Leveraging empowerment for those students with disabilities: Towards creating an inclusive university education framework

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Abstract: **Globally, people with disabilities are estimated to amount to more than one billion persons, accounting for about 15 per cent of the world population. Nevertheless, though they encompass a substantial assemblage with a potential to contribute to development and society, they have most often been excluded from the development agenda as well as empowerment through university education. This is made visible by the prevalence of existing barriers. Using a human rights-based approach, this study was aimed at advocating for inclusive education using universities as a tool for leveraging empowerment for those living with disabilities. Data for the study was collected through in-depth interviews based on the qualitative approach. A relevant sample of sixteen respondents from 2 universities was selected through criteria purposive sampling while analysis of data was premised on thematic analysis. Study findings indicated that barriers underlying university education frameworks and the general socio-economic environment have continued to negatively impact on those living with disabilities. In the end, the study recommended that inclusive education and development frameworks should be adopted to create opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making. To realise inclusive university education, diversity should be noted as an essential facet of social, economic and human development.**

Key words: **empowerment, disabilities, inclusive education, impairments, barriers dynamics**

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been shown that worldwide, people with disabilities have been marginalised owing to discriminatory tendencies particularly in the institutions of higher learning. This is despite the views by Higbee (2003) that in inclusive institutions of higher education no student should be an afterthought. Dalen (2003) Disability is an important dimension along which discrimination occurs, and this may be particularly marked in the case of the education of girls having some form of disability. In the same vein, UNESCO (2010) argues that disability is recognised as one of the most potent factors creating educational marginalisation for children around the world (UNESCO, 2010). Countless people with disabilities do not have equal access to health care, education, and employment opportunities, do not receive the disability-related services that they require, and experience exclusion from everyday life activities (WHO, 2011).

Rousso (2003) is of the view that international discourse and initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) highlight the importance of Inclusive education practices to address this shortcoming and yet, in reality, there still exists gaps that hinder the realisation of the societal inclusion of persons with disabilities. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also mention inclusivity in about in about 5 goals, but this study gives a special mention to goal 4 which focuses on inclusive education. Similarly, WHO (2011) retorts that despite the magnitude of the issue, both awareness of and scientific information on disability issues are lacking.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Globally, people with disabilities are estimated to amount to more than one billion persons, accounting for about 15 per cent of the world population (WHO, 2018). Nevertheless, though they encompass a substantial assemblage with a potential to contribute to development and society, they have most often been excluded from the development agenda as well as empowerment through university education. In view of this observation, Johnson and Fox (2003) argue that although recent legislation has improved access to higher education for college students with disabilities, some students continue to experience stigma in admission and when requesting and utilizing academic accommodations. This is made visible by the prevalence of existing barriers.

The World Health Organisation (2011) makes endeavours to estimate the global disability prevalence using two main sources of statistical information, the World Health Survey and the Global Burden of Disease. Across all 59 countries surveyed by WHO, the average prevalence rate in the adult population aged 18 years and over derived from the World Health Survey was 15.6% (some 650 million people of the estimated 4.2 billion adults aged 18 and older in 2004 (35)) ranging from 11.8% in higher income countries to 18.0% in lower income countries. Additionally, the average prevalence rate for adults with very significant difficulties was estimated at 2.2% or about 92 million people in 2004. WHO (2011) further indicated that across all countries, vulnerable groups such as women, those in the poorest wealth quintile, and older people had higher prevalence of disability and for all these

groups the rate was higher in developing countries. Comparatively, the prevalence of disability in lower income countries among people aged 60 years and above, was 43.4%, against 29.5% in higher income countries (WHO, 2011). Though both main sources of information have limitations with regard to disability prevalence, they serve to provide useful estimates to guide future policy and studies. WHO (2011) further observes that while progress is being made - as with activity limitation studies in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe - accurate data on disability are mostly lacking for developing countries.

While the number of students with disabilities on college campuses have been increasing significantly over the years, numerous obstacles have been identified as affecting their learning (Johnson and Fox, 2003; Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), 2016). These challenges have been further noted as impacting on the completion of education by those living with disabilities in universities. Against this background, this study sought to discuss the barriers and challenges that negatively impact on the education of persons living with disabilities in higher education. Using a human rights-based approach, the study further aimed to advance for inclusive education using universities as a tool for leveraging empowerment for those living with disabilities.

