

CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS WITH BLINDNESS STUDYING THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to find out the problems faced by blind students studying through open and Distance Learning (ODL). A case study of a blind student enrolled in 2014 at Mashonaland Central Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University was the focus of this research. Data were generated through interviews and observation. Data were qualitatively analysed. The study found out that the students with blindness should have the technical equipment that can be presented or adapted to be relevant to them. The study concluded out that ODL is ideal for students that are blind because they learn at their own pace and in the comfort of their homes. However, there is great need for highly trained personnel to assist such students. The study suggests that there is need to establish resource centres at ODL institutions for internet, Braille computers and e-learning to facilitate training of students with blindness.

Keywords: Blindness, Open and Distance Learning, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe Open University offers access to education to people with disabilities (PWD) through ODL. According to the Zimbabwe Open University Quality Policy Manual (2013:16), it aims to provide adequate facilities and services to staff and students with disabilities and special needs. According to Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) these services and facilities are not readily available in institutions of higher learning. However the quality of support and services offered to students with disability requires to be identified and requires a unit to effectively support their learning. At Mashonaland Central Regional Campus in the first semester 2014 a blind student enrolled at the Regional Centre. She has been able to successfully pass all the semester courses she sat the examinations for. She experienced challenges during her studies. This study would like to investigate problems faced by students with blindness studying through Open and Distance Learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Disability in the Context of Blindness

Disability is defined in different way in the various fields. Disability is the total or partial loss or body or mental functioning, total or partial loss of part of the person's body, a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's growth through the processes, perception of reality, emotions and judgement of that result in disturbed behaviour Girson and Dymond p15 (2011)

Hardman, Drew, Egan and Wolf (1993) also define disability as a condition characterised by loss of physical functioning or difficulty in learning and social adjustment that significantly interferes with normal growth and development, for example, loss of sight. Disability is any restriction as a result of an impairment failure to take part in any routine activities at home and other environmental activities.

Blindness Is defined as a visual acuity worse than 20/400 or worse with the best possible correction, or a visual field of 10 degrees or less, Mandal (2013). In the case of the student registered at Mashonaland Central Regional Campus her condition was total loss of eyesight due to brain tumour. On the other hand acquired blindness refers to those who develop blindness later in life, maybe as a result of accident, trauma diseases or medication (site servers international, 2000)

Factors impacting on academic success of students with blindness

In literature, a number of external factors have been identified as contributing to the academic success of blind students. These include, social support and university student services, family support faculty support (Chikukwa and Chimbwanda p16 2014). Family support is a critical factor in ensuring academic success students with blindness. According to Murphy (1992) emotional support from the family members contribute to the academic achievements of student with blindness.

Chikukwa and Chimbwanda (2014) also identified that students with blindness rely on fellow students to succeed academically. In all learning situations such as accessing E-resources, internet reading modules and writing of assignments other college students assist. According to Chikukwa and Chimbwanda (2014) peers read scripts, take notes for blind students and guide their physical movement/mobility.

Although universities have policies that pronounce how the students with disabilities can be assisted they need to put in place resources and infrastructure that support students with blindness. Universities need qualified staff to meet the needs of students with blindness Choruwa (2009). Employers in the education sector should have positive attitudes towards students with blindness. According to Lang and Charowa (2007) people with disabilities are marginalised and face adverse social attitudes and isolation. Institutions need to provide equipment such as Braille, audio tapes, and MP3s, study materials and computers specially designed for students with blindness Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014). Lecturers need to modify their tutorials to accommodate students with blindness.

Student-centred factors affecting academic success of students with blindness

A number of factors contribute to the academic success of students with blindness as individuals. One of the factors is students motivating; students should be motivated to learn and to succeed. This also involves the persistence and discipline Roy (2000). This means academic success is also influenced by the effort and actions of the students themselves. Students with blindness are expected to be self-reliant in seeking and participating in academic and social activities. These students are expected to be proactive and solicit for assistance they require from various sources Gil (2007). Failure can be as a result of students not being proactive and failing to explore the environment to their advantage.

Challenges faced by students with blindness in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Open and Distance Learning refers to approaches to learning that focus on separation of the learner and the teacher in space and time while offering flexible learning opportunities. According to McBroom, 1997 blind students in ODL faced the problem of navigation accessing resources and accessing information. They fail to access e-resources and have little access to computers targets or software. Open and Distance education by increasing use of WebPages adverts and resources in support of students studying at their institution. Blind students need specialised qualified personnel to take care of their educational and social needs Chikukwa and Chimbwanda (2014).

Statement of the problem

Blind students experience challenges that impact on their academic success when studying through ODL. Educational institutions and families had been found wanting in terms of support both financially and morally. Blind students without adequate support are unlikely to succeed in their studies. This research sought to find out the challenges faced by a student with acquired blindness enrolled at Mashonaland Central Regional Campus.

Research Questions

- What challenges are faced by students with total blindness?
- What are the views of the students and sighted guides on the assistance needed for success in their academic study?
- How can institutions ensure academic success of students with blindness?

