



## Accessing Higher Education through Open and Distance Learning by People with Disabilities in Nigeria

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### Abstract

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*Disability means any form of physical or mental condition that restricts a person's way of life. It ranges from visual impairments, lameness to complex intellectual or mental health challenges. Research reveals that about 15% of the world's population suffer from various forms of disabilities. The number is expected to keep increasing because of the fact of continuing conflicts, terrorism, hunger and aging populations, . People with disabilities are usually discriminated against in virtually everything, including education and employment. This tends to lead to a vicious cycle of more poverty, further exclusion and discrimination. However, the plight of people with disability was captured by the United Nations and provisions were made for them in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 stipulates for the provision of inclusive, equitable and quality education for all by 2030, as well as for lifelong learning. Two of the targets of SDG 4 include the elimination of discrimination against people with disabilities and the provision of infrastructure and materials for improved access to education for all. Since education is a sure way of overcoming poverty and discrimination, the question becomes how to include more people with disabilities into institutions of higher learning? This paper therefore reviewed ways of making Open and Distance Education (ODE) more accessible to People with Disabilities (PWD). PWDs have problems with enrolment, physical environment, support services, finances, among others. Recommendations were made as to how to ameliorate these problems and*

*have more people with disabilities accessing and succeeding in Open and Distance Education.*

**Keywords:** *Access, Higher Education, Disability, Open and Distance Education.*

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## **Introduction**

Disability may mean any form of physical or mental condition that restricts a person's way of life. It ranges from visual impairments, lameness to complex intellectual or mental health challenges. About 15% of the global population, with an estimated 1 billion people are affected by some form of disability or another. The numbers are expected to grow as a result of conflicts, poverty, ageing populations, among other factors. The World report on disability (2011), published that about 25 million Nigerians had at least one disability, while 3.6 million of these had very significant difficulties in functioning. As at 2020, there are reportedly over 27 million Nigerians living with one form of disability or another.

Disabilities include physical, learning or psychological types. Physical disabilities include difficulties with mobility, seeing and hearing problems, and other illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome; brain injury and other debilitating conditions which are physical or organic in nature. Learning disabilities include reading difficulties, attentional disorders and dyslexia. Psychological disabilities include anxiety disorders, phobias depression and other bipolar disorders that hinder students from gaining from a learning experience. In this paper, however, our attention is focused on people living with physical disabilities.

The most common types of disabilities in Nigeria are, visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical impairment, intellectual impairment, and communication impairment. The World health organization (WHO, 2019) describes Visual impairment as problems that has to do with seeing and they include loss of central and peripheral vision, blurred vision, generalized haze, extreme light sensitivity, night blindness and in some cases, total blindness. Hearing

disability has to do with total or significant loss of hearing which may range from mild or moderate to severe or profound.

In a typical Nigerian context, disability, most times, is viewed as a curse or punishment from God. As such, people with disabilities (PWD) are faced with a lot of problems ranging from neglect, discrimination and exclusion, to marginalization, poverty, abuse, among others (Aleh and Idom, 2016). This exclusion and discrimination lead to a cycle of more poverty, greater exclusion and further discrimination (The World Bank, 2005). Studies have shown that PWDs constitute one of the poorest, marginalised and socially alienated groups. (Mapuranga and Nyenya 2014). Choruwa (2006) observed that taking care of the special needs of PWD always tasks people without disabilities and prevents them from engaging in meaningful occupations that could enhance the well-being of the family. In some cases, the breadwinner might have to forgo working in order to take care of the disabled. Disability and poverty, therefore, go hand-in-hand to increase the vulnerability of People with Disabilities (PWDs) and make accessing higher education very difficult, if not impossible, for them.

As observed by Kanwar & Cheng, (2017), majority of people with disabilities are illiterate, with only a few of them completing secondary school, and fewer still completing university education. Mapuranga, & Nyenya (2014), observed that only few people with disabilities are found in institutions of higher learning, including Distance Education Institutions. In a study carried out by Moisey, (2004), it was observed that between 1998 and 2001, only a total of 604 students with disabilities, representing only 1.5% of the total student population enrolled in undergraduate courses at Athabasca University. Of that number, only a few of them (45.5%) were able to complete their programme.

The Nigerian National Assemblies put the population of People Living with physical disabilities in the country at twenty per cent (20%). The figure gives room for a lot of concern because these people have to struggle for the very few admission spaces in Nigerian Universities on equal footing with their able bodied counterparts. Reports indicate that

less than 10% of the applicants to Nigerian universities gain admission each year. In 2017, reports from Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) indicated that of the more than 1.8 million candidates who registered for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) only about 850, 0000 gained admission spaces, leaving the needs of another 850, 000 unmet. This number continues to increase yearly whilst the quota for admission remains static. Hence the legitimate aspirations of average Nigerians to university education has continued to suffer with PWDs affected the most. The issue becomes how to have more PWDs access tertiary education.

