

The Role of ODL in the Advancing Access to Education for Special Needs Groups

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***Abstract:** Special and vulnerable groups have a right to equitable access to all benefits that society offers. However, the situation for people with disabilities, refugees and inmates in Zimbabwe face barriers of accessibility to basic and tertiary education. Zimbabwe is a signatory to the UN Declaration Charter for Human Rights which regards education as a basic human right that should be provided to all. But it appears declarations are one thing and implementation another. It appears most conventional institutions are insensitive to people with disabilities and special needs in terms of academic accessibility and quality provision. A desktop survey revealed that most conventional institutions are insensitive to people with disabilities and special needs in terms of academic accessibility and quality provision. More so, inmates can not access studies through conventional institutions whilst at the same time serving their term. On the other hand, political instability has seen Zimbabweans leave the country and this has forced most to discontinue their studies. Open and Distance Learning institutions can bridge this gap by providing initial stimulus of access and success to education for all. Success of such educational provisions however can be enhanced through the use of appropriate technologies such as the Internet, computers and cell phones. With appropriate technologies, ODL institutions are bound to reach out many persons with special needs such as prisoners, refugees and people with disabilities.*

INTRODUCTION

Special and vulnerable groups have a right to equitable access to all benefits that society offers. There are many categories that fall under special groups and these include people with disabilities, the gifted, talented and creative learners, stray kids, people living with chronic illness/ HIV and Aids, prisoners, refugees, orphans to mention but a few. It is critical for such categories of people to make advancements in education too. The significance of education in the development process cannot be over-emphasized. Besides training the workforce for increasingly complex tasks, education is important for nation building, health, and governance. Provision of education to all citizens can lead to a long term increase of economic production as everyone will be empowered to participate fully in entrepreneurship and economic production. While special groups have a right to equitable access to all benefits that society offers; such benefits seem to be a shadow of the real thing in most countries including Zimbabwe. Our desktop survey revealed that most people with disabilities are not accommodated by the infrastructure and teaching methodologies and curriculum in conventional institutions in Zimbabwe. More so, inmates can not access studies through conventional institutions whilst at the same time serving their term. On the other hand, economic and political challenges have seen some Zimbabweans leave the country forcing some to discontinue their studies. Zimbabwe, like many other African countries, is signatory to the UN Declaration Charter for human rights which regards education as a basic human right that should be provided to all (Dakar World Education Forum, 2002). It is also signatory to declarations and policies in Africa on the education for special and vulnerable groups and policies have been made to such regard.

BACKGROUND

This concept paper was motivated by the fact that, despite policies and declarations in most countries; special and vulnerable groups are left out in terms of education. Inmates are neglected yet behind those bars there are some innocent people who failed to convince the courts of their innocence and there are also mothers with children. Education is a human right issue which can not be stripped off, even those who committed crime. Persons with disabilities have been observed to be prisoners too in terms of access to education in conventional institutions whose buildings and mode of delivery are inaccessible to most. The purpose of this paper is to challenge ODL practitioners on how best they can map the way forward in providing access to quality education to prisoners, people with disabilities, and refugees through Open and Distance Learning mode in this world of emerging technologies.

Special and vulnerable groups have a right to equitable access to all benefits that society offers. In this competitive market place, nations are striving to maximize the potential contribution of all their members. The exclusion of a significant number of people in academic pursuance impedes this goal and weakens the overall economic potential of a country. Thus one avenue by which vulnerable groups can readily gain employment and compete for positions at higher level is to graduate with a university degree or undertake a vocational training.

The major factors leading to failure in providing education to special needs and vulnerable groups is lack of equipment and skilled personnel to cope up with their demand for adaptive and modified methodologies. It appears most conventional institutions are insensitive to such special needs groups in terms of academic accessibility and quality provision. Sensitivity should be noted in the provision of quality access to higher education for inmates who can not access studies through conventional institutions whilst at the same time serving their terms. On the other hand provision for continuity of education to Zimbabweans who have left the country for Diaspora has not been possible through the conventional mode.

