

Special and Vulnerable Groups on Access, Success and Equity on Open and Distance Education in Tanzania: The Case of The Open University of Tanzania

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***Abstract:** Open and Distance Learning (ODL) assisted by the use of ICT, has proven to create significant opportunities for potential learners especially people with special needs including those living with disabilities and inmates to access higher education. ODL as a mode of instruction with the use of ICT can promote access to higher education for people with disabilities and those with special needs (the inmates). The concern is on whether the people living with disabilities and those with special needs have full access, success and equity to higher education despite the existing potentials for education. The use of ODL in higher learning institutions assisted by ICT proves to have a number of challenges especially when students with disabilities are involved in accessing and utilizing ICT, in particular the assistive technology like text-to-speech software, alternative keyboards and mice, and specialized software for students with learning disabilities. In-depth interviews were conducted to both students, academic and non academic staff from four OUT regional centres namely Kinondoni, Ilala, Morogoro and Iringa. Findings indicated that, there are various challenges in accessing education through ODL and related ICT facility due to high cost implications related to the establishment of assistive infrastructure for the students with disabilities for individual institutions to undertake; Inadequacy of personnel and especially academic staff trained to attend such students; lack of text-to-speech software, alternative keyboards and mice, and specialized software for the students; Inadequate funds to lay down the required infrastructure and related equipment. It is recommended the government and generous institutions to mobilize resources to fund the establishment of the infrastructure and purchase the related equipment to enable ODL with the use of ICT to effectively provide the education required by PLW and inmates as a human right to all. ODL through ICT can reach the unreachable in the remote areas for PLW including jails*

Key Words: students with disabilities, open and distance learning, information and communication technology, access, equity and success, The Open University of Tanzania

INTRODCUTION

All human beings no matter their disabilities and vulnerability occupy a niche on earth. And that they are part of the whole and therefore, wherever they are can play their role to make the whole system to function effectively. This school of thinking is stipulated by the functionalists and sociologists who state that, the society is like a living organism of which it has some parts such as heads, legs, arms and that each part contributes to the functions of the whole body. Dysfunction of one part disrupts the function of the whole body. People with disabilities and the vulnerable, as part of the society, should also be made to function through empowerment and support in order for these groups to be functional. The major means of

empowering them is through education to make them knowledgeable and impart skills to ensure they are effectively functional.

The social school of thinking on the empowerment of people with disabilities and its related challenges, further argues that, "It is not the individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization" (Richard, 2006:45)

Dewsbury (2004:87.), also basing on the social school of thinking, said that every human being regardless of who and what he is, has the rights and needs to be respected and treated with humility and dignity. This goes the same regardless of being a person with or without disabilities. This is in line with the social model approach which redefines disability in terms of a "disabling environment, repositioning disabled people as citizens with rights, and reconfiguring the responsibilities for creating, sustaining and overcoming disability"

The social school of thinking demonstrates that everyone including those who have no movement, no sensory function and even those expected to die the following day, have the right to a certain standard of living and to be treated with respect. The model thus depicts to view those living with disability as people who require to be empowered and not the condition of disability as the primary concern. Having this in mind, and as far as this paper is concerned, every student with disability of any kind needs access to resources which would enable him or her to access information regarding higher education opportunities, study in a convenient environment, equal access to resources available to students in the same manner as those without disabilities, as well as other supportive services which do reflect the kind of disability they have, to ensure a better learning outcome. Thus, using the approach of the social model, the paper will suggest and recommend useful means of overcoming the barriers which would in turn create a better learning environment for students with disabilities at The Open University of Tanzania.

Regarding assistive technologies which can facilitate success in academic performance, it is believed that the technology makes it possible for individuals with almost any types of disabilities to operate computers and access the Internet. Such technologies include text-to-speech software for individuals who are blind or who have disabilities that affect their ability to read, alternative keyboards and mice for people who have limited hand function, and specialized software for students with learning disabilities (Burgstahler, 2007). In Tanzania, the main challenge is for the students to access OUT website and how they can be assisted effectively in their learning process.

