

Inclusion of Learners With Disabilities in Higher Education: An Investigation of the Enrollment of Learners with Disability in Higher Education in Malawi

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Abstract

Vision 2063's central focus is on the creation of “*an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation*” to achieve the Malawi we want. Strategically pillar number 5 of human capital development emphasizes the need for inclusive education accommodating all disadvantaged groups including but not limited to those with disability. Therefore, providing equal access and participation to all in higher education is a catalyst to an economically empowered nation since tertiary education provides the necessary empowerment for human, social and economic empowerment. Nevertheless, the literature indicates persistent multiple challenges affecting learners with disabilities leading to school dropout or exclusion from school. A record of a one percent admission rate to higher education institutions indicates a restraint from attaining education that provides empowerment to individuals and strategic placement to the lower ladder in society.

Hence, the need to investigate the enrollment of learners with disability in higher education as previous studies have mostly focused on primary and secondary school sectors and hence the need to provide a higher education perspective. Mixed methods were employed using a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews to collect data from 125 participants who were stakeholders in higher education. The results of the study revealed that there was a low enrollment of learners with disability in institutions of higher learning which reflects a systematic exclusion that creates a social gap between those with disabilities and the rest of society. The exclusion compromises the national and continental goal of participatory creating economically empowered Malawian and African societies.

Keywords: Inclusive education; enrollment; disability; learners with disability.

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1. Introduction

Authors [1] argue that exposure to higher education empowers individuals in a way that places them in the social hierarchy the position that allows them to contribute effectively to societal activities. Consequently, institutions that provide higher education serve as catalysts for the development of principled graduates who are equipped with essential values, knowledge, and skills useful to contribute to personal and community development[1]. Hence, providing unbiased and inclusive learning opportunities to all individuals is a positive stride toward the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goal number four [2]. Author [3] posits that the apparent forms of discrimination against individuals with physical disabilities led to the establishment of the Malawi National Strategy on Inclusive Education to uphold children's right to education. Literature indicates persistent exclusion of learners with disabilities regardless of numerous initiatives in inclusive education which are in line with the Rights of the Children [4, 5].

The attainment of one of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals to provide equal access and participation for men and women to tertiary education by the year 2030 guarantees equality in accessing higher education[6]. However, the author [7] laments that barriers to educational support for learners with disabilities are escalated by poverty and financial limitations. The Malawi Population and Housing Census indicate that by 2018 the population of individuals with disabilities was 1,734,250 representing 11.6 %, a composition of persons above the age of five [8]. The disabilities range from speaking difficulties, reduced mobility, visual impairment, and hearing impairment whose individuals are mostly enrolled and progress with education more than the others [9]. Hence, the Malawi government's inclusive education initiatives aimed at increasing the enrollment of learners with disabilities led to an increase, limited to primary and secondary schools, of those with low vision, hearing impairment, and learning difficulties enrolled, as tertiary education enrollment was at one percent[10]. According to the author [11], both public and private tertiary institutions in Malawi enrolled a total of 117 learners with disabilities in the academic year 2018/2019 representing 1%.

Enrollment in higher education is the gateway to the acquisition of skills and knowledge, and values that empower individuals for personal development which is a prerequisite to positive social contribution [1]. Therefore, the exclusion of the majority of learners with disabilities contradicts the Malawi Vision 2063 which focuses on creating a nation that is inclusive, self-reliant, and wealthy [11].

2. Materials and Methods

This article is based on research done at Malawian universities utilizing a mixed study design and a sample of 125 participants selected from two government ministries and nine higher education institutions. The Cochran Formula, which considers the constraints of budget, time, manpower, and resources, was used for sampling [12]. Both probability and non-probability sampling designs were used for the sample selection. The selection of students was done using simple random sampling, and the selection of lecturers or tutors was done using stratified sampling. The purposive sampling approach was used to choose government representatives. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources using survey questions for quantitative data and in-depth interviews for qualitative data. To address the research questions, information was gathered on the

following: What percentage of students with disabilities are enrolled in higher education institutions? What kind of impairment requires preparation for inclusive education? And thirdly, how do the difficulties affect how inclusive education is put into practice at higher education institutions? But the subject of this piece is only enrollment. Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) drawing out descriptive and inferential statistics while content analysis was employed in analyzing qualitative data.