It would appear, several local and international bodies acknowledge the fact that addressing the issue of equal participation among everyone is long overdue. This has resulted in a number of initiatives designed to bring special and vulnerable issues back onto the national agenda of developed and developing countries. The Government of Zimbabwe has adopted a number of laws and policies that emphasize on equal participation of special groups, it has numerous Acts and policies that have the potential to benefit such. However, it appears policies are one thing and implementation of the policy another thing all together, in most Zimbabwean conventional universities. The Disability Board for example created by the Disabled Persons Act continues to be invisible and inaccessible to people with disabilities (Chimedza and Peter, 2001). This situation may continue for many years to come as most people with disabilities lack formal education and most are not aware of legislation and policies that uphold their rights and livelihood.

Zimbabwe like many others societies is endeavoring to recognize the need to dismantle other barriers to education and provide access for special groups by providing information in a variety of formats as well as to challenge attitudes and mistaken assumptions about people with disabilities, prisoners and refugees. Despite these initiatives, in Zimbabwe such people remain a minority group in terms access to education. The Zimbabwe millennium development goals mention the inclusion of people with special needs and the most viable mode to enable access to such is ODL. The advantage of this mode of delivery is that it offers flexible education that accommodates the minority groups and provides a learning mode suitable for them as it reaches out to wherever they are. It is not offered within the

limits of the buildings which in most cases are exclusive to people in wheel chairs, prisoners and displaced persons.

Disability and Education in Zimbabwe

There is no recent data on the situation of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Inter Censual Demographic Survey of 1997 recorded a total of 218, 421 people with disabilities in the country. Seventy-five percent of them lived in rural areas while 25 per cent lived in urban areas. Five years later, Zimbabwe's 2002 Housing and Population Census presented a national prevalence of 2.9 percent, of whom 45 percent were men and 55 percent women. The Inter-Censual Demographic Survey identified 57, 232 children with disabilities (0-19 years), but another study in 1997 (UNICEF, 1997) found an estimated 150,000 children with disabilities in the country. There seem to be a disparity in data provided on people with disability but what is of significance is that there is a significant population of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1996), 10 per cent of the world's population are people living with disabilities. As such, Zimbabwe, with a population of 12 million people, should have 1.2 million people living with disabilities. Basing on the latter statistics, 1.2 million is a significant population that can make a striking contribution to the development of a nation if empowered (Hegarty, 1997; Ballard, 1999; Vlachou, 1997).

Education is the most significant way of empowering individuals. No wonder policies on education have been put in place in Zimbabwe. While the 1987 Zimbabwe Education Act is rather hazy on issues of disabilities it outlaws discrimination. The Zimbabwe disability Act of 1992 however explicitly prohibits discrimination of people with disabilities (Chimedza and Peters, 2001). The latter act is a comprehensive law covering rights, rehabilitation and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. It creates the National Council of Persons with Disabilities as a statutory organ to oversee the welfare of persons with disabilities. While such policies have been articulated, it is observed that the education of the majority of persons with disability in Zimbabwe is still a challenge. Only a few persons who live in urban areas have had the opportunity to access formal education up to tertiary level. Zimbabwe faces the challenge of brain drain which has been a result of political and economic challenges that the country has been experiencing in the past years. Human resources or experts that the country produces have migrated in the neighboring countries and abroad. Provision of adequate resources in terms of human or material is a key component to the success of any planned activity or policy. I have been convinced by my experience that most persons with disabilities lack access to tertiary education. Partly, this is attributed to the fact that most lecturers and education administrators in Zimbabwe lack knowledge of how to academically accommodate students with disabilities. Evidently most of them are not trained in or made aware of disability issues and as such are not able to advocate or influence decisions on matters relating to admissions, curriculum, instructional methods, staffing, and resource utilization. Lack of information and knowledge also makes it impossible for administrators and educators to appreciate the impact of their actions, inactions and decisions on the education needs of students with disabilities thus adversely affecting the implementation of national and international policies on the education of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The significance of ODL in this regard will be elaborated latter.

