Article title: Including the excluded in Open and Distance Learning in Namibia: Policy transformation to maximise the inclusion of students with visual impairments

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**Including the excluded in Open and Distance Learning in Namibia: Policy transformation to maximise the
Inclusion of students with visual impairments**

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Abstract

It is evident that there is an increase in the enrolment of students with disability in Higher Education, particularly Students with Visual Impairments (SVI). However, it is also sad to note that, this group of students remain excluded and thus are less visible in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The current pandemic (COVID-19) has put to test, the preparedness and pro-activeness of most higher education institutions to include students with disabilities in different modes of teaching and learning. This paper observed, reviewed, and analysed various legislatives to determine the preparedness of different ODL Centres of selected HEIs in Namibia. Amongst others, some national and institutional legislatives revealed lack of obliging guidelines to compel HEIs to commit to the inclusion of students with disabilities particularly the SVI. The paper concludes that there is lack of policy guidelines in HEIs toward inclusive education and consequently most institutions remain reluctant to prepare and be proactive to include SVI in the ODL programme. The paper calls for policy transformation at national, ministerial, and institutional, to move toward inclusive education through all modes of learning.

Visual Impairments; Open and Distance Learning; Disabilities; Legislative, Exclusion; Inclusion; Inclusive Education

1. Introduction

Access to high education maximises employment opportunities for individuals with or without disabilities (Reed and Curtis 2012, 414). In Namibia, according to the National Development Plan (NDP 5) access to higher education is also regarded as the key enabler to economic freedom. It also plays a vital role in poverty eradication, improve quality of life and strengthen economic situations for the country, families and individuals (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2017/2018 to 2021/2022).

Responding to the call of Education for All (EFA), Higher Education Institutions in Namibia have maximized access to Higher education and a number of students with different disabilities are enrolled in various programme offered by different universities in the country. The roles of university education is to facilitate skills development and heighten long term economic growth (Conlon 2014, 1). In 2018, a total of about 59 208 students were registered in different HEIs in Namibia studying through various modes of studies of which 32,5% were enrolled for ODL modes in different HEIs (National Council of Higher Education 2018, 6). The (N. S. A. Government of the Republic of Namibia 2012, 55) indicates that a total of 98 413 (4.7%) of the Namibian population are people living with visual impairments. However, there is limited reports on statistics pertaining to the enrollment of students with disabilities in Higher Education in Namibia. In this study, Students with Visual Impairments refer to any student who may requires special support due to limited vision. This includes both blind and partially sighted students in HEIs.

Most HEIs have created learning opportunities through ODL which is regarded as the golden opportunity to maximize access to higher education especially in countries with limited learning resources (Möwes 2008, 2). According to (Möwes 2008, 2) ODL provides flexibility for students to access education, especially those who have limited opportunities to pursue careers and continue their studies on a fulltime basis. A number of policies has been developed and most HEIs took collaborative initiatives to facilitate the development of ODL in Namibia. To date, there are various ODL centres with varied Learning Management Systems (LMS) (E-Learning platforms) to smoothed learning via the distance mode. A number of students, successfully completed their studies through distance modes and are equally competing for different employment opportunities in Namibia and elsewhere.

Hewett et al. 2017, 106-107 underscored that moving towards inclusive education practices require policy transformation. It also requires institutions to invest more in resources that ensure equal opportunities and equity for

all at all levels and modes of learning. In addition to the resources, HEIs are also challenged to strengthen their support services to meet the unique needs of students through the various available modes of learning. (Ciobanu 2013, 170) investigated the roles of student services in improving students' experience in higher education. She indicates that without effective student support services, students who lack academic, emotional and social connection with the institution at cultural level are at risk of giving up their studies (Ciobanu 2013, 171). She further revealed that there many academic, social and cultural aspects which are complicated to manage and understand resulting from continual growth and diversification of student population. Ciobanu, thus emphasised that there is a vital need to create student support services that are efficient to meet the diverse academic needs, while arousing personal, social, cultural and cognitive development of individual students (Ciobanu 2013, 171).

Notwithstanding the many success stories from ODL in Namibia, little is stated regarding the prevalence of Students with Visual Impairments in ODL programme. Most ODL centres of HEIs seem to be more reactive rather than proactively prepare to equitably attract and include Students with Visual Impairments in their programme. Findings from Reed and Curtis 2012, 422 indicate that some students shy away from seeking admissions to institutions with a perception that there are fewer academic and social supports. In addition, Reed and Curtis (2012, 424) state that lack of self-confidence reflect poor preparation for students to transit to higher education. Similar sentiments were echoed by (Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020, 2).

