disabilities in developing countries. This is an indicator of the number of adults and youths with disabilities attending tertiary education. The advent of inclusive education means that more of them will require university education just like their able bodied peers. This responds to what Peters (2004) says that significant numbers of children and youth with disabilities are largely excluded from education opportunities in developing countries.

Benza (2001) in a study of the Zimbabwe Open University mentions that its creation extended tertiary education to people who may have never had an opportunity to acquire degrees. He writes that it gave access to tertiary education to the previously marginalized men and women folk. However this study does not point out the numbers of PWDs who have benefited from this phenomenon.

There are few studies to my knowledge which have been carried out on PWDs in ODL in developing countries. However there is now growing interest in the areas as shown by a paper presented by L. Goitseman and J. Bahuma at the Distance Education Association for Southern Africa (DEASA) Conference in Malawi on 18 September in 2010 titled "Opening access to Learners with Special Needs in the provision of education through open and distance learning mode."

Policy has been a major driving factor in providing for people with disabilities in ordinary education settings. In ODL institutions missions or philosophies should guide their mandate to students.

The provision of study material should be guided by clear mission statement and vision of the organization as Modesto and Tau (2009) mention.

Such a position is then articulated into policy which then guides how the study material is to be developed. Izuagie (2001:14) articulating ZOU policy on study material development suggests that there is need to develop a policy "that allows a measure of academic autonomy that provides scope for a full scale ODL study material development for internal and external markets." Such a policy would provide course designers the opportunity to be creative rather than just concentrating on the average learner.

The course team approach which is in current use in many ODL institutions is ideal for developing study materials for PWDs who are in programmes because disability specialists can also be included. Collaboration with specialists from NGOs can help in developing appropriate materials. Campus based universities, like the University of Zimbabwe, have built Disability Resource Centres (DRCs) to provide access to PWDs (UZ DRC Brochure, undated). The University of Zimbabwe DRC has gone a long way in providing for PWDs. In their brochure they list a number of activities to help students during lectures, and examinations.

The ZOU has a Student Support Unit which caters for all the students. Mudavanhu, Mvere, Majoni, Mupondi and Kaputa (2004) in a study on students views on Distance Education at ZOU found out those learners in financial dire straits commented on the financial support they were getting from the institution. As indicated by this study it is clear that focus in most studies have not been on learners with disabilities. This maybe because they are not enrolling in the ODL programmes or that their numbers are insignificant to make an impression. Despite this one of the tenets of ODL is that course development should be student driven through needs assessment (Holmberg 1989) and views. If ODL is provide appropriate study materials than it has to find out what their needs and views are so as to afford them access to the content.

PWDs' experiences in ODL are not reflected adequately in current research. Case study done in the United Kingdom documents the experiences of a student with dyslexia who was included in a campus based University (EENET 2005). Dyslexia is a cognitive disability characterized by poor reading such as reversals, additions and omissions. The student had challenges in reading text and also in writing examinations. The study highlights that even in a developing country challenges are met when providing reading material to PWDs.

The development of ODL study material for all learners initially is very expensive but due to the law of demand and supply gradually reduces in cost. Rowntree (1992) suggests three ways in which study materials can be developed, the last two are from Modesto and Tau (2009):

- Using existing off- the shelf learning packages

- Building on existing non-open learning materials e.g. textbooks, videos, etc
- Planning and planning a custom-made package from scratch.
- Hosting a course on behalf of another institution
- Adapted study materials used by another institution

The development of study materials for PWDs can also follow any of the above.

Ferguson (1992) points out that a growing number of researches support the Salamanca statement and its principles on the building of inclusive societies and achieving EFA. Such a situation has already brought in change in the education systems of developing countries. More PWDs are being included into the ordinary schools and colleges and are self including themselves into ODL institutions. ODL institutions which have made it their policy to include these excluded learners must make their environments inclusive through their mission statements policy, funding and management. The ZOU is such an institution (Strategic Plan 2004-2009). At ZOU the materials development unit (MDU) created a full time post for a course designer for Disability Issues. The placement of student advisors in all the regions and the creation of a Disability committee with representation from all the academic faculties are meant to help in developing appropriate study materials for learners with Disabilities.

A Disability center like the one at the University of Zimbabwe helps in the creation of a centre of excellence where PWDs can get the much needed support when things go wrong in the inclusive setting.

The literature presented show that not much has been researched upon in this area of including PWDs. This study therefore is significant because it will reveal what is currently happening in ODL adding on to our knowledge on current provision.