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative research. Qualitative research involves the researchers studying the participant in their natural setting (Cresswell, 2007). In this case the natural setting includes the home and the schools or the work-place. Qualitative research was preferred because it allowed the researchers to interview the participants in either assisting or facilitating learning to the blind student. The researchers visited the student's home and interacted with the parents and other caregivers involved in assisting the blind student in her studies. Staff members were interviewed at their workplace. Data were collected through in depth interviews. The participants were purposely sampled.

Research Method

A case study method was used in this study. The case study design was preferred because it allowed the research to focus on the key players and the challenges faced by students who are blind studying through ODL. According to Best and Khan (1993) a case study enables the researchers to examine a social unit of institution or individual in a given context and be able to understand it better. The researchers wanted to get a better understanding of the challenges faced by a blind student with acquired blindness.

Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify the participant in this study. The participant is a blind student, parents, siblings, caregivers and ZOU staff who were directly

involved with assisting the blind student during the learning period. The purposive sampling technique enabled the researchers to pick individuals with the vital information to ensure relevant data would be collected (Creswell, 2007).

Data Generation and Analysis

To generate data guided interviews and observations were used. The researchers were able to pursue issues raised by participants as well clarify questions and follow up on the responses made by the participants. To generate data the student was interviewed including the parents and the siblings. Observations were made during the learning process. The interpretative study analysis was used to analyse the data. During data analysis the following steps were followed coding, categorising, the researcher had to structure the categories of data so that they would be meaningful. Analysis also involved selecting the categories and relating them to other categories. The researchers had the task of integrating the categories to generate meaning and understanding, which involved describing relationships action, events and the intervention of the participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The student was asked to highlight the challenges she faced studying through open and distance learning. The student faced challenges in travelling to the Regional Campus . The student does not work and the parents do not have stable income so getting busfare was a challenge The student also faces challenges in accessing the print modules or e-resources The student said *“My parents are sometimes very busy that they fail to read for me. Due dates for assignment come before I cover enough ground”*. The result is failure to meet assignment deadlines. Short circulation time for the borrowed library books, units her access to reading materials. The student had this to say , *“my parents are my eyes, if they fail to assist with reading because they have busy schedules it means I have failed to read too”*.

The student suggested the following possible solutions to the problems faced.The student needs assistance with reading materials to meet the course requirements.In the area of lesson library resources the student came up with a number of suggestions which : *“the students had this to say, e- books, current library books, audio books and tapes and compact disks. The library also needs new technology for students who are blind.*

The roles played by various members of the family included the father assisting the student with reading and at times the mother also assist. When both parents are not available for assistance the sister and brother assist the student. She studies using a computer when there is no one else home. Her computer is loaded with the jaws soft ware which enables her to read hence the need for the institution to acquire such a software.

The part played by Regional Campus staff included invigilation counselling, registration , processing of assignments and project supervision. The student received assistance in many dimensions from the student management office. This ranges from psycho-social counselling, academic guidance and counselling, encouragement and teaching. The student advisor , the IT technician, information clerks, library assistants and the Programme Co-ordinator assisting the blind student were all involved in assisting the student. They attended to the learning needs and wants of the student.the student also said *“The library registry and computer departments help me a lot”* and went on to say *“The leadership at the Regional Campus is good and flexible”*.

As this being the first case staff were not sure of the best way to manage the blind student. One of the staff members had this to say *'Vimbai is accommodative because she was able to guide us on the best way to assist her while we lacked basic knowledge of handling blind students'*. Other relatives who played a part in her studies also include her aunts, uncles and their children. The student had this to say *"they give me too much attention and they want to do everything for me."*

The student was asked about the type of resources required for effective learning. The student said that she needs, a reliable laptop, user friendly software, library resources, and more time during examination. On the resources the student emphasised the need for well ventilated examination room, a resource centre for internet, braille, machine supported device and other services that benefit students with visual impairment and other disabilities. She highlighted that some challenges are infrastructural and institutional and may need long term solutions for example the examination room and the accessible stairs at the regional Campus. Asked if ODL was suitable for her study, she said 'yes' to this question and further explained that she has other conditions apart from being blind. *'I suffered brain tumour and I always experience epileptic seizures and I sometimes cancel appointments with staff members due to illnesses. But I always get chances to resume my studies'*. The student indicated that the open and distance learning (ODL) was ideal for her condition. Considering the challenges of travelling and finances alluded to earlier own, ODL is the answer because it brings education to anyone's door step. However, it becomes fully beneficial when all the necessary equipment is as well as the technical aids. The student advised recommended that all people who deal with studying with blindness need to be patient to be patient with them to ensure completion of studies.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that student with blindness face various challenges which open and distance learning institutions need to take into consideration when supporting students with special needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Library and Information department need to increase circulation time for borrowed books to these students.
- Staff members, parents, relatives or any other sighted guides need to be capacitated with skills of managing and assisting students with total blindness by specialist in students with disabilities.
- Regional campuses need to be equipped by the by the institution with appropriate hardware and software resources for students with visual impairment.
- Resource centres should be well equipped by the institution to assist students with special including blind students.
- There is need for assessment of time for examination depending on the severity and the age of onset of the disability by academic registry.
- The study recommends for the research in the area of software that can be used by blind students with acquired blindness.

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