

Enabling Success of Students with Disabilities on Teacher-training Distance Education programs in Uganda; A comparison of Two Dual Mode Universities.

THEME: Social Justice

SUBTHEME: Education & Employment of Persons with Disabilities

By

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INTRODUCTION

Education for all is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that all countries should achieve for better livelihood by 2015. This goal caters for both children and adults with disabilities. One of the modes of making education accessible is Distance Education (DE). DE provides postsecondary educational opportunities that may not be present at conventional universities for students with disabilities (Moisy, 2004) and should be all inclusive to enable everyone attend. Access to Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) is a way for disabled people to be included in society (Ebersold, 2004). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), a disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from any impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being (HCDG, 2010). Students with disabilities are individuals who are disadvantaged by reason of any verifiable and persistent physical, learning, cognitive, sensory, psychological, neurological, or temporary impairment that may affect their academic progress (Athabasca University, 2000). Often students with disability suffer from lack of motivation and require much more time to accomplish the task (Parfitt and Nguyen, 1998). Although catering for students with disabilities is in line with the United Nation's (UN's) Declaration, BBC News (2006) noted that disabled people are often excluded from schools and therefore have limited opportunities to find work.

Various universities in Uganda handle students with disabilities using several approaches. In some, access is difficult for student with specific disabilities because of the provisions and practices. Makerere University and Kyambogo University are both public Universities recognized by the National Council for Higher Education and they are two of the thirty one universities in Uganda (NCHE, 2010). They both offer teacher-training DE programs.

Makerere University (MAK) was established in 1922 and became a dual mode public university running DE degree programs in 1991. The programs are managed by the Department of Distance Education (DDE) in the Institute of Adult and continuing Education (IACE) in collaboration with the academic faculties. DDE carries out student support activities to students scattered in many parts of Uganda and who only report to the center for a two-week face-to-face session (Kajumbula, 2009). The first program was the Bachelor of Education External in 1991.

Kyambogo University (KYU) is a public university established in 2001 and has been running DE programs since then. The programs are managed by the Department of Distance Education while the academic component is by the respective faculties. The two DE programs run are the Diploma in Education (Primary) and the Diploma in Special Needs Education.

Uganda's Policy Provisions and Situation

Section 35 of The Constitution of The Republic Of Uganda (1995) emphasises that people with disabilities should be treated with dignity and provides for sign language in Part XXIV (c). Five members of parliament represent people with disabilities, several Acts of Parliament like The Local Government Act (1997), Traffic and Road Safety Act (1998) and the Parliamentary Elections Act (2001) have disability friendly articles. The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (2001) provides for affirmative action to students with disabilities in the admission procedures of higher education institutions. The Act creates the National Council for Higher Education with a disabled persons' representative. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development formulates National Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Strategic Plans aiming at integrating people with disabilities into the community and to equalize opportunities for them.

Formation of the National Union of Disabled Persons in Uganda (NUDIPU) is also another step. This organization brings together other organizations dealing with people with disabilities. NUDIPU (2010) informs that 7.2% of the population has a disability and only 2.2% of People With Disabilities (PWDs) have attained post secondary education.

Categories of Disability

British Columbia Ministry of Education (BCED, 2002) classified disabilities from Level 1 to Level 3. Level 1 includes Dependent Handicapped (A) and Deaf, Blind (B), Level 2 includes Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disabled (C), Physically Disabled, Chronic Health Impaired (D), Visually Impaired (E), Deaf/Hearing Impaired (F) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (G) and Level 3 includes Intensive Behaviour Interventions, and Serious Mental Illness (H). Athabasca University in the revised policy for students with disabilities (2000) mentions disabilities to be categorized as sensory, learning, cognitive, physical, neurological, psychological, and temporary disabilities.

Provisions for Assisting students with respective disabilities in Makerere University and Kyambogo University

The section below gives two parts of the comparison: the provisions specific to particular types of disability and the general administrative provisions in the two universities.

a) Sensory disability

This includes students who are blind, the deaf or hard of hearing and those with speech impediments.