### **Education and Disability**

Education sharpens human skills and therefore is an important tool in reducing poverty in the world. It guarantees gainful employment and opens up opportunities for meaningful occupation and career development which in turn enhances the quality of life of the people. Education is one of the surest strategies for socio-economic development and for mitigating poverty (Ihuoma, 2017, Ihuoma, 2019). Accessing quality education is therefore very important to all and more so for people with disabilities so as to enable them escape the vicious cycle of unemployment and poverty.

The United Nations and the International community has been paying more and more attention to the plight of PWDs and to their rights to have access and to participate in University education on an equal basis with others. Some of these efforts are reflected in the 2006 Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, the Millennium Development Goals and now, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 advocates that people living with disabilities should have access to inclusive and equitable quality education and to lifelong learning opportunities and for the elimination of discrepancies in accessing quality education for people with disabilities and for the provision of infrastructure and materials that will enhance access to education for them.

Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD 2006) emphasized that accommodations should be made for persons with disabilities by increasing their

abilities to access quality education as access to information and knowledge is a key fundamental human right. It further highlights that providing education and employment for people with disabilities has a direct impact on global development.

### **Open and Distance Education (ODE)**

Distance education is a mode of learning or training where the learners are separated from their teachers or trainers by time and space. Delivery of content is usually done through technology and various media. The term open learning describes policies and practices that remove barriers and permit free entry to learning. It enables candidates to access education by removing limiting barriers to entry such as age, gender and previous qualifications as stated by Ihuoma, (2015). Open learning and distance education are complementary because opening up learning requires the introduction of some elements of distance education. Similarly, distance learning, opens up opportunities for more people to access quality education, including those living with disabilities. Therefore, the two terms are brought together to form what we know as open and distance learning (ODL) or open and distance education (ODE).

Policy makers in many nations have embraced the idea of ODE and have gone ahead to establish open and distance learning institutions in their countries. The Nigerian government has established such a university known as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). ODE drives down costs, improves quality and increases access. For example, the Open University of UK is one of the top universities in the United Kingdom that is ranked high for quality research, innovation, use of ICTs and for student satisfaction (Kanwar & Cheng 2017). The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has its vision as to provide highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. NOUN mission statement is to provide functional, cost-effective and flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge.

Komba (2009) discovered that the Tanzanian government is turning to distance education as an alternative mode of delivering Education.

Their official documents confirm that the government is working hard to improve and bolster the quality of education in the country and to enhance, access, affordability, equity and efficiency in tertiary education through open and distance learning methods.

Open and distance learning appeals to people with disabilities (PWD) because of its characteristics. It's openness gives room to students to apply irrespective of their age. Students are also free to study at their own time, place and pace without mandatory campus confinement. This characteristic makes ODL more convenient for PWD since they can study from wherever they are and at their own time and pace. They are not expected on the campus all the time or to live close by the institution. They can study from the comfort of their homes, offices or any other convenient place. Paist (1995) and Lagoke, (2010) also note that flexibility in the location, scheduling, and delivery of distance education programs provide disabled students with suitable opportunity to work at their own pace and time, with minimal stress. Again, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) opportunities readily provide solutions to the difficulties persons with disabilities face in accessing information and quality education.

The flexibility of ODL allows students to access course contents through various formats such as prints audios and audio-visuals. So learners can decide to either read, listen or watch lectures. Furthermore, ODL institutions are less expensive than regular institutions. More importantly, ODL is a preferable mode of learning for them as it provides some degree of anonymity for students with disabilities where they can interact freely with lecturers and their peers with their handicaps unnoticed. It also saves them the hassles of face-to-face interaction as noted by Massengale & Vasquez, (2016). In view of these facts, open and distance learning becomes a viable alternative for PWDs.

Though the major purpose for the establishment of ODL institutions is to allow as many people as possible, have access to higher Education, particularly the disadvantaged segments of the society, yet people with disabilities cannot freely access higher education including distance education in many parts of the country. Though the social mission of

ODE institutions stipulates that they be inclusive, they are still far from reaching the neglected segments of the society including PWDs. People With Disabilities still find it very difficult to access ODE. This paper therefore sought to establish the problems and difficulties encountered by PWDs in accessing higher education and how ODL institutions can help in ameliorating these difficulties thereby making ODL more accessible for PWDs.