People living with disability in the world are said to be half a billion as per WHO report of 2004. The number includes those resulting from mental, physical and sensory impairment. About 80% of these people live in the third world countries. Tanzania as one of the third world countries has considerably a big number of people living with disabilities. The 2002 population census revealed through an analysis report that, three percent (3%) of the population of over 35 million people was living with disabilities (URT, 2006), giving an indicative figure of 3,456,900. Among these 28% are physically disabled, 27% blind, 20% deaf, 8% mentally handicapped, 4% have mixed disabilities and 23% has various disabilities (URT, 2004).

These statistics demonstrate that Tanzania society, like any other country in the world has people with disabilities. However, each society had its way of treating them differently from the other. For example, in some European societies, people with disabilities were eliminated, while in Germany during the reign of Hitler, they were exterminated as he believed that people with disabilities were not productive in society. For those who survived in both German and other European nations, they were prohibited to get services in hospitals and related services; they were humiliated and left to beg in the streets.

In some societies in Tanzania, newborn children with disabilities were killed immediately after birth or were taken to the bush to die. Those who were killed immediately after birth were born at home environment and the killing was done by the local/traditional birth attendants upon an order of kinship authority under strict confidentiality (Daily News, 2008).

In Uganda, during the reign of Iddi Amin Dada, people with disabilities were ordered by him to be thrown into River Nile to be eaten by crocodiles. He had a belief that the disabled had bad omen to the family and therefore a need to be eliminated.

Various treatments of the people with disabilities all over the world made parents who managed to remain with their children with disabilities to keep them indoors. Hence, the majority did not have access to education and other social services. Concerted effort at international level began in 1975 whereby the UN passed a declaration on rights of man. In 1993, the UN standard rules of equalization of opportunities were passed. Tanzania did sign to ratify their application in the country.

Nyerere (1974) reiterated that people with disability including those with mobility impairment have rights to education and that; they can be useful to the nation but only that they lack an enabling environment. His statement was put into force through the Education Act of 1978 No.25 (56.1) where in it stated that every Tanzanian citizen has the right to education. The UN, on well being and rights of people with disabilities did emphasize that all human beings are born free, equal and with dignity. They also have the capacity to contribute constructively to development and to the well being of their respective societies.

Basic education statistics (2008) in Tanzania, however, demonstrate that less than 1% of children with disabilities get enrolled in primary schools despite efforts done by the government to introduce inclusive education together with national and international agencies. MKUKUTA I programme had set a goal of raising enrolment of children with disability from 0.2% in 2005 to 20% in 2010. Yet, the education statistics by 2008 indicated an enrolment of less than 1% which is far below the set goal of MKUKUTA I. That means, people with disabilities are still denied the rights to education. This tallies with Richard (2006) arguing from critical disability concept that people with disability are denied full rights, and reiterated that the society need to make people with disability capable to participate fully in all societal activities.

Distance education is an approach that takes education to many learners who are separated by time and space, from those who are teaching. It is a mode that has a high potential for transcending barriers that are caused by distance, time, and age; thus facilitating lifelong learning. Through distance education the learner enjoys a high degree of autonomy in deciding what, when and how to learn. In addition, it provides distinct advantages for many students with disabilities by offering access to educational opportunities that may not be present at most conventional universities. For example, Paist (1995) noted that flexibility in the location, scheduling, and delivery of distance education programs can provide disabled

students with what may be their first real access to higher education. Similarly, it is equally important that students with disabilities receive the support they require to ensure success in their studies.

Horn and Berktold (1999) argued that, disability-specific services are an important contributor to success in distance education for students with disabilities. They further noted that students with disabilities, who receive appropriate support services, persist in their studies and graduate at the same rates as their non-disabled counterparts. Therefore, students support services are responsive to a wide variety of needs where they receive information, assessments for assistive technology, assistance and/or referral for funding and services, help with study skills, extension of course contract dates, alternative methods for writing exams, and a variety of other services. The aim is to provide them with an equal opportunity to access and succeed in educational courses and programs. There is a wide coverage of literature for studies conducted on students with disabilities and their experiences in academic endeavours.

On the aspect of equity, students with disabilities in Australia are identified as the equity group of the whole higher learning institution's population. At the inception of Australian higher education equity policy articulated in 1992 in 'A Fair Chance For All' (Brett, 2010), students were asked to indicate whether their disability belongs to the categories of hearing, learning, mobility, visibility or other kinds of disabilities for service provision. Equity is key in terms of providing appropriate services for students with disabilities based on their specific kind of disability. It is evident in Australian higher learning institutions where they categorize students with disabilities in order to know what services each may need.