Blindness

This varies from inability to perceive light to inability to view things that are not magnified (CCC, 1999). Students with such are unable to read print material. The following is what the two universities have in place to assist them;

MAK: No provision for totally blind private students in DDE. However, Government students in regular programs are given disability allowances.

KYU: Provision of sighted guides by the university and Braille study materials, examinations and coursework.

This means that both institutions have taken steps to ensure that their programs are accessible to the blind students. However, the private programs of MAK are not accessible. In both universities, large print is used and extra time is given during examinations and tests. CCC (1999) emphasizes that provision of print material in alternate formats like Braille, large print, audiotape, digital sound files, and descriptive video narration improve access to education.

Deaf or hard-of-hearing

Students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing will not be able to hear conversations (CCC, 1999), lecturers' instructions and the auditory content of a Web site, DVD and CD ROMs. Provisions in the two universities include;

MAK: No provision for private students in DDE. However, Government sponsored students are given disability allowances.

KYU: Provision of sign language interpreters during lectures.

This shows that KYU is more accessible to the deaf students than MAK. But this is only during the face-to-face lectures. There is still need to utilize technology to help students off-campus. Faculty should communicate with students who are deaf or hard of hearing using the Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) where a special operator types whatever the instructor says and the words appear on the students display. Student responses are typed back to the TRS operator who reads them aloud to the instructor (CCC, 1999).

Speech Impediments

They are communication disorders where 'normal' speech is disrupted. Someone who is totally unable to speak due to a speech disorder is considered mute (Wikipedia, 2010). Students with speech impediments will not be able to verbally respond to conversations. There are no special provisions to cater for this category in both universities hence limiting their access to University education

b) Learning, Cognitive and Language disabilities

According to Randall (2006) a learning disability (LD) is a neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to information, that is, an unexplained difficulty a person of at least average intelligence has in acquiring basic academic skills. They are often complicated by attention deficit or hyperactivity disorder (CCC, 1999). Cognitive disabilities include general processing difficulties, short term memory, inability to remember proper names, learning disabilities, language delays, and more (WCAG 2.0, 2006). The practices include;

MAK: Counseling for those with attention problems and tutorials to repeat content for the slow learners and those with memory problems.

KYU: No specific action for those with memory problems.

Counseling is a common approach in MAK for improving access. However, those with acute cognitive problems, developmentally delayed or with below average intellectual functioning are not admitted to both institutions since they are not in position to make it to university level.

c) Physical Disabilities

These include paralysis, weakness, limited motion, little control of any of the limbs and uncontrolled sporadic movements which accompany purposeful movements (CCC, 1999). A physical disability does not usually affect a person's ability to perceive information but the individual may find difficulty or fail totally to access certain facilities of the institution. Evans (2009) says that one with a physical disability is not necessarily with a learning or mental or emotional disability. He graduated with honors. Provisions in both universities include;

MAK: B.Ed external lectures and exams take place off-campus where the facilities were designed for able-bodied students. The DDE building has no special access provisions for the physically handicapped. Short Messaging Services (SMS) are used to give students information so that they do not move frequently to access information.

KYU: Use of ramps at lecture rooms, accessible toilets, wheel chairs availed by the university in some cases.

The MAK programs are not as accessible since students have to make a lot of movements without specific assistance as compared to those of KYU.

d) Neurological disabilities

These are disorders of the body's nervous system including structural, biochemical or electrical abnormalities in the brain or spinal cord, or in the nerves leading to paralysis, muscle weakness, poor coordination, loss of sensation, seizures, confusion, pain and altered levels of consciousness (Wikipedia, 2010). Provisions include;

MAK: Students are referred to the University Hospital.

KYU: Students are referred to the university's medical center and are given regular follow-ups and check-ups.

There is care for the students in both institutions. However, this can be improved by preventative measures, physiotherapy, neurorehabilitation, pain management, medication, or operations performed by neurosurgeons (Wikipedia, 2010).

e) Psychological disabilities

These include mood-related disorders (depression), anxiety-related disorders (phobias, panic, posttraumatic stress, obsessive compulsive behaviour patterns), psychoses (schizophrenia) and personality disorders (borderline personality disorder and anti-social personality disorder) (CSUN, 2010). Approaches include;

MAK: Students are referred to the University Counselor. The university has an established counseling unit.