### **Problems Encountered by PWDs in Accessing Open and Distance Education**

A number of factors have been identified as constituting barriers to people with disability gaining access to ODE. Sachs and Schreur (2011), citing Johnson (2006) and Dada and Eni-Olorunda (2014), identified factors constituting problems to PWDs in accessing ODE. These factors manifest in low enrolment and high dropout rate and they include: lack of support, negative social attitudes, students' self-isolation and lack of funds. Kanwar & Cheng, (2017) also enumerated a number of barriers that people with disabilities encounter while trying to access ODE. The barriers are explained as: physical, Cognitive, linguistic, didactic and financial barriers.

#### **Physical Barriers**

Unfriendly environments (physical access), have been identified as a major factor that hinders PWDs from accessing higher education. Most buildings in educational institutions are not constructed with PWDs in mind and as such they cannot enter or move around within the buildings. Buildings in our institutions are not designed in such a way that a blind person could access them without aid, and toilet facilities do not provide for even a wheelchair-accessible toilet. In their study at Open University of Tanzania (OUT), Kitula, Minanago & Mntumbo (2012) observed that the Libraries and Laboratories were at the upper floors of the University and therefore not accessible to people with physical disabilities. Another big problem for PWDs is access to transportation. Disabled people find it difficult to get anywhere outside their homes and villages because of transportation problems. As such, PWDs find it difficult to participate adequately in daily activities, including going to school.

### **Inadequate Support Services and Resources**

Another barrier that disabled people face is the inability to access useful information. Many ODL resources do not have “built-in” accommodation for PWDs like Braille, large print or sign language (films or interpreter) as desired. Most times, leaflets, television, cinema and newspapers are not available in various formats and languages for people with disabilities to utilize. Course materials are also lacking in design/content layout, which is accessible to “industry standard” assistive computer technology which persons with disabilities can use freely (Kanwar and Cheng, 2017).

### **Inappropriate Application and Admission Procedures**

PWDs have problems accessing information about admissions to ODE institutions. Kitula et al (2012) found out that most PWDs receive information about admissions through family members and friends. Most institutions do not have positive enrolment policies or waivers for them. Hence the disabled are made to go through all the rigors that their non- impaired counterparts experience. Effective, inclusive and open teaching and learning process cannot be ensured for PWDs when they cannot access reliable information freely and when they do not enjoy some waivers as a result of their disabilities.

### **Lack of expertise**

Qualified and competent experts are in short supply at various levels of the social and economic system, including the educational sector. Worst still is the short supply of experts in open and distance education (Ihuoma, 2015), as well as experts in handling people with disabilities. Educational institutions lack qualified and competent experts to meet the needs of PWDs. Teachers and other support staff lack the requisite skills to handle them and so they see them as a burden. This results in their developing negative attitudes towards the disabled students. In addition, there are no adequate arrangements for training enough teachers on how to handle PWD according to Abaa & Ihuoma (2019).

### **Negative attitudes**



Students with disabilities experience negative attitudes from staff of their institutions. This makes the students not to disclose their handicaps and prevents them from requesting for accommodations that they are entitled to. Choruva (2006) also report that PWDs frequently face negative attitudes from the service providers in their institutions. Many a times, education personnel develop negative attitudes to students with disabilities because they are uncertain about how to deal with them.

### **Inappropriate teaching methods**

Many lecturers lack the pedagogical skills to handle PWDs. All through their training period, they were not exposed to courses on how to handle people with disabilities neither do the faculties organize seminars and workshops to equip them with these all important skills needed for inclusive education. Teachers use methods they are conversant with and at the end, PWDs in their classes are shortchanged.

### **Family and Personal Factors**

Some of the challenges most PWDs face in accessing higher education start right from the family level. Family members sometimes exhibit negative attitudes to PWDs. Some parents even see sending their disabled children to school as a waste of time and resources. Outside the negative attitudes of the non-impaired members of the family, some PWDs also harbour negative attitudes about themselves. Attitudinal change on both sides has to occur and PWDs need the support of family members to be able to succeed academically. It is believed that when family members change their attitude, the PWDs will follow suit. Though the change process might actually takes many years to complete.

### **Poor funding**

Most students with disabilities are poor and often marginalized and as such cannot afford to buy the devices required for success in ODE. There is also no clear-cut policy either from government or other organizations on how to provide financial assistance for PWDs for educational purposes.