With students having hearing problems, for instance, Brett (2010) documents that they are categorized between those with mild to moderate forms of hearing loss, and for those identified as deaf, who are provided with interpreters and have access to the use of Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Others are provided with hearing augmentation devices, audio loop installation, interpreters, as well as note takers who are specifically employed to document the key concepts in the form of verbatim transcript. In the course of lecture delivery, the employed staff take notes while the students get the opportunity to focus on the speaker, the interpreter and on other visual cues as notes are being taken care of by someone else. Interpreters need to be two per lecture who would take turns in 15-20 minute intervals. This study shows the significance of equity and accessibility to important services but with a focus on students with hearing loss. However, it did not touch on students with other disabilities.

A review on the Open University in Great Britain regarding handling of students with disabilities shows that students with disabilities are provided with courses in multi-media form aiming at developing skills in terms of effective use of the necessary services that guide students in their learning. These courses include the use of printed texts, audio and video material, radio and television programs, microcomputer software, and tutorial support for students with visual and hearing impairment, to be able to use taped materials, identification of speech needs in computer use, arrangements for home examinations and assessment of individual functional requirements. All this is made possible and functional to ensure students with disabilities reach their potential, supported by information and resources network with specialist organizations and through links to national and regional governmental and non government- funded agencies.

The situation and experiences in the African higher learning institutions in terms of accessibility, equity and success takes a different nature. Most African higher learning institutions are faced with resources and facilities problem, which would have been utilized by students with disabilities to necessitate academic achievement and prosperity. This goes with the lack of effectiveness of legislation and policy on disability issues and special education programs (Obiozor *et al.*, 2010) which results to poor or non existent disability support facilities for students with disabilities in African colleges and universities. There is also lack of adequate funding, training facilities, resources and effective special needs curriculum, resource office equipped with all facilities necessary for conducive learning and related activities (therapy and counselling, assistive technology devices). The consequence of this is a minimal enrolment of students with disabilities at higher learning institutions and graduation of skilled individuals. The only feasible programs that could be found in use in few institutions in African countries south of Sahara is the Resource Room model which according to Charema and Peresuh (1996 cited in Obiozor *et al.*, 2010) is a model commonly used in America. However, not all African higher institutions can afford such facilities.

The Open University of Tanzania, basing on the previous inference therefore, is equally faced with the problems of accessibility, equity and success for students with disabilities. This situation has a negative implication on such students' performance and success in their academics and thus their future aspirations. It also keeps the enrolled students in a very low number as information related to enrolment opportunities are not easily accessible. Students with disabilities also lack accessibility to materials for studying. Policies on equity on distance learning is equally ineffective as such students are treated as any regular student without focusing on their specific needs and this challenges their learning environments and outcome. As a result, some of them decide to drop out in the middle of a year's semester.

Given the challenges facing most students with disabilities, in particular at institutions with limited or inefficient ICT and supportive services for students with disabilities, most of such students are likely than students without disabilities to leave college before attaining a degree.

In a study conducted in India at Indira Ghandi National Open University on seeking to find out the success component to students with disabilities at distant education, Parthasarathy (2010) contacted 52 students through mailed un-structured questionnaire or telephone to know about support services received. The researcher received 24 responses of the 52 as feedback for those who indicated had received printed study materials, counseling sessions during week ends, reimbursement of program fee as per government norms, information on examination and extra time or allotment of writer/ special seating arrangement during written examination. Ten (10) of these completed their studies and graduated on time. When all had graduated, it was noted that, nineteen (19) of them were employed. What this study discovered clearly shows that, although the rate of graduating among students with disabilities is not as high, there is a possibility for them to complete their studies and be made to function in society. However, the study was a tracer study which utilized data from the same institution, from 2000-2006, 2004 and 2010 respectively, tracing how employable are graduates with disabilities, termed as success after attaining a higher learning degree.

Despite the fact that support services such as an arrangement made for the success of students' with hearing loss (having interpreters, note takers, hearing devices) are arrangements regarded by Andrews and Smith (1992 cited in Brett, 2010) as the most expensive for a group of students with disability to support, it is reported that 14% of deaf people had completed a higher education qualification, as opposed to 27% of the

general population (Al Mahmood, 1998). Such a minimal percentage was linked with shortages of interpreters who are very important for students with hearing loss's learning.