In a survey coordinated by the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare (2015) in Zimbabwe, among the respondents aged 3-60 years, school attendance percentage to those with disability is lower than those without, female's attendance is lower than males, attendance is also higher in urban areas than in rural. To most people with disability their highest level of education was primary education which is 19%, 18, 5 % reach form 4, and less than 5% attain tertiary education as indicated in figure 1 below.
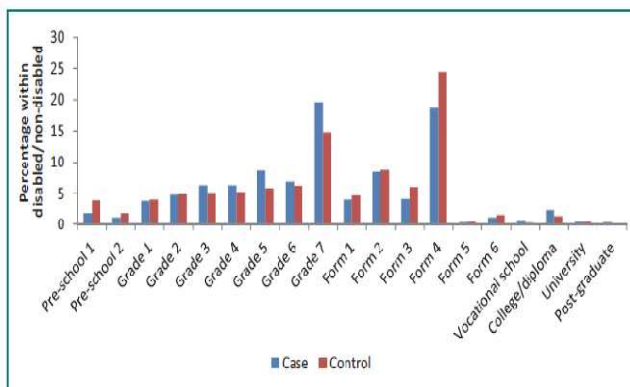

Fig 1: Highest level of education achieved by disability status (3+ years)

Source: Ministry of Health and Child Welfare (2015)

The same survey also indicted that of those less than 5% who attend tertiary education, 9.8% of them are male and 5.6% of them were female. Various reasons were stated as reasons for not attending school and they are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1: Reasons for not attending school, by disability status and location (age 5-60 years)

Reason for not attending school	Persons with disability		Persons without disability	
	Urban %	Rural %	Urban %	Rural %
Not enough money	58.9	55.8	67.6	72.9
Failing/underachiever	9.0	5.5	13.7	7.3
Illness	8.9	8.2	1.5	1.7
Lack of interest	2.1	3.8	4.9	5.3
Because of disability	8.4	16.0	0.2	0.4
School not accessible	2.0	2.0	0.7	2.0
Pregnancy	3.9	1.1	4.4	3.2
Other	6.8	7.4	6.9	7.1

Source: Ministry of Health and Child Welfare (2015)

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Albeit the increase in the number of students with disabilities in universities in Zimbabwe, their learning is complicated by the existence of barriers that negatively affect them. The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) (2016) resonates with this view reporting that, while students with disabilities are being admitted into college in increasing numbers and that all institutions and faculties have been working to create inclusive environments in which these students can thrive, a number of persistent trends and barriers which raise questions for the education sector have been recognised. Additionally, students with disabilities still are less likely than their nondisabled counterparts to complete their education, (Wagner, et al., 1992). Students with disabilities may be less likely to graduate due to the medical model, which focuses on fixing the individual with a disability rather than changing the environment (WHO, 2011). It is in the light of such views that the study sought to deliberate on the barriers impacting on the learning of those living with disabilities in Zimbabwe's higher education sector.

IV. STUDY OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overall objective of the study was to explore the barriers experienced by learners with disabilities in accessing education in universities in Zimbabwe with a view to proffer suggestions for empowering them. The achievement of this objective was premised on the following research questions:

a. What frameworks are in place to empower and facilitate the education of students with disabilities?
b. To what extent do the barriers disabling students to achieve their academic goal.
c. What policy recommendations can be proffered to empower students with disabilities in their endeavour to access quality education?

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Conceptual Framework

5.1.1 Disability

Defining disability is has proved to be intricate. This owes to the view that understanding of disability varies between countries, communities and throughout history (Clarke and Sawyer, 2014). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2011) epitomises the 'medical model' of disability and Which Clarke and Sawyer (2014) pointed to as focused on impairment as a health issue; persons with disabilities were viewed as passive receivers of services aimed at cure or management. Criticism that has been levelled against this definition has given rise to the 'social model'. While this definition pays attention to the structures that hinder the disabled from societal involvement and attempts to make amends for this disproportion, there are ongoing debates with regard the complex interrelation of health and social factors (Shakespeare, 2002). Consequently, new thinking recognises disability as a dynamic interaction between an individual with a health condition (disease, injury and disorder) and his or her personal and environmental context (Clarke and Sawyer, 2014). Such a perspective of disability has come to be recognised as the 'bio-psycho-social model' and is perpetuated under the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (WHO and World Bank, 2011).

According to WHO and World Bank (2011) within the 'bio-psycho-social model', disability can be conceptualised as a broader concept encompassing a) impairments, b) activity limitations and c) participation restrictions. For Clarke and Sawyer (2014) this context departs from an emphasis on impairment as the reason for disability but rather direct attention at individuals' functioning in society. Perhaps, more significant to this study and in the case of elementary education, this denotes to functioning in university (Giffard-Lindsay, 2007; Croft, 2010).