Liakou and Manousou 2015 points out various challenges in the provision of distance learning for students with visual impairments. Such challenges include lack of graphic learning materials, unreliable supportive equipment, lack of academic experts to support the SVI, lack of intermediary staff to facilitate the studies of SVI as well as limitations on library services to cater for the needs of SVIs. These challenges are common in most HEIs. Ciobanu 2013 acknowledges that student support services contribute to the quality of learning experience among students and their academic success and decrease university dropout rate.

Reed and Curtis 2012 highlight some barriers that impeded the successful completion of university programme by Student with Visual impairments. Among others, they pointed out poor quality and timeliness of alternate print format and poor access to computer-based materials. However, Reed and Curtis 2012 assert that understanding the unique needs of students with visual impairments could lead to more success in various study programmes by students with visual

impairments. Ciobanu 2013 also highlights that students' services are often influenced by the beliefs and values of staff, by how policies are outlined, by the contents of institutional curriculums and services as well as by the extent of understanding the development of students as well as how their behavior are outlined in their learning environment.

The study, explored various policies and guidelines pertaining to academic and social support for students with visual impairments in ODL. In addition, it also explored the extent to which institutional policies and guidelines promote the available academic and social supports to attract students with visual impairments. Finally, discussed ways to improve policies and guidelines and proactively prepare to attract, support and facilitate the successful learning of Students with visual impairments through ODL.

International and National commitments to inclusive education

In Namibia, like elsewhere in the world, there are guiding policies that compel academic institutions to the provision of Education for all (Mole 2012). The Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) assured the rights to education and asserted "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on a basis of merit" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR], 1948). This was reaffirmed by the Salamanca Declaration of 1994, which supports the inclusion of students with special needs in regular schools. The declaration urges educational systems to implement programmes that take into account individual unique characteristics, interests abilities and learning needs (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organisation [UNESCO], 1994). It further alluded that inclusive education is imperative in combating discriminatory attitudes and creates welcoming communities. It requires sound students-centred pedagogy with extensive support from which all students can benefit.

The rights to education and in particular access to higher education was affirmed by the World Declaration on Higher Education where in article 3 (d) indicated that special targeted groups which include the indigenous people, cultural and linguistic minorities, disadvantaged groups, people living under occupation and people living with disabilities should be granted access and should be actively facilitated (World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st century [WDHE], 1998). The article further indicates that this group of people with special needs might possess valuable experience and talents of great value to the society and the nation (UNESCO 1998). The article calls for special materials and educational solutions that can aid in lessening the barriers this group face in accessing and continuing higher education (UNESCO 1998). The Salamanca Declaration of 1994 urges educational systems to implement

programmes that take into account individual unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs (UNESCO 1994). It further alluded that inclusive education is imperative in combating discriminatory attitude and creates welcoming communities. Inclusive education requires sound student-centred pedagogies with extensive support from which all students can benefit (UNESCO 1994). An increase in diversity of students entering HEIs has prompted the need for student support services to address the gap in subject knowledge and understanding as well as to ensure inclusion and equitable quality education (Dhillon, McGowan, and Wang 2008).

In 2009 UNESCO reported on global foundations issues and best practices regarding student affairs and services in higher education (UNESCO 2009). UNESCO highlighted amongst others the following as the desired outcomes of the student affairs and support services in higher education institutions: high-quality, well rounded learning experience, improved higher education access regardless of ability/background, enhanced career/employment prospects and lifelong learning interests and a life as a responsible, contributing community member and citizens (UNESCO 2002; 2009).

Finally, Namibia remains committed to implement the Sustainable Development Goals stipulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels of education and promotes lifelong opportunities for all. The goal places emphasis on the acquisition of foundational and higher orders skills at all stages of education (UNESCO-UIS 2018). Education for all is the focal point of all educational activities in Namibia. Education is recognised as constitutional right of all citizens and an enable to poverty eradication (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2017/2018 to 2021/2022). In 2013, a National Sector Policy on Inclusive Education was launched to facilitate the implementation of inclusive education in all sectors of education (Ministry of Education 2013). With the affirmative action in place, fair access with equity to quality education is assured for all Namibians. HEIs are obligated to avail equal opportunities in all modes of study.