Reaching Out Through ODL to People with Disabilities

Open and distance learning institutions have vast roles in bridging the gaps in the education of persons with disabilities. They can put in place a unit or center for Special Needs Groups. This centre can be manned by specialists in various technologies such as ICT, multimedia,

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Improved access and availability of educational technology facilitates and promotes the millennium goal of education for all. An Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC aid) is any "device, either electronic or non-electronic, that is used to transmit or receive messages", such as communication books or voice output devices using symbols such as photographs, line drawings, words or letters. Since the skills, areas of difficulty and communication requirements of AAC users vary greatly, and so an equally diverse range of communication aids and devices exists to meet these demands. This type of technology is an alternative way to help students and adults with language disorders use expressive language or receptive language. Augmentative communication can be accomplished through assistive technology devices such as computers or hand held devices. Low technology facilities such as picture communication systems can also be used as augmentative communication. This type of communication is most often used with students and adults who have significant disabilities impacting language or those who do not have the ability to speak, for example persons with deafness, those with cerebral palsy and other communication disorders.

Of interest to note is that we have low-tech and high-tech AAC. ODL institutions can make use of high- tech AAC aids in giving tutorials through e-learning to persons with specific disabilities. High-tech AAC aids are electronic devices that permit the storage and retrieval of messages, with most allowing the user to communicate with others using speech output. Such devices can also be referred to as Speech Generating Devices (Sods) or Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs). High-tech systems can be divided into dedicated devices developed solely for the purpose of communication and AAC, and non-dedicated devices, such as computers, which have been adapted for use as communication tool, but which can also be used for other functions. On static display devices, all the symbols are constantly displayed on the device. On dynamic AAC devices, multiple pages of symbols are possible, and thus only a portion of the symbols available are visible at any one time, with the communicator navigating the various pages. Funding of the education of special needs groups in most developing countries is very low (Peresuh, 1994:226) thus technologies of such nature may be difficult to acquire. In such, ODL as is the case with Zimbabwe Open University (the largest ODL University in Zimbabwe) can mobilize technological resources in their Special Needs Resource centre.

Resources Indian Hand Talk, and has been used with children with severe-profound disabilities, and adults with a variety of diagnoses including dementia, aphasia and dysarthria. The benefits of such gestures and pantomime are that they are always available to the user, usually understood by the listener, and are efficient means of communicating.

As forms of AAC, manual signs, such as manually coded language (such as Signing Exact English) and signed languages (such as Zimbabwean Sign Language) have been used alone or in conjunction with speech. Formal gesture and sign systems require adequate memory and fine-motor skills to be able to remember and physically make the signs and gestures, as well as for communication partners to understand the symbols made. Manual signs in particular are less transparent in meaning than gestural codes and require more fine-motor coordination to execute. In sign systems, the symbols are hand signals which can be iconic (they resemble the word they represent) or more abstract. With signs, the communication partners need to understand the signs for successful communication. As well, the user's ability to control gross and fine motor movements needs to be considered with these approaches. ODL institutions can put in place a department that mans the academic and welfare of persons with disabilities. This department can be manned by specialists in sign language as well as in transcribing Braille. In such, the module may be coded in voice codes

through and persons with visual impairment may access modules of their pursuing programmes. On the other hand specialists can load signed tutorials for persons with disability through, Usenet group feature, Internet relay, Newsgroup, Electronic mail, Real World. Through the use of computer softwares that cater for persons with disabilities in the form of symbolic icons or voice, ODL can provide quality education to vast persons with disabilities such as those with cerebral palsy, hearing impairment and other communication disorders.