3. Findings and Results

3.1. Presentation of Findings

Based on the enrollment figures in the institutions that made up the study's sample, there are not many students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions. Sampled institutions of higher learning enrolled learners with disabilities ranging from 0, 5, 11, 19, and 53. The number of students enrolled at the sampled institutions and the number of students with disabilities is shown in Figure 1 following table.

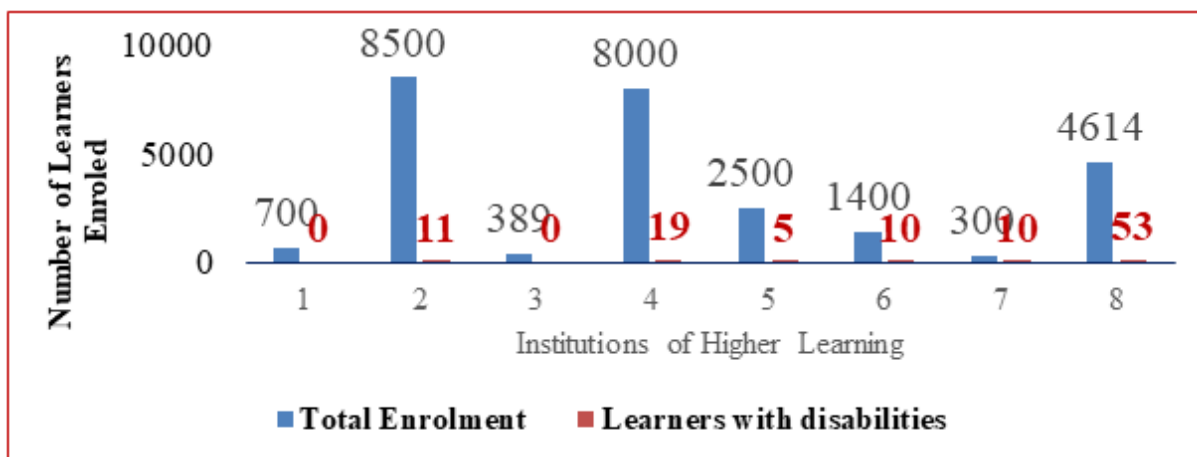


Figure 1: Student Enrollment in Sampled Institutions.

Adopted from research data 2022

The study results indicated that the rate of efficacy of inclusive education and the enrollment rate of students with disabilities are significantly correlated, as shown by the analysis of the variance's p-value of 0.018 and the fact that the slope of the regression line was not zero. However, there was no correlation between the year of study and the institution-level rate of inclusive education quality provision ($R^2 = 0.6\%$, p-value = 0.488).

The findings of this study showed that higher education institutions routinely discriminate against students with impairments, creating social gaps. Findings indicated that a variety of disabilities are being supported in the facilities, with a physical disability being the most often supported disability. Muteness or dumbness, intellectual handicap, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and hearing loss were all discovered to be accommodated. Psychological impairments and albinism were also mentioned as limitations. Institutions, however, offered diverse accommodations for various infirmities. Additionally, different perspectives on the kinds of disabilities that are supported in these institutions were offered by professors and students. Based on the

opinions of the students, several institutions did not provide accommodations for students who had hearing loss, vision loss, intellectual disability, or muteness. Conversely, lecturers acknowledged that various forms of disabilities were not present in the institutions, but they argued that physical disabilities were also not present in other institutions.

The study findings also reflected fluid opinions on the effectiveness of inclusive education in higher education institutions. Both students and instructors expressed differing opinions on the value of inclusive education. The provision of inclusive education was rated as moderate by students but unsuccessful by lecturers. According to the social construction of disability, a perspective connected to the social disability model, these views are fluid. The issues causing low and ineffective inclusive education have been linked to the root causes of lack of policy direction, which results in a lack of technical know-how and funding.