Success aspect in Africa, with respect to a Nigerian University's study by Lagoke *et al*, (2010), discovered a significant difference between the academic performance of able and non-abled distance learners, in which-abled distance learners performed better than non-abled learners.

Moisey (2004) also reported that students with disabilities usually recorded less success. The factor behind such assertion lies on similar challenges facing African higher learning institutions on enhancing learning for students with disabilities which relate to inadequate support and facilities and personnel to assist such students. Lagoke *et al*, (2010) adds that, student support services especially in terms of supportive staff like language interpreters, speech therapists, audiologists and the like were not made available for students with disabilities in the programme. Findings from this study which compared between-abled and non-abled students, indicated that support services are very much important for a non-abled student's success.

Komba (2009) on OUT students with disabilities revealed that students who are blind/partially sighted and print-disabled, are studying various programmes by using audiotapes or cassettes. The same study materials used by other students are marked-up or adapted in a way that enables print-disabled students to use them for learning. This unique group of learners is provided with initial training on how to use audio tape systems and how to navigate the pages. However, he reiterated, that the cost of establishing the necessary infrastructure especially ICT is prohibitive. And yet, institutions are almost working in isolation to develop the infrastructure for modern distance education.

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) which was established in 1992 under an Act of Parliament No. 17 is by far the major provider of higher distance education in Tanzania. The mode of delivery is via print and audio. Student support is provided through face-to-face sessions, study groups tutorials, guidance and counseling, including study skills advisory services for students with learning disabilities.

Komba (2009) reporting on the situation of students with disabilities studying at The Open University of Tanzania, indicated that students with disabilities studying in various programmes, especially those with visual impairment, study by use of audiotapes or cassettes. The same study materials used by other students are marked-up or adapted in a way that enables print-disabled students to use them for learning. In addition to support services provided to all students such as study skills, advisory services, guidance and counseling, this unique group of learners is provided with initial training on how to use audio tape systems and how to navigate through the pages.

OUT has a unit which is responsible for the coordination and to ensure that all students benefit from the technology. However, it is not clear whether this technology also assists students with disabilities to have access to the information through OUT website. Therefore, this calls for an assessment on the experiences of students with disabilities, on how they access information through distance education at The Open University of Tanzania.

The questions that arise are whether potential students with disabilities and special needs (inmates) have full access to information on admission in higher education through ODL, or whether they have full chance to succeed and are provided with equal opportunities to access

the education required. Therefore, distance learning when effectively implemented can facilitate a larger number of people to enrol for higher education studies for both direct entrants and those already employed. It can also minimize costs as students learn where they are located using ICT facilities and distance mode learning materials prepared in lecture form for students to read the lectures alone wherever they are. This mode of learning can also promote enrolment of the students with disabilities who as per human rights convention and as per Tanzanian policy on disability, reiterate that, all people have equal opportunities and access to higher education.

The availability of infrastructure and other assistive services at institutional level can facilitate smooth access, success and equity in getting higher education for potential students living with disabilities. Such facilities and services include institutional procedures, pattern of facilitation schedules, availability of course materials, academic and administrative support, ICT and tutorial support. Mnyanyi and Mbwette, (2009) argued that the use of ICT could be one of the effective solutions to most of the problems faced by the students due to its ability to transverse barriers of time, age, culture and social status.

The urge to empower the people with disabilities in Tanzania began way back in 1994 when Mwalimu Nyerere talked about their rights and need for improvement to make them capable of participating in national development. This was followed by Tanzania ratifying international declarations and conventions on disabled people's rights. In 2004 Tanzania Disability Policy was adopted and implementation was seen through the MKUKUTA programme. Families with children having disabilities have been sensitized to take them to school; and opportunities for potential students with disabilities have been opened for them to get enrolled in institutions of higher education. Perhaps the most appropriate opportunity for such students could be through Open and Distance learning with the use of ICT. Through time, the demand for ODL has been increasing due to its flexibility. Mnyanyi and Mbwette, (2009) argued that flexibility in distance education offers opportunities to people with special needs, including those with disabilities to access higher education, and thus, the opportunities contribute to equality in education and poverty alleviation programmes.