Prisoners and Access to Education

Prisons in Africa should be places of positive transformation, and entering prison should not mean losing hope. We believe deprivation of freedom need not mean deprivation of humanity. Zimbabwe, like most African countries is in transition, and its problems seem to be magnified within its detention systems. The plight of detainees in accessing health facilities and education seem to be rarely noticed. Yet they include the most downtrodden and vulnerable - babies imprisoned with their mothers, the mentally ill, children and the illiterate. ODL is the only hope of improving access to healthcare, education, justice and community reintegration for prisoners in Africa. The ODL facility can go a long way in restoring the dignity of inmates by making awareness of the need to put in place humane conditions and services for inmates that may in turn help them to regain their humanity. As ODL institutions, we can build and refurbish attitudes of the societies towards commitment of crime and on issues of criminal justice.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in USIS (1998) and the Standard minimum Rules for treatment of prisoners are some of the agreements ratified by several countries recognizing the need to educate prisoners (Dakar World Education Forum, 2002). According to the UN, the basic principles for the treatment of prisoners include provision for further education for prisoners and education of illiterate prisoners so that they can be integrated into the educational system, or seek gainful employment after their release. According to the Kampala declaration, prisoners need vocational training and education for easier reintegration into society after release. It is very difficult to advocate for provision of education to prisoners since the abuse of these prisoners is still rampant in many countries, Belanger (1999).

Education for Prisoners in Zimbabwe

According to a desk top survey carried out in Zimbabwe, prisoners, mainly in four major prisons receive post secondary education. The other prisons are finding it difficult to offer educational courses. The reasons are mainly because most colleges and universities in Zimbabwe are conventional ones. Thus a detainee can not access education at conventional universities while at the same time serving their sentence. More so, the prisoners in such prisons come for short term sentences therefore it is difficult for them to start courses as they might not finish them. In addition, some of the prisons do not have required infrastructure for educational purposes.

Education schemes for prisoners in Zimbabwe come in many packages. These are basic literacy whereby illiterate prisoners are taught how to read and write, ordinary and advanced level, vocational training, diplomas, certificates and degrees. Zimbabwe Open University, which is 11 years old now, has been initiating study programmes for inmates. For example some prisoners are attached to some agricultural institutions and they receive necessary education and skills in agriculture that help them later on integration. Women prisoners are taught income generating projects such as sewing, bread making, etc. There are education officers responsible for these programmes. The methodology used in the prisons involves the

use of internal trainers who are part of the prison service staff. Prisoners use the participatory approach whereby they carry out discussions on their own in addition to day-to-day practical learning and tutorials.

The prisoners have a library but in addition they access books from major universities' libraries. Arrangements are made for access to these books. Meanwhile, the university has enrolled as part time tutors some prison officers with needed qualifications. This has made collaboration between the university and Zimbabwe Prison Services. Prison officials are furthering their studies mostly with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) and this can cascade to the prisoners as the knowledge gained can benefit prisoners. ZOU is one example that reveals that ODL institutions have a role to play in the provision of education to special groups which include people with disabilities, prisoners and refugees.

HOW ODL CAN REACH OUT TO INMATES

As eluded earlier, ODL can play significant role in reaching out to special groups as is the case with inmates. The role include offering of short courses to prisoners who are on short term sentence. There can also be arrangement with Government and ODL institutions to ensure that the prisoners continue and complete their courses after release.

For prisoners on long term sentences, ODL institutions can collaborate with Prison Services so that strategies are put in place that enable an effective provision of education to inmates. ZOU for instance can make arrangements to go and provide face to face tutorials to prisoners three times per semester so that grey areas in the learning modules can be ironed out. Therefore there is a need for awareness campaigns to prisoners so that they see the value of education in empowering them. This is vital in increasing numbers of prisoners undertaking ODL studies.

