

# TRAINING EDUCATORS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN IN GHANA: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY AND CONFERENCE OF HEADS OF SPECIAL SCHOOLS (COHESS)

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## Introduction

Today's training of educators for special needs children in any part of the world particularly, those in the third world or developing countries are plagued with basic needs which are compounded with inadequate teaching and learning materials, space, large enrolment, low socio- economic settings, lack of commitment, greed and selfishness of the individuals besides government's inadequate financial provisions.

Despite these set backs, all educators need to play that dynamic role to bring back the nation Ghana to the map of academic excellence that it has once been known for in Africa and in some other parts of the world.

This means a hard work by educators in Ghana and all stake holders including students or candidates themselves.

## Definition of educators

An **educator** according to Thesaurus means “ one who educates”. This refers to an instructor, pedagogue, teacher, trainer, and tutor ( Roget's 11 : The new Thesaurus (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) 1995 Houghton Mifflin Company).

An educator also refers to:

- (a) a specialist in the theory and practice of education.
- (b) an administrator of a school or an educational institution (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English language: (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (2004) Houghton Mifflin, Company. [http: //www.answers.com / educators](http://www.answers.com/educators) & r = 67 (10 / 12/ 05).

## A brief overview of UEW

The University of Education, Winneba had been established in September, 1992 by the PNDC Law 322. It is had been constituted with seven diploma awarding institutions.

Presently, there are 1,326 staff and 18,317 students enrolled. Admission is based on the university's requirement as well as that of the departments.

There are nine faculties of which the Department of Special Education is part of the Faculty of Educational Studies. The Department of Special Education trains students to acquire the pedagogy of training special needs children. Since 40 years ago, in 1965, 15<sup>th</sup> November, the training of special teachers for the disabled started as the College of Specialist Teachers of the Deaf. Later, on October 6, 1986 two other Departments for the blind and mentally retarded joined when the College was designated, College of Special Education. (Department Brochure, 2005).

### **Vision of the Department of Special Education**

The Department will be a renowned centre for training of teachers of students with special needs in the entire West African region.

### **Mission**

The Department will equip its graduates with the requisite knowledge, practical skills, competencies needed to teach students with special needs and advise decision makers on policies and strategies on Special Education (Department Strategic Plan 2003 – 2008 pp.145 – 152)

### **Objectives**

1. To attract and retain qualified young Lecturers
2. To improve the quality of teaching and learning in the Department
3. To address gender imbalance in educational provision in the Department
4. To make Departmental programmes and activities more responsive to national needs.

### **The Structure of the Department**

It has three units: Education of the Hearing Impaired (EHI): Education of Visually impaired (EVI) The Education of the Mentally Handicapped (EMH). In addition, the department runs a Professional Programme for Rehabilitation Personnel (PPRP), which is a Diploma Programme for rehabilitation training for the adult with visual impairment, and the Centre for Hearing and Speech Services. Besides, there is a Resource Centre for the blind.

There are 20 academic staff members and three (3) non teaching staff. There is a Head of Department, who is supported by three unit heads who internally arranged to assist. There is also a coordinator of Clinical Services and a coordinator for the PPRP.

**Student Enrolment:** Total enrolment is made up of 567 students (389 males; 178 females).

### **Content of Programme**

The programme is In – In – In - Out for four (4) years with 120 credit hour courses. Content of each programme is designed to meet competencies in Educational Studies, Subject studies, Methodology (Involving practicum); Research / Project work and Internship. The internship lasts for 10 months with mentors and lecturers directing and evaluating students. Post Internship is also done for almost one month.

The post Internship has three components: Portfolio Assessments, Reflective Practice and Teaching Philosophy (Out segment handbook, 2001).

### **Second Subjects Area–**

To strengthen student's competencies of core subjects for teaching, students from the Department take second subject courses such as Home Economics, Social Studies, Art, Health Physical Education Recreation and Sports (HPERS). Other subjects are; Music French, Ghanaian Languages, Science and English Language. Half of the total credit hours of 120 (or hrs) are taken by the second subject area to make the graduate qualify for the Bachelor of Education.

### **Strengths of the Department**

Students take a second subject as a teaching subject from another department, throughout their three years study in order to function well in content. This prepares them not only for special schools but for the mainstream or the inclusive education where besides the disabled, some regular school children have learning disabilities which render them ineffective in their academic output.