Other views of disability relate to its thought as the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers to those limitations (Clarke and Sawyer, 2014). Despite the few stereotypical views that exist in relation to disability, people with disabilities are varied and include a broader assortment of health conditions, both visible and invisible, temporary and long term, static and episodic or degenerating as well as painful or not (WHO and World Bank, 2011). People with such conditions thus mostly encounter societal bias, discrimination as well as stigma. Current thinking on disability also recognises environmental and institutional barriers (Clarke and Sawyer, 2014). On the one hand and in relation to environmental barriers, aspects such as physical infrastructure and communication barriers in expanses such as public transport, health facilities, housing, schools, shops, workplaces and the media. On the other hand, institutional barriers point to issues such as national laws, policies, resources and practices that exclude people with disabilities from everyday activities in society (Coe, 2013).

Addressing disability requires the promotion of inclusive policies and practices and addressing attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers that result in disability (Coe, 2013). Absence of societal awareness of disability remains intricate internationally while being exacerbated by the existence of adverse insolences towards people with disabilities.

5.1.2 Empowerment

Empowerment discourses have emerged as an attempt to bestow power among groups that were hitherto marginalised by society. Implicitly, the concept of empowerment relates to formal rather than functional power and it encompasses an external upper level agency to grant power rather than people below seizing it in the course of struggle (http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/15828/10/10_chapter%202.pdf.) The meaning of the concept includes mainly references to power that develops and is acquired. It implies that people are able to achieve greater control over their lives, either by themselves or with the help of others (http://www.mpow.org/elisheva_sadan_empowerment_chapter2.pdf). The form to be empowered relates to what is both a process and an outcome—to the effort to obtain a relative degree of ability to influence the world (Staples, 1990). From this study's analytical frame, empowerment will be used as referring to the practical efforts advanced by universities towards offering power to persons living with disabilities in higher education largely through inclusive curriculum development and infrastructure.

5.2 Framework for the Disabled and Education

The right to education is a well-established universal human right, underpinned by international human rights treaties and conventions (UN, 2014). In the light of this, the United Nations (2015:69) states that:

From the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that upholds the right to education for all persons (1948), to the most recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) adopted in 2006 that recognizes the principle of equality in education for persons with disabilities, education is seen as a means and a condition to enhance individual development, life chances and effective participation in society for persons with disabilities.

Among the international frameworks that aim to promote the rights of the disabled are the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) and Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which powerfully advocate the principle of non-discrimination in education (UN, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) (UN, 2008) additionally, is a legally-binding standard setting instrument specific to the disability context, and particularizes and clarifies existing commitments of countries with regard to

education. Article 24 of the CRPD calls on State Parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning (Clarke and Sawyer, 2014). Zimbabwe adopted the UNCRPD in September 2013. In the same year, the year Zimbabwe adopted the new constitution which speaks to non-discrimination.

Additionally, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in 1993, emanating from the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) in 1981 and the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (1983-1992), further present a a framework for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities in the field of education (http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre04.htm). While not legally binding, the Standard Rules urge governments to adopt the principle of equal educational opportunities, by placing focus on the integration model rather than the inclusive education paradigm.

The World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality and the ensuing adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education identified the barriers to learning for all children and by making an unequivocal call to inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994) further point to the relationship between disability and education by underlining key principles, such as the 'principle of the inclusive school (UNESCO, 1994) where all children should learn together, and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula. In 2000, the global community reaffirmed its commitment to the Education for All movement by adopting the six Dakar goals and the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments at the World Education Forum) by referring to the learning needs of the poorest and most marginalized, which includes children with disabilities (UN, 2015).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes as a goal the inclusive quality approach to education 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all (Goal 4)' (UN, 2015). At the same time, it also embraces two targets focusing on persons with disabilities: target 4.5. 'by 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations'; and, under means of implementation, target 4.a 'build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all' (UN, 2015).

The Continental Plan of Action for the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2010-2019) under education has a goal to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy universally inclusive and accessible quality education for all. It calls for member states to prioritize areas such as ensuring physical accessibility, mainstreaming all categories of disability in teacher education curriculum, accessibility of information and learning materials, allocation of an education budget for students with disabilities, no discrimination and '*effective individualised support measures that are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion*'. AU, 2010:23

In the light of the above frameworks and for the purposes of this study, it should be stressed that universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) have legal obligations and a requirement to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity, (The University of Edinburgh, 2016). Hence, are the universities doing enough to make this a reality? If so, what barriers and challenges impact on the achievement of inclusive education in higher education? Such pertinent questions are what this study attempted to answer in the preceding sections.