Internet education can play a leading role in enhancing ODL institutions to reach out to many prisoners located in many prisons of a country. To facilitate distance learning on Internet-based courses, suitable alternative approaches must be identified that match the technology available to the student. Khokar (2007), noted that a solid technology infrastructure is an institutional barrier that needs to be overcome to enable engagement with e-learning in excluded groups. Planning has to be done so as to minimize Internet costs. The following are some of the ways that can be used to minimize costs of ODL using Internet; purchasing equipment in bulk which ensures discounts, use of standardized education technology packages which are scalable and use of efficient networks. Educators in ODL need continuous professional development and support. However, assumptions can not be made that appropriate technology is always available.

As such lack of Internet access may inhibit distance learning but does not prohibit it. Traditional channels of communication in distance learning still exist and can also be utilized if required (self study, print and non print materials, group work tutorials). Collaborative education projects between ODL institutions such as ZOU and Zimbabwe Prisons Office (ZRP) can be put in place to promote learning through technology. ODL institutions as is the case with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) can liaise with the ministry of Science and Technology as well as the ministry of Communication and Technology so that appropriate soft wares are installed in their universities and prisons.

The online education content should be affordable and available. This entails ploughing a lot of capital to produce suitable learning materials such as CDs DVDs, and e-learning computer technology packages. The ODL institution can enhance the e-learning project by equipping

prison guards/officers with basic e-learning skills so that they may in turn assist inmate students studying through ODL.

Refugees and Access to Education

The United Nations Declaration charter defines refugee as;

‘a person... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it’ (UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948: art. 1’ Friel and Hay, 1996).

The political and economic challenges experienced by Zimbabwe in the past years for example, has seen some Zimbabweans take refuge in other countries in Africa and abroad. Such situation has made some students abandon studies at a lower or advanced stage. ODL institutions can play a vital role in the education of refugees in a number of ways that we are going to discuss in this paper.

Education is a basic right, one that is vital in restoring hope and dignity to people driven from their homes (USIS, 1998). Thus it is an important tool to help refugees get back on their feet and build a better future. However, in the midst of conflict or poverty, education is often seen as a luxury for refugees and internally displaced people who are also struggling for food and shelter. But then, there is need for continuous access to secondary and tertiary education for such people. In this regard instead of sourcing money to put in place infrastructure such as buildings, ODL facility can be instrumental in enabling access to education for refugees. Such forcibly displaced children and adults are bound to benefit if ODL is taken seriously especially in this era of technology and scholarships. UNHCR supports the UN Millennium Development Goal of ensuring that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. This suggests that UNHCR prioritizes provision of access to basic education to growing children. With such, Zimbabwe and other African countries could sit down and map the way forward on how best to utilize ODL mode so as to provide education to refugees.

Under a programme funded by the German government since 1992 for example, UNHCR offers higher education scholarships for refugees on a limited basis. The annual Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) has granted thousands of deserving young refugee’s scholarships at universities, colleges and polytechnics in their host countries (Tabor, 2007). ODL universities in Africa can put in place scholarships too that are targeted for special and vulnerable groups. Alumni are a potential resource that is under utilized by most universities in Zimbabwe and probably in Africa as a whole. This resource of former students in the country and in Diaspora can be utilized to create funds targeted to enable access to education to refugees and other vulnerable groups. ODL can collaborate with Inter-Agency Network for Education in emergencies. Inter-Agency Network is a network that promotes access to quality education for all people affected by crisis. ODL universities as is the case with Zimbabwe Open University can create partnership with such a network thus provide continuous education for persons in the Diaspora or those who have taken economic refugee.