### **Lack of Policy Direction, and Political Will**

There is no effective legislation and policy on disability issues and special education in Nigeria and some African countries. As noted by Salihu and Razak (2020) and Obiozor, Onu & Ugwoegbu (2010). Governments do not have any programme to support PWDs in Universities and other institutions of higher learning. Chataika (2007) noted that negative attitudes and practices against PWDs are already enshrined into some cultures and societies' legislation, and may be very difficult to change. Even where clear cut policies exist for PWDs, they are hardly implemented because of bureaucratic bottlenecks in government establishments. Disregard and half-hearted implementation therefore have been the bane of mainstreaming disability in the society, particularly in the Education sector.

### **Lack of Technology**

Modern technological gadgets required for successful ODE experience like adaptive telephone, computers, internet, fax, cellphone, are either not available in the format PWDs can use them or the prices are so exorbitant that they cannot afford them.

## **Ways of Enhancing Access to Open and Distance Education by PWDs**

### **Environmental Adaptation**

Inclusive and participatory planning during construction of buildings would help PWDs overcome environmental barriers and problems. Buildings should be designed so that blind students could use them without aid, and public toilet facilities should have wheelchair-accessible toilets. The needs of PWDs should be mainstreamed in all development planning and implementation so that there would be no need for ad hoc project-based, disability-specific interventions, which can be costly and time-consuming. Mainstreaming disability in planning and development is usually cheaper and more sustainable than to patch up afterwards. This could be facilitated by using a "Universal Design", as specified by the United Nations (UN Enable, 2008).

## **Disability Resource Center and Resource Mobilization**

Writers of course materials should note the characteristics of learners the materials are being written for and how they will use them. In ODL, the course material development team should include experts in Special Education who would ensure that the study materials are designed to meet the needs of students with various disabilities, so that they can study the material without hindrances. Printed information should be made available to the students in various alternative formats such as Braille, audio tape, large print, electronic text, MP3, DAISY and others. Universities and other institutions should ensure that required Web sites and resources in alternative formats are made accessible to PWDs. Kanwar & Cheng (2017), also suggested that an appropriate legal framework be put in place to give impetus to quality of the materials and to provide a solid foundation for their assessment.

The faculty should ensure that the students are given the study materials as soon as they register, to enable them start studying on time. The course materials should also be accessible online and an avenue should also be created for the students to give the faculty feedback on the effectiveness of the materials. Teams of disability specialists should also be created to support students in their studies. Another way to ensure resource mobilization is through staff development. Instructional design workshops could be organised for academic staff to build their capacity for e-learning and for handling students with disabilities.

## **Adaptation of Teaching Strategies**

Teachers can utilize available and emerging technologies to help students access ODL courses, resources and materials. Audio tape, video tape, multimedia and text components of courses and web sites, electronic chat rooms, e-mail, open instructional software, CD-ROM, DVD, laser disc, electronic text and print materials are available technologies which teachers can adapt and use as avenues of communicating the course content to disabled students at their various locations. Utilizing these strategies would go a long way to make course-taking a worth-while experience for students living with disabilities

## **Training of ODL Personnel**

Another strategy for ensuring accessibility of ODE to PWDs is through staff capacity building. Teachers' capacities need to be strengthened to be able to handle issues connected to disabilities and learning such as legal matters, disability types, methods of teaching in ODL as well as costs of assistive technologies. Instructional design workshops should be organized for academic staff aimed at sensitizing them about alternative methods of delivering courses and course design structures that recognize the needs of varied learners. When staff at ODL institutions are trained, they will be in a better position to design online courses that will assist disabled students to achieve academic success by encouraging independent learning among the students and improving student evaluation of their own learning.

**Accommodations** also helps PWDs to access ODL and to succeed in it. These would include fundamental alterations in the nature of the instructional activity in order to help students to grasp the subject matter. Accommodations should also be made for disabled students during examinations like allowing them some extra time to finish writing. These help them complete their programmes and not drop out.

## **Clear policies on admission**

ODL institutions should have policies stipulating clear cut structures and resources for PWDs. This should be made plain to them on admission so that they will be aware of the provisions made for them right from the on-set. A positive disability policy will also help the faculty and staff to be aware of what they should do to help the PWDs. Institutions should seek the collaboration of the government to ensure the sustainability of the policies.

Governments at all levels should ensure that inclusion of people with disabilities in education goes beyond lip-service. Negative attitudes and practices against PWDs enshrined deeply into our cultures and legislations, should be jettisoned and bureaucratic bottlenecks removed. Mainstreaming of disability should be fully implemented in line with SDG 4.

## **Improvement of funding and financial assistance**

Barrier free environments and appropriate study materials can only be provided through adequate funding. Initial development of appropriate study material for ODL students is usually very expensive though the cost gradually reduces as more students are supplied with the materials (Valverdel, Aborn, Broutgam, Johnson, Vasauetz, and Vigallan, 2011). Funds should be sought from governmental and non-governmental organizations to support students with disabilities. Students should also organize themselves to seek financial support for their education.