- The ten months internship gives efficient training of the hands-on approach to many students.

- Research facilities/grants are available (Teaching And Learning Innovative Fund)- (TALIF).
- University library offers prints and electronic materials (CD Rom, computers and internet facilities).
- The Department of Special Education has adequate and qualified staff in the three units.
- Journals and text books are written for use.
- Student enrolment is high. (567 students are made up of 389 males; 178 female).
- UEW has one of the best Speech and Hearing Centres in Ghana.
- The department has the capacity to design and use assessment tools and checklists.
- Computer library with the support of GTZ (German, NGO) is available. This computer library has 26 computers with the internet facilities but yet to be handed over.
- Departmental library is available but located in HOD's office with only few books.
- Expansion of Department from undergraduate programme to Masters Level (eg. MEd M.Phil are run on sandwich and regular basis respectively for the long vacation under the school of Research and Graduate Studies.
- First batch of M.Phil are 4(2 females; 2 males); The MEd Sandwich are 7 (4 females; 3 males), Currently, there are 6 M.Phil students (2 females; 4 males). Student exchange or educational visits, for Carnegie by sponsorship is yet to be available to all students. Female students have \$50 as support from Carnegie Funds in a year.
- Departmental Seminars on monthly basis take place for skills acquisition in content and art of presentations
- Inclusive Education Programme for the Hearing Impaired was started 3 yrs ago (2002). The levels are from Kindergarten to p.2 A. Special unit for the mentally retarded has also started in Father John's Preparatory School – in Winneba.

## **Weaknesses/Limitations**

Over the years, studies showed limitations of Sped Programme as follows:

- Inadequate equipment; (eg. Auditory Trainers; Computers with voice box; telecommunication device for the deaf.
- Preparation in Sign Language and Braille is inadequate.
- Less practicum coupled with students' own bad time management to do more practicals on their own;
- Aging staff (Agbeke and Denkyira, 1999; Gadagbui, 2004).
- Brain drain/staff attrition (now a contemporary issue).
- Government budget for UEW is not enough to carry out research and development and dissemination of research findings (Minister for State and Tertiary Education 2003 Honourable Minister Ms. Elizabeth Ohene cited by Quist-Arcton 2003)
- Gender Disparity (eg. Among the teaching staff there are only two females; with students, there are 178 females as against 389 male students
- Lack of adequate teaching and learning materials such as, braille text books and sheets; auditory trainers etc.
- Internet browsing is costly so very few students again access to it.
- Lack of expansion (e.g. Units for interpreters; Learning Disability Programme; Autism. Deaf – Blind , Audiologist speech and Language Therapist, Physical Disability Postgraduate. Diploma/Certificate/In-service training for trained teachers to enable them function in inclusive education programme.
- Inadequate space for office, Speech/Language and Reading clinics
- Lack of transport for Speech and Hearing Centre makes outreach programme difficult.
- Architectural difficulties for the blind and physically disabled ( e.g. no ramps; no elevators)
- Post graduate students attrition – (e.g. unwillingness of some to go to special schools – job dissatisfaction; leaving for greener fields (Dery, 1995); teachers' frustration such as problems with heads of special schools, lack of

accommodation; unchallenging job especially with the mentally handicapped (Avoke et al. 1999).

- No tracer study of our graduates & their performances in the field
- Lack of multi sectoral approach/collaboration with Headquarters or National Council for Teacher Education e.g. in posting of teachers trained. The Department is not involved in even suggesting best graduate teachers to specific schools or Assessment Centres.
- Low human capacity building of academic staff to PhD level and participation in conferences overseas.
- Linkage programmes/partnership programmes are yet to take off though memorandum of understanding were signed with some overseas institutions (eg. Oslo in Norway; Jos in Nigeria; Heidelberg in Germany)
- No Research Centre for the Department to liaise with for community outreach programmes.
- Unfavourable Government policy on study leave (eg. Inadequate quota allocation especially for Special Education.
- Inability of teaching staff to have sponsorships due to age restrictions of awards.

## **Challenges**

**Definition of challenges;** To confront boldly or courageously in the face of difficulties. It also means a test of one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking.

