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ODEL and Inclusivity: Enhancing Learning Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in Africa

Issue at-hand

Disability is an umbrella term for impairments including activity limitations and participation restrictions. The interaction between a health condition, personal and environmental factors affect the capacity of persons with disabilities (PWD) to reach mainstream systems, such as that of the education sector. Based on this definition, UN Statistics estimates the number of persons with disabilities in Africa at 80 million, almost a quarter of the estimated 400 million who live in developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) goes farther in its estimation of PWD in Africa. According to WHO's analysis, forty percent of Africa's population (300 million) can be affected by some form of disability brought about by malnutrition and disease, environmental hazards, traffic and industrial accidents, civil conflict and war. Out of the 300 million people, WHO estimates that 10 to 15 percent are school-age children. Given that disability in Africa conjures stigma and social and economic exclusion, very few African PWD have access to educational and employment opportunities. The average rate of school enrollment for PWD is estimated at no more than 5 to 10 percent and unemployment among them is very high, 70 to 80 percent (Leiden University, 2016).

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Handicapped Persons, education should ensure that the State provides "learning materials through appropriate assistance measures, ways and means of augmentative and alternative communication, sign language, including the language of touch signs, Braille, relief, unprocessed texts and other alternative formats, a universal and accessible environment, sign language interpreters, assistance of all kinds, and other arrangements" (United Nations, 2006).

One of the greatest challenges in addressing the educational and training needs of PWD in sub-Saharan Africa is the lack of empirical data as to the number, types of impairment, and levels of disability within the population. However, progress and interventions have been made in Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zambia, to name a few.

PWD require differing interventions, ranging from national policy planning and implementation to support to daily activities with supportive materials that could be complex and costly but also inexpensive. More specifically, this includes modifications to physical infrastructure, educational planning and policies, integration of ICTs, and innovative teaching and learning methods (WHO, 2011). Available data demonstrates that the limited infrastructure and education-related facilities provided by tertiary institutions has, in general, resulted in a limited number of disabled professionals in key fields, including science, government, law, and medicine who are able to attain decision-making positions or contribute to local, national, and international initiatives.

Embedding into existing policy implementation frameworks strategies for providing access to quality and relevant education for PWD through ODeL at all levels, including lifelong learning opportunities.

Online learning provides an exciting and relevant opportunity for disabled persons to learn at a level equal to their able counterparts. However, the design of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is contingent on reliable statistical data on PWD, universally accepted definitions on disabilities, national resources (budget, plans, policies, governance), institutional infrastructure and educational design, as well as quality teacher training for inclusive education. In UNESCO's *Learning for All: Guidelines on the Inclusion of Learners with Disabilities in Open and Distance Learning*, the authors highlight how an ODL education system supports inclusivity utilizing Open Educational Resources (OERs), Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), and Open Access (OA) to incorporate the needs of all learners. Stakeholders (governments, institutions, instructors, partners, curriculum designers) must be paired with mechanisms to support quality assurance and qualifications recognition bodies, whilst developing ODL platforms, processes, courses, and examinations.

Aside from international conventions and protocols, increased focus is needed to ensure equity amongst all people without discrimination of the disabled. Chambers et al (2016) provide guidelines for (i) governments, (ii) educational institutions delivering ODL, (iii) instructors, and (iv) quality assurance and qualifications recognition bodies.

The authors of the *Learning for All* guidelines offer detailed guidelines for the four categories. Specifically, **governments** must ensure lifelong learning for education for PWD through legal and policy provisions, adequate funding, inter-ministerial cooperation, broadband internet access

and ICT capacity, access to assistive technologies, adequate infrastructure, capacity support, accessibility and standardized procedures to monitor quality implementation. This support must incorporate provisions for inclusive technology and increased accessibility to open solutions such as FOSS, OER, and OA. Inclusivity should be incorporated into national teacher training programs.

Education institutions must ensure that the content and platform used for ODL courses are based on the relevant teaching and learning provisions and meets the needs of students with disabilities in an inclusive manner. As the disability needs can be diverse, existing common challenges should be identified in a coherent method with respect to both design and learning principles. To highlight a few, attention must be paid to needs assessments, policy and strategy, content, removal of barriers, training, efficacy, support services, and compliance to support good practices. Inclusive institutions will support and provide for PWD (students, teachers) and the necessary institutional technology.

Instructors and other teaching personnel are tasked to ensure that students are able to access content and required learning resources, as well as to guide them through the course to achieve the expected learning outcomes. Focus should include awareness of student needs and functional capabilities, learner support, knowledge of OS and inclusive technology, accessibility integration solutions, assessment, effective communication, review of content accessibility, monitoring, and professional development and knowledge exchange of good practices.

Guidelines for quality assurance and qualifications recognition bodies necessitate the standards and criteria to assess programs and foster quality inclusive education. This includes ensuring policy design and implementation which supports the needs of students with disabilities. It further requires standardized criteria for the qualification of the teaching staff and educational curricula. Quality assurance must be non-discriminatory, raise awareness, set standards, focus on retention and learning outcomes for the diversity of students, improve on quality assessment processes, ensure phased implementation of inclusive practices, and share good practices to support ODL.

Recommendations

(i) governments provide for legislative and policy direction and resources to support PWD, and offer materials to enable access; (ii) institutions ensure relevant and inclusive content and platforms for ODL; (iii) instructors assure students' access to content and learning resources as well as monitor and assess progress; and (iv) quality assurance and qualifications recognition bodies should establish standards and criteria for program assessment and quality assurance mechanisms.

With regard to African countries, governments should:

- Allocate sufficient resources towards technology, infrastructure, policy design and implementation, teacher training, and national qualifications frameworks towards inclusive ODL systems in accordance with national protocols, yet based on specific country needs.
- Foster inter-ministerial cooperation in the design of curricula based on data collection (Education Management Information Systems and census surveys).

ODL institutions must strive to:

- Provide content-appropriate teaching and learning methods towards inclusivity of all students, ensuring that quality teaching, learning, monitoring, and assessment reach all learners with technological support meeting their needs.
- Reduce barriers and increase access to educational content through ICTs and web-based resources, teacher development, and the sharing of best practices.

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