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on the Zimbabwe Open University. A qualitative survey design was used on the various units which deal with learners. Although the study was on a single case the survey design enabled the collection of as much information as possible from the different units (Cohen and Manion, 1989). Two semi structured interview schedules were used to collect data from the sample. Open ended questions enabled the informant the freedom to answer in their own way.

The sampling units consisted of the ZOU departments, academic registry, MDU and Student Support Services. These according to Schofield (2006) represent the full range of the population under consideration. The sampling frame as shown in table 1 identifies the main elements or the sample from the different sample units. The sample consisted of chairpersons and coordinators, Academic registry

managers and editors. Convenience sampling was used to identify all anticipants.

Table 1 Sampling frame

Unit	Participants
Department of Business Administration(DBS)	Chairperson Programme Leader(PL)-Master in Business Administration Programme Coordinator (PC) – MBA Harare Region. Learners (PWDs)
Department of Maths and Statistics (DMS)	Chairperson Programme Leader(PL) Maths and statistics Programme Coordinator(PC) Masvingo Learners (PWDs)
Department Of Education(DE)	Chairperson Programme Leader(PL) Master in Education Programme Coordinator(PC) Harare Learners (PWDs)
Department of Disability Studies and SNE(DDSS)	Chairperson Programme Leader(PL) Programme Coordinator(PC) Mashonaland West Learners (PWDs)
Department Of Development Studies(DDS)	Chairperson Programme Leader(PL) Programme Coordinator(PC) Masvingo Learners (PWDs)
Department of Records Archives Management (DRAM)	Chairperson Programme Leader(PL) Programme Coordinator(PC) Harare Learners (PWDs)
Academic Registry	Manager Records Manager Examination
Materials Development Unit	Manager Editors
Student Services Support	Student Advisor National Centre Student Advisor Masvingo

Visits were made to the various units to collect data. Telephone interviews were carried out for all the PWDS, coordinators and student advisors residing out of Harare. After the collection of all the data, coding was done and themes were developed and analysed. Some data was reduced into numerical scores, quantified and presented. In the next section the results are presented.

Results presentation, analysis and interpretation

The results were presented in the order of the research questions. Triangulation was achieved through comparisons of the results of the academic staff with those of the PWDS.

Demographic Results

The results in table 2 show the participants who took part in the study.

Table 2: Participants of the study

Unit	Participants	Number
DBS	Chairperson	1
	PL MBA	1
	P.C. Harare	1
	PWD	1
DMS	Chairperson	1
	PL	1
	P C. Masvingo	1
	PWD	1
DE	Chairperson	1
	PL MED	1
	P.C Hre	1
	PWD	1
DSSNE	Chairperson	1
	PL	1
	P.C Mashonaland West	2
	PWD	3
DDS	Chair	1
	PL	1
	PWD	1
DRAM	Chair	1
	P.C Harare	1
	Learner PWD	1
Academic Registry	Manager Records	1
	Manager Examinations	1
Student Services Support	Student Advisor NC	1
	Student Advisor Masvingo	1
Total		29

The sample consisted of 28 participants and of these eight (8) were People with Disabilities who were in the indicated departments. The Department of Disability studies had the largest number of learners with disabilities. Table 3 shows the self included learners with disabilities who were currently registered in the ZOU.

This information was provided by the academic registry. The ZOU mission statement has enticed people with disabilities to enroll in the ZOU. The current total of 9 PWDs constitute less than 1% of the student population. Of these one was inactive.

Table 3 Self Included Learners with Disabilities in ZOU

Category	Number	
	Female	Male
Visual Impairment	4	0
Physical Disability	1	3
Multiple Disability	0	1
Total	5	4
Grand Total	9	

More PWDs have visual impairments. This means that they require either study materials in large print or in Braille.

Policy on Students with Disabilities

The ZOU mission statement clearly indicates that it is an institution of all types of learners including PWDs. The creation of a Department of Disability Studies and

Special Needs Education Department and the Student Support Services indicate an awareness of PWDS. The Manager MDU when asked the question on the presence of a policy indicated that there was a draft which was crafted by her department. This draft policy

was not ratified by the ZOU senate. This means that there is no agreed policy on disability in the institution. She indicated that the MDU has a full time post for a course designer in Disability Study materials although it is now vacant. She indicated that it was her post before she was promoted to the post of manager. The policy on Disability issues shows that the university made it its policy to include PWDs. When the other participants were asked about this they indicated lack of knowledge of this policy. It was clear that although the ZOU has a draft policy on PWDs this has not been cascaded to all the other units so that they can prepare for them. The fact that there is a vacancy for a course designer for disability issues is an indication that the MDU can develop material for PWDs.