KYU: Students are referred to psychoanalysts and medical doctors.

The approaches are the same in both universities and counseling is considered the most appropriate approach for such students. This encourages them to continue onto the programs.

f) Temporary disabilities.

These occur in a short time period where a person is unable to comfortably accomplish certain tasks. They may include pregnancy, broken limbs, a surgical procedure, post-surgery recovery or a common health condition. These conditions temporarily influence students' ability to fully participate in academic activities (University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, 2008). The provisions include;

MAK: Students are referred to the University Hospital. They are given special attention when identified during a specific activity.

KYU: Students are referred to the university's medical center and are given regular follow-ups and check-ups.

The approaches are the same in both institutions hence supporting access for such students in both universities.

General Administrative Provisions

These cover the activities right from application, admission, mentioning students with disabilities in the mission statement, policy documents mentioning disabled students, registration, academic and administrative support and presence of statistics on disabled students.

Both universities admit students with disabilities but some of the practices differ. The students are required to report to the Dean of Students office which caters for their needs.

A provision for applicants to state any disability they have in the application form is important because it gives confidence to the applicant to apply and show that the institution is all inclusive. Both universities have got a provision where one can specify any disability but for KYU the applicant is required to attach a photograph. The photograph enables the university to assess the nature of disability and help that can be offered. However, enrollment rates and educational attainment of disabled children remain far lower than those of their non-disabled peers (Ture & Wiman, 2001).

When programs start running, it is imperative that students with disabilities are identified as soon as they report to the institution to gather details. In MAK, DE students with disabilities are required to take the initiative to inform the institution of their needs; pursue their studies with the same diligence required of all students; and accept responsibility for the role that they play in their success or failure. In KYU, students are specially identified and are invited for a briefing session as soon as they report. This shows that there is more access to the students in KYU than in MAK. Further to this, in both universities' mission statements, serving students with disabilities is implied although not specifically mentioned. The mission statements are as under;

MAK: To provide innovative teaching, learning, research and services responsive to National and Global needs (MAK website, 2010).

KYU: To advance and promote knowledge and development of skills in science, technology and education and in such other fields having regard for quality, equity and transformation of society (KYU website, 2010).

There is no special emphasis on disabled students in the mission statements and as was noted by Ebersold (2004), this is a common phenomenon in higher institutions of learning. This limits the extent to which strategies can be made to improve access for the disabled.

Both universities note that it is important to cater for students with disabilities and intend to develop specific policies. Ebersold (2004) says that policies on inclusive education for the disabled are still wanting and the situation depends a lot on the institution. In institutions that have not achieved their policy objectives, responsibility for disabled students lays with individuals, seldom the institution as a whole. Without this comprehensive strategy indicating their commitment, institutions admit students with disabilities more as an act of philanthropy than an educational duty inherent in the institution's mission (Ebersold (2004).

Lecturers and support staff on DE programs are not trained to deal with students with disability. In MAK no formal training has been given to lecturers and support staff handling B.Ed External students pertaining to handling students with disabilities. In KYU, there is no mandatory training for staff to handle students with disabilities but all those facilitating on the special needs education program are trained. The skills are still low especially in MAK and this undermines the support given. Further the statistics on students with disabilities are more reliable in KYU than MAK. This state of affairs in MAK makes it impossible to plan for the students on the B.Ed External program since the figures are not readily available. And as CCC (1999) noted, there is absence of statistical data on disabled students in higher education institutions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

From the findings in both universities, the DE programs in KYU are more accessible for students with disabilities than that of MAK. In both universities, students report to the dean of students. The provision of wheel chairs, Braille material, interpreters and ramps at lecture rooms makes the external programs of KYU more accessible. Besides what the universities are doing, program planning as it pertains to disability, time management assistance, monitoring of progress in course work, registration assistance, information and assistance with applications for funding, assistance to obtain alternate format materials if materials cannot be produced on campus advocacy, volunteer assistance including: note taking, exam writing assistance, mobility assistance, taping of readings, library research help, special project help, and assistance and consultation to University staff who have a disability should be taken into account (Athabasca University (2000) and CCC (1999)).

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