Yet, the infrastructure laid down so far, the procedure for accessing information for enrolment and facilities for learning for the students with disability seem to be problematic. This is because, the number of enrolled students with disabilities is still low, and some are dropping out. The situation prompted the interest to find out the actual prevailing situation in terms of access, success and equity to higher education through ODL assisted with ICT for both potential and continuing students living with disabilities and those with special needs.

The broad objective of the study was to look into the prevailing situation of access opportunities, success and equity to higher education for students living with disabilities through open and distance learning assisted with ICT. Specifically the study aimed to investigate on the level of accessibility of both information about admission opportunities for higher education through ODL and study materials for both potential and continuing students with disabilities. Secondly, to assess equity issues for students with disabilities and special needs through ODL at The Open University of Tanzania. Thirdly, to assess success issues for students with disabilities and special needs at The Open University of Tanzania and lastly, to evaluate the experiences of students with disabilities studying at The Open University of Tanzania.

METHODOLOGY

This case study project used qualitative approach. The study population was both students and lecturers with disabilities in higher learning institutions learning through ODL; and policy makers, planners and implementers in universities. The coverage of the study was all The Open University regional centres in the country which host students in the regions and remote areas who study for higher education degree or diploma awards.

Four of the twenty six regional centres were involved in the study, as well as the Ukonga prison. However, telephone calls were made with students with visual impairment located in Tabora (2), Kagera (1) and Tanga (1) to get their views and experiences as OUT students. A purposive sampling was applied to select the regional centres basing on a number of criteria which include proximity to researchers, proximity to main informants especially the lecturers living with disabilities and to some extent the numeracy of students living with disabilities in the regional centres.

Methods used were mainly face-to-face interview using an interview schedule and in- depth interview was applied to lecturers living with disabilities, regional directors and administrators at OUT main campus in Dar es Salaam. A telephone discussions were made with two students in Tabora, one student in Kagera and one student in Tanga.

Thirty four (34) students with disabilities were interviewed and out of these, six were females. Two inmate students were also interviewed at Ukonga prison. Regarding lecturers and administrative staff, the study involved four lecturers, four regional centre academic staff and two policy makers of the University. Of the four lecturers interviewed, two are living with visual impairment. The summary of the number of respondents is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Respondents Involved in the Study

Type of Respondents	Gender of Respondents		Total
	Male	Female	
Students	28	6	34
Student Inmates	2	-	2
Lecturers	4	-	4
Administrative Staff	2	-	2
Total	36	6	42

Data was analyzed by using thematic analysis, by recording and summarizing key issues emanating from the discussions with the respondents. In addition, SPSS programme was employed in analysis of the data and later on results were presented in the forms of percentages and tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 42 respondents were involved in the study as shown in Table 1. Regarding the type of disabilities the students involved in the interview have, about 60% of students interviewed have visual impairment, 30% have physical disabilities and 10% were albinos. Among the four lecturers involved in the study, two of them have visual impairment.

Accessibility to Information about Higher Education Opportunities

On accessibility to information about higher education opportunities, about 80% of the respondents said that information about higher education opportunities was obtained through

friends and relatives. The respective regional centres lack the essential equipments which are designed specifically for use by both potential and continuing students with disabilities. The absence of such facilities makes it difficult for these people to get such information using ICT mechanism. Advertisement of programmes is done through University website and newspapers but people living with visual disability can access that through specialized computers or a translator to provide information from newspapers. The limitation of funds at the University to acquire such equipment for every centre make them not to provide such services to the students as expected and required.

The interviewed students with disabilities indicated that since they are unable to access the information through specialized gadgets because they are not available, they resort to seeking such information from friends or relatives who go to search for such information either from internet or attend face-to-face sessions conducted by the University.

Accessibility to Reading Materials

Students (60%) interviewed with visual impairment admitted that they lacked the assistive gadgets that would enable them to access learning materials which are in electronic form. Individual students could not afford to buy special computers for use in their studies. Likewise, even if they got them, they have to be trained on how to use the assistive equipment. The University does not have funds to purchase such special computers, Braille type writers and other related equipment. The visually impaired students can also access study materials through specifically prepared audio tapes for listening and transferring information into Braille for daily use. Telephone information from some of them especially those in Tanga, Tabora and Kagera indicated that they experienced difficulties in accessing the audio prepared materials for study.