3.2. Presentation of Findings

The study results revealed limited access and participation to higher education for learners with disabilities; selective inclusion and institutional segregation; ineffective implementation in inclusive education as follows:

3.3. Limited access and participation in higher education

Apart from one institution with 53, which showed inadequate access and engagement in higher education for students with impairments, the recruitment numbers of learners with disabilities ranged from 0 to 19, indicating low enrolment. The students' exclusion from higher education has the connotation that they are deprived of the necessary empowerment supplied by those institutions, and as a result, lack self-development and significant ability to contribute to society. People with disabilities are placed in second-class positions in society as a result of marginalization, and as a result, they are more prone to engage in criminal activity. Therefore, limited access and participation in higher education reflect systematic discrimination through the enrollment process.

Access to higher education is also dictated by perceptions that individuals have towards the potential that individuals with disabilities possess. The Social Model notion, which contends that disability is socially created and that what constitutes a disability and its functional limitations rely on individual perspectives, is however reflected in the fluidity of views on the success of inclusive education established. The many points of view serve as a foundation for thinking about the possibilities and characteristics of disability. These are affected by one's level of familiarity with, and attitudes toward, issues relating to disabilities.

3.4. Selective inclusion and institutional segregation

Institutions accommodated multiple types of disabilities ranging from physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual impairment, muteness, and albinism but also intellectual impairment and psychological disability. Dysontogenesis theory and the medical model are reflected in the differences in the biological anomalies that require different support for effective learning. Hence, one type of strategy or support cannot work for all disabilities. Different expertise, teaching and learning resources, and support are required for different disabilities. Therefore, the participation of the parents, peers, teachers, and guardians in the social

environment is critical in providing support for the effective learning process. Linked to Vygotsky's theory of social constructionist epistemology the potential of learners with disabilities is escalated with social support.

The severity of the disability to be accommodated was dependent on the discretion of the institution as inclusion was considered to be very expensive.

The choices made by institutions on the type and severity of a disability to accommodate indicated selective inclusion which continues to widen the academic gap for individuals with disabilities denying them access to the necessary knowledge and skills for empowerment that lead to socio-economic development. Rendering these individuals dependent with no meaningful contribution to society is an intellectual injustice. The human rights model refers to the violation of human rights reflected through the apparent inequalities in access and participation in institutions of higher learning.

3.5. Closing the gap

The gap that has been created due to ineffective inclusion practices needs to be closed to empower individuals with disabilities for lifelong learning opportunities and benefits that would enable them to become self-reliant and contribute effectively to society. To close the widening gap between the abled and the disabled this article suggests the following:

- Increase access and participation: It is necessary to establish strategies to improve the enrollment of people with impairments. Intentional percentages might be targeted for the recruitment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions to promote access and participation.
- Create an inclusive education policy. This is essential for tackling the ongoing difficulties with inclusive education. The Malawian government has the responsibility to create a National Inclusive Education Policy to give guidance for all-inclusive activities. This is the responsibility of the Ministry of Gender, the Department of the Disability, Elderly and Welfare, and the Ministry of Education. It is necessary to coordinate efforts and maintain sanity through the development of policies since the absence of a policy leads to fragmented efforts that do not address societal issues.

4. Conclusion

The study concluded that there is a low enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions. The low enrollment is facilitated by selective inclusion leading to systematic segregation for students who have disabilities resulting from a lack of policy direction on the national and institutional levels.

The creation of limited access and participation in higher education results in creating a social gap between individuals who have disabilities and those who do not have disabilities.

Therefore, there is a need to develop strategies that might increase the enrollment of students who have disabilities in higher education; and also to develop national and institutional policies as they are critical in providing implementation direction for inclusive education.

Acknowledgments

To all who supported this work in every way, thank you. To those tirelessly supporting inclusive services, you are appreciated.

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