Social model of inclusive education (disabilities)

There are various discourses from which disability is perceived. This study underpinned the social model of disability. The model advocates that barriers to learning are socially constructed (Inclusion London 2015). The model emerged between 1960 and 1970 as individuals with disability started to radically question the institutionalization and segregations of people with disabilities (Levitt 2017). It was developed as people with disability begun to criticise the

medical model that supported segregation and institutionalization of people with disabilities and has succeeded in the transformation and removal of many barriers in society (Levitt 2017). However, in higher education, there is still a need to tap from the social model to advocate for the removal of pedagogical and attitudinal barriers to learning. The social model believes that disability is created by the society where unsuitable physical environment, communication, organizational and attitudinal are the barriers to inclusion (Inclusion London 2015).

In higher education particularly the provision of ODL subjects students to exclusion in different institutions due to various barriers constructed by the existing systems. A transformation toward inclusivity is observable particularly on the physical environment. However, there is a need to re-look into equitable access to all modes of education by all. The model has relevance to this study as it questions the roles of institutions in addressing organizational, pedagogical and attitudinal barriers to equitable access to quality education for all through policy transformation.

The needs of most students with disabilities are still unanticipated. Inaccessible information, segregated services, prejudice, assumptions, and de-valuing remain the barriers in some HEIs. The model underscores that society creates barriers that disable individuals with impairments (Inclusion London 2015). In the context of this study, the social model calls for a shift toward inclusivity to learning as described by (Williams et al. 2017) and can be achieved through policy transformation, adjustment to virtual learning environment that includes improved online instructional materials for all, provision of inclusive curricula and inclusive assessment methods, providing support staff with the necessary training and attitudinal change.

Methodology

For this study, document analysis and participant-observation were deemed appropriate to consider the various legislatives underpinning inclusive education in HEIs Namibia. Participation observation is an old method of data collection that allows researchers to gain insightful and familiarity to better understand what is happening in the research setting (Kawulich 2015). It was considered for various reasons, as a convenient data collection method that provides researchers as members of HEIs staff to pay more attention to issues pertaining to inclusive education in higher education particularly the provision of ODL for SVI. Another reason being, due to limited prevalence of SVI on ODL, there are limited informants with insightful on the phenomenon. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are reviewed by the researchers to give voice and meaning around a the phenomenon

(Bowen 2009). Document analysis is deemed popular in higher education research as the documents are stable, non-reactive data sources that implies that it can be read and reviewed multiple times and it will remain unchanged by the researcher's influence or the research process (Bowen 2009). For this study, a checklist was used during observation while, public and institutional legislatives were reviewed and analysed to provide for thematic analysis. These included public and institutional policies, education, and institutional acts as well as higher education Reports. The methods allowed triangulation of data collected. Key themes were extracted to answer the questions on whether there are compelling legislatives in place to guide institutional preparedness on the inclusion of SVI on ODL section of institutions of higher learning in Namibia.

Before document analysis takes place, the researchers went through a detailed planning process to ensure reliable results. Document analysis involves skimming reading and interpretation of the selected documents and then combines it with either content analysis or thematic analysis (Bowen 2009) which for this study, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis involves a more careful and focused re-reading and review of the data to allow for coding and category construction based on the data to draw themes.

Discussion of findings

This paper reviewed various legislatives pertaining to the implementation of Inclusive education in HEIs particularly for SVI in the ODL mode. The review included amongst others the institutional acts, Ministerial policies as well as some institutional policies and guidelines. The review revealed that the two public HEIs were not established by one act of parliament which could be (Higher Education act) (Matengu, Likando, and Kangumu 2018). Each institution has its own act with unique mandates and objectives (Matengu et al., 2018). As a result, each institution operates as an independent entities with unique policies. Although the acts outline various objectives and aims of each institution, they do not provide compelling focus on inclusive education. Although, the aims of both institutions are to provide higher education and contribute to knowledge creation through teaching and research, there seem to lack of consistency and uniformity in the provision of higher education particularly the inclusion of students with disabilities. Perusing through the different acts of each institutions' objectives; further training and continuous education forms parts of each institution which supports the implementations of ODL. (Government of the Republic of Namibia, [GRN] 2015, Government of the Republic of Namibia, 1992). However, worth noting is that issues pertaining to inclusive education are not standing out.