The physically disabled students indicated to have difficulties in accessing computers because at OUT headquarters the computers are located in the library, on the first floor of the building where they can hardly reach as there is no lift. Likewise, such students experience difficulties in accessing computers at Kinondoni and Ilala regional centres for the same reason. The offices are all located in upper floors where such students cannot climb stairs and the lifts do not operate.

Lecturers and Policy Makers Response to Accessibility by Students with Disabilities

Lecturers and policy makers dealing with students with disabilities acknowledged the challenges students with disabilities experienced. Two of the lecturers who are both visually impaired said that ICT facilities, when available, can promote enrolment of the vulnerable groups and special groups into higher education and study effectively while in their respective localities. The Regional centres and study centres at the level of districts are supposed to be equipped with ICT facilities including special computers, Braille type writers, tapes, and other tools. However, the lecturers expressed concerns on the current absence of facilities especially at regional and district level. Students with disabilities get information through friends and relatives. On the side of study materials, they are available in most programmes but these are not in Braille print. They cannot be used by the students with visual impairment.

For the special group of students, that is the inmates, the University had made an effort to reach them physically. Two of the students at one of the prisons in Dar es Salaam (Ukongu) were physically visited by lecturers and provided with the necessary documents. This is a result of lack of ICT facilities in prisons for students to access electronic learning materials.

Accessing Tests and Examination Results

SARIS is a programme specifically designed to present student tests and examination results at The Open University of Tanzania. It is through SARIS that OUT students wherever they are, if they have access to internet services, they can see their results. For students with visual impairment interviewed, 100% of them said they get results through their friends. This is due to lack of special computers for them to use. Likewise, students with physical disabilities who cannot access computers because of lack of friendly infrastructure to access computers in upper floors of buildings, they use friends to access their results.

Equity and Success in Accessing Higher Education through ODL

Equity

Education Act number 25 of 1978 states that every Tanzanian has the right to education. This was a reflection on what Nyerere (1974) reiterated some years back, that people with disability including those with mobility impairment, have the right to education and that they can be useful to the nation, but they lack an enabling environment.

The Poverty Reduction Programme I and II, addressing the policy statement, set an objective to raise enrolment of children with disability in education from 0.2% in 2005 to 20% in 2010. This also reflected on the Tanzania policy on higher education which states that, education opportunities in Tanzania are for all Tanzanian citizens irrespective of their disability, gender, ethnicity and religions orientation.

In an effort to address the national goal of increasing enrolment of students with disability, The Open University of Tanzania established a unit for special education to sensitize potential students to enrol for higher education, mobilize resources to provide the required assistive equipment for learning, and orienting them to use ICT for easy access of reading materials. Together with this, The Open University of Tanzania adopting the nation's education policy declared that there is equal opportunity for all Tanzanians who qualify to join the university irrespective of gender, disability, ethnicity and religion.

It is through this effort that the University currently enrolls about 96 students with disabilities studying through various regional centres as indicated in Table 2 on student enrolment by regions.

Table 2: Students with Disabilities Enrolled at OUT by Regions

S/N	Region	Visual Impairment	Deaf	Psychiatric case	Physical impairment	Total
1	Tabora	1			1	14
2	Mbeya	1			2	3
3	Dodoma	4				4
4	Kilimanjaro	4			1	5
5	Temeke	8			1	9
6	Singida	7			1	8
7	Iringa	2				2
8	Morogoro	5			5	10
9	Ruvuma	2				2
10	Rukwa	2				2
12	Arusha	2		1	2	5

13	Kagera	3			2	5
14	Shinyanga	6				6
15	Tanga	2			2	4
16	Zanzibar	2				2
17	Pemba	1				1
18	Kinondoni	3		1	3	7
19	Ilala	1	2			3
20	Lindi	2				2
21	Mtwara				1	1
22	Manyara	1				1
		71	2	2	21	96

Study information indicated that, there were some achievements in enrolments of students with disabilities as Table 2 above on enrolment by regions demonstrates. However, in regional centres where data was collected, there was lack of assistive learning equipments which included special computers, hearing gadgets, Braille type writers and relate gadgets. There was also a problem of unfriendly environment for those with mobility impairment to access computers as they could not climb the stairs especially at the Head Quarters, Ilala and Kinondoni regional centres. Lack of such essential assistive equipment have had serious impact on their performance and to many such students, it has discouraged them from continuing with studies.