Student needs and the development of study materials for PWDs

The participants from the MDU and the student support services indicated that the ZOU put in place a committee on disability issues to deal with the development and supply of materials to PWDs in various programmes. The Department of Student Support Services was supposed to coordinate and facilitate the work of this committee. During the study it was clear that PWDs and regional coordinators were not aware of this committee and the role it can play. Table 4 shows both the PWDs' study material needs and the uncoordinated activities being carried out by the various departments to supply material to some PWDs in their programmes.

The results indicate that in terms of materials development not much has been done due to the expense in adapting modules to Braille or large print. In the past Braille modules have been developed with the help of the Dorothy Duncan Centre for the Blind.

Table 4. Learners with Disability Study Material Needs and what has been done

Faculty	Department	Category	Number		Study Material Needs	What has been done by MDU
			Female	Male		
Applied Social Sciences	Disability Studies & SNE	Visual Impairment	1	1	Needs Enlarged print and Braille Modules & Examinations	No material given. One student deferred
	Development Studies	Visual Impairment Blind	1	0	Needs Braille Modules & Exams	No Braille provided. Electronic copies provided
	Psychology	Cerebral Palsy	0	1	Requires more time and Access	Done
Science	Maths and Statistics	Visual Impairment	0	1	Aegrotate Approved Oral Examination	Preparations being carried out
Commerce & Law	DBA	Visual Impairment	0	1	Braille Modules Needed	No material given
Education Art & Humanities	DE	Visual Impairment	0	1	Large Print Size 48 Modules	No material Electronic copy given
Social Sciences	DC	Physical Disability	1	0	Rumps on building student has problems getting study material	Not done due to cost
Social Sciences	DRAM	Physical Disability	1	0	Needs a lift cant climb steps Problems getting study material	Not done Repairs to lifts too expensive

PWDs' feeling towards the study material

Table 5 summarizes the students' feelings towards the current situation.

Table 5: PWDs Feelings towards their study materials	
•	Despite the lack of material I am still motivated to learn with the ZOU.
•	Can I have an electronic copy so that I can enlarge it on my computer?

Despite the challenges they face PWDs show determination to carry on with their programmes. When asked about their students' experiences chairpersons

and coordinators had this to say about the provision of PWDs material as summarized in table 6.

Table 6: Chairpersons and coordinators' comments on the development and provision of study material.	
•	I got to know about the student's problem when he was about to write examination.
•	Inclusive education entails planning materials with PWDs in mind.
•	Oral examinations for blind students must be planned for and well coordinated.
•	Student deferred their examinations because they did not have study materials
•	Proposed for rumps were made but were too expensive
•	There is a communication break down between the units
•	I need training in developing study materials for PWDs

The findings indicate an agreement between the Chairperson, coordinators and student advises that PWDs are not being catered for adequately.

The participants suggested a number of ways of addressing this and these are captured in table 7. Suggestions need to be addressed if ODL is to retain PWDs in their programmes.

Ways of improving study materials for PWDs

Table 7: Suggestions for improving study materials	
•	Create a disability resource centre which is housed in the student support services
•	MDU to work with other organizations e.g. the Dorothy Duncan centre to develop, adapt or create study materials for PWDs
•	Create a Disability policy which stipulates structures and resources for PWDs
•	Staff develop course teams on developing study materials for PWDs

Participants also suggested that PWDs background information should be captured from their application forms, and sent to academic registry. Such information would then be given to MDU or the DRC to help them develop appropriate study materials.

with hidden disabilities like reading, emotional problems or epilepsy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

PWDs are present in the ZOU university programmes. Only less than 1% was present in reflecting the trend in inclusive education of PWDs as shown by the demographic information provided by Habibi (1999) and Peters (2004). However we should be cautious in accepting these results because there could be other PWDs who may be silently suffering without coming forward with their problems; specially those students

Success in providing material to those with visible disabilities will enable the invisible ones to demand their rights also. The recommendation to include disability specialists in the course team is supported by Modesto and Tau (2009) who advise that the development of appropriate study material should involve specialists. PWDs in ZOU are determined to learn and complete their courses despite the lack of materials to some of them. However there are few studies in this area. The ZOU is attempting to address the students' needs in an inclusive manner. This is in line with Peters' (2004) proposal on inclusive education. However, the way it is currently being done is disjointed. There is need for clear structures to promote the developments of study materials for PWDs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following recommendations;

- Disability specialists are involved in the creation and development of study materials both in print and electronically.
- There is collaboration with organization of and for people with disabilities and other institutions to help bring critical expertise together to improve the inclusion of many PWDs into ODL.
- Strengthen policy of study material development and the provision for PWDs in general.

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