The researcher observed that indeed, HEIs recognize the provision of Education for All (EFA) at different levels of qualifications through various modes of learning. This is evidenced by the establishment of Centers for Open and lifelong learning at different HEIs. This is to ensure access to higher education by all. Amongst others, the highlighted aims of the ODL centers are

- to provide access to higher-quality education with the most appropriate and effective learning and teaching media
- assure quality of all study materials that meet individual lifelong learning need.

It has been observed that in all objectives, inclusive education has not been emphasized, despite many calls to transform education toward inclusivity. This does not only leave a room for poor preparation to cater for the needs of students with disabilities, it also indirectly promotes exclusion in ODL. As highlighted by the social model, exclusion is socially constructed, if institutions fail to consider the diverse needs of students, they are creating barriers for SVI to access education.

At National level, there are various legislatives calling for inclusive education at all levels of education particularly the inclusion of Students with Visual impairments. Some of which are as follow: National Policy on Adult Learning (2003); Namibia Vision 2030 (2004); National Policy for Educationally Marginalised Children (2000); National Disability Council Act (2004); Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education, 2012-2017 and 2017-2022 and the Sector policy on Inclusive Education (2013). Although these policies aim at transforming and redirecting education at all levels toward inclusive education, there are limited focus on higher education (Mckinney 2018). This seem to suggest that the emphasis for inclusive education in Namibia is more on basic education and less on higher education. While the Namibian Sector policy on Inclusive Education suppose to be the steppingstone for inclusive education at all levels of education, the review reveals that the policy directs the focus mainly to the basic education provision with limited focus on higher education. In 2018, an assessment on inclusive practice in Namibia looked at the challenges and opportunities in leaving no child behind. However, the assessment of the sector policy on inclusive education regarding higher education only focused on teacher training and not on the general provision of inclusive higher education (Mckinney 2018). Moreover, these policies have limited guidelines to open and lifelong learning. It is thus disheartening to

conclude that most of the calls made by these policies are not directed to HEIs. Consequently, they are rarely integrated in most institutional policies.

As indicated by (Mpofu and Shumba 2012, 132) SVI are at-risk of exclusion in ODL resulting from lack of guiding public and institutional policies and guidelines to facilitate their preparedness to include all. Meanwhile, (Liakou and Manousou 2015, 82) noted malfunctions in the provision of distance learning to SVI and highlighted the need to redefine policies to allow improvement on student support, teaching and assessments.

Conclusion

Firstly, this paper concludes that despite having many calls made by various legislatures pertaining to Education for All and inclusive education in Namibia, there is a need for both national, ministerial, and institutional policy transformation. Secondly, there is a need to strengthen the calls for inclusion in HEIs, the review concludes that these calls are still not well received by HEIs. This is evidenced by the following:

- Lack of national and institutional compelling policies to enforce the implementation of inclusive education in HEIs in Namibia.
- Most institutions remain reluctant to transform their policies and redirect them toward inclusive education in all modes of learning.
- With limited compelling policies, institutions remain reluctant to invest sufficiently on instructional materials and methods that meet the diverse needs of students particularly that of SVI on ODL mode.

Without policy transformation, SVI in HEIs will continue to experience challenges such as lack of access to proper study materials in any form, lack of specialized supportive equipment and devices and lack of support staff to facilitate the learning of SVI as highlighted by (Liakou and Manousou 2015).

Secondly, due to lack of policy support, most HEIs lack assurance on the available student support services especially for SVI. While most remain unprepared and only reactive upon enrolling SVI. Subsequently, they remain less attractive for SVI to students seek admission to their programmes. Similar sentiments were echoed by (Reed and Curtis 2012; Shikulo and Lekhetso 2020) who state that students shy away from seeking admission to most HEIs because they are less prepared and there is lack of assurance of student support in some institutions.

Recommendation

There is a need for policy transformation at national, ministerial, and institutional to facilitate the implementation of inclusive education in higher education particularly in ODL. HEIs should revisit their policies and redirect them toward inclusive education. Transforming policies would inform all institutional activities including instructional material development, facilitation of learning, assessment, staff awareness and attitude change as well as improvement on students support services. HEIs and their centers for ODL need to revisit their mandates, aims and objectives to shift toward inclusive education. A more detailed study is recommended to understand the perspectives of ministerial and HEIs learnerships on the provision of inclusive education for SVI through ODL.

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