## **Global challenges**

The world declarations on higher education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (19 October, 1998) stated that there are many great challenges that higher education is facing which are related to financing, equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies, improved staff development, skills-based training enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programme, employability of graduates, establishment of cooperation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation. It declared also that there are challenges of new opportunities relating to technologies by which knowledge can be accessed, produced, managed and disseminated

and controlled. As a result, all graduates need to have equitable access to all these (World declaration on higher education for the twenty first century: Vision and action 1998).

### **Department's Challenges**

#### 1. Inadequate Funding

The developing countries such as, Ghana, have many terrible difficulties and challenges on how to manage in the face of inadequate funding, equipment and furniture, lack of space, and students huge enrolment. Market classes are flooded, chalk and board, old text books, low remunerations and aging teachers are among the major problems and challenges that the universities face.. Low salaries fail to attract young teachers to the higher institutions. However, in spite of these global demotivations, the vision of the Department is to exhibit itself as a renowned centre for training of teachers for pupils and students with special needs. The realization of this vision alone is by itself a challenge. To attain this, the Strategic Plan was designed in 2003 but achieving the objectives within the time frame is a difficult task and needs all stakeholders, students-teachers, Heads of special schools and all in sundry to support in achieving them.

#### 2. Human capacity building

We are posed with the challenges of mode(s) in communications, practicals in speech and audiology; retention of graduate teachers in school and human capacity building through upgrading of staff to PhD, students and staff exchange to educational exposure to learn skills conduct empirical research and use findings to improve teaching & learning and problem solving.

#### 3. Communication skills

Training teachers to effectively manage audiology and speech clinics, to teach writing, reading and language skills to restore communication abilities and of special needs children and support them to pass examinations are the department's concern. Besides, equipping students to have the skills in Sign Language for the deaf and acquire skills in Braille letters and figures competently to impart to learners are major issues for the Department. Nevertheless, the complaints from the fields that the Department is unable to train students to show competencies in these practical areas in their service deliveries in the class room

does not conform to the vision of the Department. However, the presenter thinks that if there were collaborations often, between the Headquarters for Special Education, teachers and the Department, such issues could be addressed. For example, the contradictions of symbols in the Sign Language taught or used in special schools seem to differ from what students claim they study. However, If the department were officially informed, there could have been a change. The Accreditation Board in 2000, recommended Sign Exact English to support learners in competency on communication skills in order to reflect in the written communication skills and in the BECE results but this was not effectively implemented. If students cleave to the contentives without the functors, there will be a compounding of errors of syntax, and morphology of English which can transcend to other components of language worsening students' linguistic plight and the inability to study other subjects properly.

This competency can be addressed if there is a uniformity in the way the schools sign and that of the University. It is not possible to attain same vision of excellence when key stakeholders differ in skills/content which are given to learners.

It is time to have another forum or round table discussion holding learners' interest higher than stateholders' personal ambitions.

#### 4. **Re-definition of terminologies**

This leads to the question "Why should the same mode(s) of communication be promoted wholesale or enmasse on all hearing or visually impaired irrespective of their differences in levels/degrees of hearing and sight impairment?". Special Educators are then challenged to re-define terminologies of "deaf" and "blind" or "hearing impairment" and "visually impairment". A clear-cut definition, assessment through proper diagnosis before and after school admission of children with special needs, will help manage the disabilities properly and urge the public to respect the rights of these learners.



## Way forward

The future of enhancing the preparation and training of teachers depends so much on needs assessment of material and human resources, research and the will to change in the face of new technologies. These can be articulated in terms of the following:

1. **The supply of equipment** such as the auditory trainer computer with voice box etc. can improve skills in service delivery for students.
2. **Human capital building** will be strengthened through **partnership** with other universities either through split-half PhD programmes or full time studying.
3. **International co-operation** and **exchange for staff and students** are major avenues for advancing higher education so this will be encouraged since efforts are directed towards the process of “brain gain” through collaboration.
4. **Gender parity** in staff recruitment will be considered,( particularly, female students will be increased to serve as mentors and if possible) to replace the aging staff.
5. **Expansion currently of the Department Programme** is to cover training of interpreters and Learning Disabled since the latter are many in the regular schools. Low vision/visually impaired also needs to be started to cater for such children or included.
6. Specialist teachers from one unit can go to another unit to study. This means the program should be flexible. Enough to enable students to have the necessary competence to handle other children with disabilities.
7. **Curriculum modification** vis-à-vis global trend of programmes for the special needs pupils, students and adult is crucial. For instance, assessment needs have to cover the training of Audiologists, Speech and Language Therapists, physics therapist & occupational therapist. Reading Teachers, Interpreters and more resource personnel to transcribe print textbooks to braille or the voice computer to transcribe to braille and vice versa. Use electronic media, video conference learning: change in teacher perception of learning. Eg. life long Learning Distance Education of new dynamic technology of doing things with child focused.
8. Mentorship, and new courses on reflection, philosophies for teaching are to be introduced to improve methods of teaching.

9. Subject **teachers** already with **vocational/technical skills** such as those of Higher National Diploma have to be given training in special education to satisfy the functional needs and national needs in developing talents for learners with disabilities who are interested in technical vocational programmes. In line with this, the department is attempting to **organize field trips to attract academically capable** female graduates to be trained and to retain as human capital.
10. **Research unit/centre** to liaise with the communities for outreach programmes and serve to solve teaching and learning problems in the schools is gaining grounds for implementation. Again, if the centre is established it can cater for designing new symbols in science and mathematics and harmonizing other signs which are not existing in the language as it is in Denmark special school.
11. **Licensure of graduate teachers** by the government through practical and theoretical examinations or otherwise may be a thing for future deliberation to sieve out and retain dedicated, committed and content based teachers.
12. For **funding**, the Faculties and Departments are expected to generate income not only by expanding the units, but write Research Proposals to organizations with the expectations to win and conduct researches.

### **Suggestions**

As a **medium term** measure, staff participating in conferences to learn from others and share information as well as looking at the existing structure in reference to national and global trends to enhance the department's service delivery to students are concerns to be addressed. Highlights of this vision are suggested as:

- **Re-examining existing content of the curriculum** for modification are to be considered eg. Attract subject teachers or start post graduate diploma courses to train teachers to teach in regular schools, invite subject teachers to do Master Programmes. **Train interpreters for the deaf; have braille prints** for important **textbooks and chapters for the blind; establishing a reading unit** to upgrade skills for teachers in the regular schools and mount in-service training or workshops at Regional/District levels. (eg. Virginia State Reading Association

and other volunteer sponsored workshops, provide voluntary facilitators are now in the process of building a community library in Winneba and providing a Reading Unit for UEW.

- Write research proposals for sponsorship from Teaching And Learning. Innovative Fund (TALIF) and other organizations such as GETFUND for support for equipment and means of transports.
- **Team work** among Heads of special schools, parents and other stakeholders in Education have to be activated through round table discussions, emphasis will be laid on identification of needs of the Department of Special Education as a teacher training institution and prioritization and remediations in curricular will be addressed. For example the structure of the programme for the department, reports on students for the internship programme especially those of special education are some of the hot issues to be discussed for improvement.

The Department will welcome constructive criticisms from Heads of school on the department's training programme and if possible, call for discussions and dialogues on such issues. It is for the **Heads to recommend** to the department, hard working teachers who are subject teachers already to upgrade themselves in master degrees Special Education in order to deliver competently.

Finally, the department can team up with Heads of special schools to conduct **tracer studies research** on placement and performances of special education graduate teachers in their schools. This will give us the **true statistics on graduate attrition and reflections** of the training received.

## **Conclusion/Summary**

- Curriculum needs some modification and graduates subject specialists are needed to enrol for Master programmes. This strategy will enable the department to produce graduate teachers with vocational and technical skills as well as others for special schools and those running inclusive programmes.
- Sign Language symbols must be harmonized in schools. This has to be done in conjunction with the department so that the differences can be minimized. Braille teaching will be intensified together with other practical subjects. (audiology, speech teaching for the hard of hearing and post lingual.
- Collaboration of Heads of special schools in form of networking with the Department of Special Education is a priority to enable the department train efficiently to match with the needs of the pupils and students.
- Mentors and Heads should give objective reports on students during internship and assist in giving constructive criticisms to sharpen and sharpen student – teachers’ skills.

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