SUCCESS

Success of students living with disability is determined by various factors. One factor is the availability of assistive learning equipment, the learning contents availability, counsellors who are also academicians at regional centres to address student day to day academic and welfare issues and concerns and to encourage them to continue with their studies despite the huddles they encounter.

Information collected from both the students and the staff responsible for students with special needs and disabilities, indicated that, the students faced various challenges in the process of learning. The students with disabilities stated that they lacked essential assistive learning equipment such as Braille typewriters and special computers, special carts for the physically impaired, guiding sticks, hearing gadgets and translators for reading study materials. Students also felt that they required regional centres to open up special education units where they could get the assistance required. Students further said, they were generally slow learners due to their disabilities. However, if they were provided with the required assistive learning facilities at the same time avail the study materials and provide them with conducive learning environment, they could do as well as normal students; in some cases they could do even much better than normal students.

There is still a belief among people that people living with disabilities cannot do better in schools and in work places or at home. This was revealed by two university lecturers who have visual impairment. I quote one of them who narrated at length on his experience, while still in lower level education that his fellow students in secondary schools used to call him names. He said, "I was called *maiti wima* (walking corpse) and/or *treni la mizigo* (cargo train). He further narrated that, "Sometimes, papers for use for my type writer were stolen. I was also not allowed to take science subjects due to my vision impairment. I wanted to take

mathematics, but was told if I opt for the subject, the maximum score I can be given is C even if I perform above the C score because, students with disabilities were not allowed to take the subject”.

The lecturer further narrated that while in high school he passed with distinction and was selected to join one of the special high schools. He said, “the head master of the school had to appeal to the ministry to transfer him to another school as he had joined a school for students with special talents academically and therefore, was not fit to be there because of his disability. Fortunately the ministry of education did not implement the request and at the end he performed excellently and was selected to join university studies”.

This narration is an indication of the huddles that some people with disabilities go through before they get admitted for higher education level. On the other hand, it is a demonstration of the fact that people with disabilities can do wonders academically when they are enabled.

The Challenges

The challenges noted from this study were that very few students with disabilities were enrolled for higher education especially through ODL mode which is assumed to provide opportunities for this group to get higher education by use of ICT, wherever they were located in the country. However, the generic problem is with the lower level of education where enrolment is still low. This has to do with the traditional belief that people with disabilities cannot do anything; they are unproductive. The other challenge has to do with infrastructure that facilitates enabling environment for them to access study materials, such as computers, and for those with mobility impairment to be able to access to library and computer laboratories, and get in close contact with their lecturers. Students with disabilities studying at The Open University of Tanzania are thus experiencing serious huddles due to the absence of this.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown the possibility for the people living with disabilities to get higher education through ODL using ICT. It has demonstrated the national goals to increase enrolment of the people living with disabilities and the challenges that act as intervening barriers in terms of achieving the goals. However, enrolment of these people in higher education and especially in ODL which can reach them where they are, is still very low due to various reasons which include limited number of applicants to enrol, limited access to information about the learning opportunities at ODL, limited access to study materials, limited access to results, lack of tools and equipments to facilitate them to study effectively and getting in contact with lecturers.

Accessibility to information for enrolment opportunities for students with disabilities has been seen to be problematic. Information about ODL enrolment opportunities reaches potential students only through friends and relatives searching for such information for them. Those having no friends or relatives with exposure to such information, miss the opportunity to get enrolled, as a result, the number of enrolled students with disabilities remains small.

It is recommended that, both the government and The Open University of Tanzania, through its regional centres and through the regional advisory councils to reach out to such potential students in their respective districts by distributing fliers about the various opportunities the University has for such candidates.

In addition, it is recommended that The Open University of Tanzania together with the government, in an effort to realize the goal of increasing enrolment of students with disabilities as per MKUKUTA II, to mobilize resources to fund the establishment of the infrastructure and purchase the related equipments to enable ODL with use of ICT to effectively provide the education required by people living with disabilities and inmates, as a human right to all. ODL through ICT can reach the unreachable in the remote areas for people living with disabilities and special groups such as inmates in prisons.

The findings of this study have indicated that there are several challenges that face students with disabilities while studying at OUT through ODL. Besides lack of the required facilities and unfriendly environment, there also lacks academic staff trained to deal with people living with disabilities. It is recommended that The Open University together with the government should employ such staff at regional centres to provide services required and play the role of sensitization of such students to get enrolled.

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