Promoting Education to Special and Vulnerable Groups through Open and Distance Learning

In these new vistas of open learning, ODL institutions can create a knowledge society by reaching out to all through ICT. ODL institutions in collaboration with the government and corporate world should introduce adapted and modified computer technologies and software. Such facilitates greater information access to all; greater communication via electronic facilities; [the introduction of] synchronous and asynchronous learning; increased cooperation and collaboration; cost-effectiveness [e.g., by reaching different students and in greater numbers]; and pedagogical improvement through simulations, virtual experiences and graphic representations as well as the opportunity to offer people with disabilities, inmates and refugees a second chance to access education, improve their skills and further their education. On the other hand, ODL can make use of assistive and adapted technology to open up a bright new world for persons with disabilities who have been deprived of quality education in Zimbabwe for long. Adapted equipment such as talking computers and other software that are inclusive of people with sensory and physical impairment can be introduced in ODL institutions. Special mention is the introduction of mobility devices, communication devices, hearing aids and learning aid computers as equipment that can go a long way in reaching out to people with disabilities.

The uniqueness of ODL institutions can be proven through provision of education to groups that conventional institutions can not reach. This can be facilitated by special ICT packages that cater for the unique needs of each group of special needs.

ODL institutions should put in place strategies that fulfill the policies of inclusive education which most countries in Africa are signatory, for example Zimbabwe, (United Nations declaration charter; Salamanca agreement, Jomtien World Declaration, 1990; Kokkala, 1997). This may mean that ODL lecturers adopt methodologies, content materials and software that are more accessible and appropriate for all students regardless of place of location and disability. The use of synchronous technologies, for instance, may be more appropriate for a certain group of people with special needs and misappropriate for others. Persons with disabilities that need close monitoring and assistance such as severe to profound cerebral palsy, hearing and impairment be considered more to this mode of delivery. This is because in this mode, all participants are present at the same time. It resembles classroom teaching methods despite the participants being located remotely. While this mode of delivery requires a timetable to be organized, it promotes ODL in that it reduces the geographical distance among participants.

On the other hand, others may need both asynchronous and synchronous modes of delivery. For the asynchronous mode of delivery, participants access course materials on their own schedule. Asynchronous mode of delivery can promote more access to inmates and refugees because of its flexibility. Students are not required to be together at the same time. This appears to be more convenient for prisoners as they may need a scheduled programme that may fit in the prison timetable of activities.

Thus ODL universities need to rope in experts in special needs education and develop policies that emphasize on constant staff development of such in using special inclusive software packages. Asynchronous packages include e-learning (key mailing, real world, and internet real chart, Usenet) to mention some.

Universities providing ODL in Zimbabwe should put in place IT training departments which would train and develop lecturers in new or emerged IT technologies. Such departments will

be important as they would enable lecturers in ODL institutions to maximize the use of all internet features and emerging IT technologies. High knowledge in IT by ODL lecturers is a leeway of including the excluded and exposing all learners to a holistic ODL curriculum which is sensitive to special needs and which prepares all for the competitive employment market.

Effective monetary policies that can enhance ODL state universities in the provision of functional ICT facility (Internet Connected Computer Systems with appropriate software and hardware) should be put in place by governments in Africa. Sound economic and education policies can go a long way in reducing poverty and improve IT accessibility. As such, comprehensive power and telecommunication sector reform in countries like Zimbabwe should be carried out so as to have uninterrupted power supply and a more functional telecommunication.

ODL universities should facilitate attitude change towards prisoners, people with disabilities and refugees by educating the community through community service and short courses. Change of attitude by policy makers and communities are the only viable ways of enabling the provision of inclusive education to all.

CONCLUSION

ODL institutions have opportunities to bridge the gap and provide access to education for special needs groups. This can be through mobilization of technologies that are appropriate for the special groups in discussion. Appropriate Information and Communication Technologies can be identified and utilized by ODL institutions so as to reach out such to special groups. More so, there is need for collaboration between stakeholders concerned and ODL institutions. Thus, the continued growth and success of distance education institutions depends on the extent to which they promote and provide education to the special groups availed in this paper and those out side the scope of the paper. ODL institutions management, government and the corporate world should collaborate further on how best to continue utilizing skills and technology to reach out the excluded.

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