## **Embracing technology**

The use of ICT in the delivery of distance education cannot be over-emphasized. It is a vital mode of delivery of content and for training at all levels of ODE because learners and teachers are separated from each other. ICT makes it possible to design and produce Open and Distance Learning course materials and resources in formats that students with disabilities can access and use. Available and emerging technologies can help to improve the quality of delivery of ODL to PWD. This helps to ensure that students with or without disabilities enjoy the same course-taking experience.

## **Assistive devices**

Assistive technologies abound that could improve the ease of access to courses and resources for students with disabilities. They include mobile devices with assistive built-in technologies like smartphones. Students can convert speech to text or vice versa by simply dictating into their devices. Visually impaired students can also browse the web using Braille support on their smartphones. Zoom and magnification also help to magnify texts for them. Kanwar & Cheng, (2017) suggested that these devices be harnessed and optimally utilized for learning to attract more PWD into education and lifelong learning.

Other mobile apps developed to assist people with various disabilities include Artificial Intelligence (AI) Robotics and Smart cities. AI provides vision-free communications for the visually impaired while Robotics can extend the arm of someone who has lost a limb or provide caregivers. Smart cities combine AI, Robotics and Internet of Things

to open up a world of possibilities to PWD. All these apps could be used to provide personalized learner support for students with disabilities. They can also be used to create smart institutions (Kitula, Minanago, & Mntambo, (2012). Adapting these learning devices to suit the needs of PWDs, in addition to scholarships to students will definitely result in an increasing number of students with disabilities entering higher education. Kaputa, (2013), opines that Assistive devices and materials should be made readily available in the form needed by the students if they are to succeed in ODE.

### **Personal development and Positive Attitude**

The non-impaired members of the society see the disabled as a burden and react to them negatively. Their disabling attitudes make people with disabilities to see themselves as liabilities and so they are not motivated to achieve success, even in academics. There is the need for society to change their attitude to the disabled and to encourage them to aim at success. Chataika (2007) is of the opinion that when the society changes its attitude, the disabled would automatically change theirs also. ODL Institutions should also provide strong Counselling support systems in all the study centres. Counsellors would assist PWDs in coping with emotional and psycho-social issues that might arise in the course of their studies (Ihuoma, 2017). This would lead PWDs to seek personal development and enhance a positive attitude in the students that would enable them complete their programmes.

## **Summary**

The study reviewed how people living with disabilities could be afforded opportunities to access tertiary education through Open and distance education. The major barriers encountered by PWDs in accessing higher education were ex-rayed, It was confirmed that PWDs still encounter serious obstacles while trying to obtain higher education such as enrolment, physical environment, support services, finances, personal factors, among others. Enrolment policies and entry qualification waivers still need to be looked into for them to have easy access to higher Education. Governments also need to have clear-cut financial policies to assist students with disabilities.

## **Conclusions**

A major objective of ODL is to offer learning to students anywhere they might be and at their own pace. ODL resources should be designed in such a way that disabled students could access them easily and without outside assistance or aides. Course materials should be provided in alternative formats for their easy utilization. The interface design/content layout of the materials should be designed to be accessible to assistive computer technologies that PWDs can use. A range of accommodations should also be provided for them like giving them extra time for examinations, providing external support such as closed or open captioning, descriptive narration, sign language interpreters, counselling and advocacy services as well as access to Assistive Technologies. Conserted efforts has to be made to include more people with disabilities in higher education. This becomes imperative in view of the fact that education leads to economic growth; social inclusion and environmental conservation and is the key to sustainable development.

## **Suggestions**

In view of the issues observed in this study about PWD accessing higher Education through open and Distance learning, the following suggestions are made:

1. ODE universities should attend to the needs of students with disabilities. There should be equitable enrolment policies to accommodate more disabled students. They should also be

- given entry qualification waivers and other affirmative admission policies.
2. Institutions should endeavour to train their lecturers on the basic skills needed to offer assistance to students with disabilities.
  3. Buildings should be designed to be friendly to students with physical disabilities.
  4. Assistive devices should be readily available and affordable to students. Course materials should be provided in various formats to be accessible to PWDs.
  5. Governments and non governmental organizations should have clear-cut policies on offering financial assistance to students with disabilities as part of their social responsibilities.
  6. Universities should create a disability resource centre which is housed in the student support services to cater for the needs of the disabled students.
  7. Lastly, the inclusion of PWDs in ODE needs to be properly planned and managed and should not be left to chance.



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