5.3 University Curricula and Disability

Over the years, there have been growing acknowledgment that education in general, and post-secondary education in particular, is a forecaster of gainful employment in meaningful occupations, opening opportunities for career development, hence for quality of life (Sachs and Schreuer, 2011). Such a notion is greatly fundamental in the light of people living with disabilities, given that their range of employment is constricted to jobs that require fewer physical abilities and skills (McGeary et al., 2003, Rousso, 2003). Past research has shown that accessibility to education is particularly vital for persons living with disabilities (Rimmerman and Araten-Bergman, 2005). Furthermore, data obtainable indicate that for students with disabilities, access to higher education is enabled by accommodation given that it improves grades (Troiano et al., 2010) and persistence to degree (Mamiseishvili and Koch, 2010). This therefore, calls for inclusive education in order to cater to the needs of the disabled persons.

The UN (2015) observes that in the past few decades, the inclusive education paradigm has been gaining ground, as a valid educational approach that can advance the right to education for children and persons with disabilities. In this regard, the concept of inclusive education is pronounced as the method of solidifying the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. As such, it should direct all education policies and practices, by providing equal opportunities in education for all learners, by respecting diverse needs, abilities and characteristics of learners and by eliminating all forms of discrimination in the learning environment (UNECSO, 2009).

Conceptually, inclusive education is wide-ranging, given that it is intended to secure the conditions that can advance the right to education for all vulnerable and marginalized groups who are being excluded from equal education opportunities on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, ability and socio-economic status. Further, the inclusive education discussion has brought

to the fore the interrogation regarding the right to education for persons with disabilities in particular (UN, 2015). It does this by focussing on the barriers that perpetuate the exclusion of students with disabilities from gaining access to quality education at all levels.

In a study conducted by Sarmiento et al., (2016) where they focused on the nature of curricula in medical colleges, it was revealed that all physicians will care for individuals with disabilities; however, education about disabilities is lacking at most medical schools. In their view, while the majority of the medical schools teach the medical model, in which disability is viewed as an impairment to be overcome, disability advocates contest this approach because it overlooks the social and societal contexts of disability. They thus recommended that collaboration between individuals with disabilities, educators, and physicians to design a medical school curriculum on disabilities could be utilised to overcome these differences. As such, it becomes apparent that university curricula ought to be made inclusive through incorporating methods and infrastructure that aim at achieving the same.

Albeit the broadening participation schema (Kendal and Tarman, 2016), acknowledged as "a political drive to redress social exclusion and social injustice", (Smith, 2010: 214) compounded by the existence of numerous frameworks crafted to warrant equitable practice within higher education, diverse studies demonstrate that students with disabilities in higher education continue to face obstacles to learning (for instance Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin, 2015; Couzens et al., 2015. In the same vein, Reed, Kennett, and Emond (2015) acknowledge that such barriers are likely to expose the students to poor academic achievement. For Crow (2003:136) such a scenario owes to the "disabling social, environmental and attitudinal barriers" earlier on mentioned as the 'social model' of disability (WHO, 2011).

Prominent barriers to education among the disabled persons have been noted to encompass, the physical environment, with difficulties in accessing the campus, rooms, accommodation, library and support services (Kendal and Tarman, 2016); attitudinal barriers, including negative attitudes from non-disabled students towards those with a disability, (Liasidou, 2014 and disablist attitudes and practices from staff within a university (Madriaga, 2007). Such views are supported by Redpath et al. (2013) who recognize that there is lack of awareness amongst teaching staff of the divergent requirements that students may have. They further pointed out that in many circumstances; students have to continually ask for the same reasonable adjustments in order to support them, often this support is not given, e.g. lecture notes or slides in advance of the lecture, an issue also identified by Hopkins (2011). Such obtrusive practices construct obstacles to the inclusion of students with disabilities compared in higher education.

Additionally, Kendal and Tarman, (2016) assert that previous studies have presented intricacies around modes of assessment for students with a disability, a view which Fuller, Bradley, and Healey (2004) support noting that some assessments are observed as constricting and hence posed as barriers, for instance in-class assessments. While there have been suggestions that there should be a provision of alternative forms of assessment for students with disabilities (Pavey, Meehan, and Waugh (2010), in contrast, Liasidou (2014) is of the opinion that the segregation of students with disabilities from their non-disabled counterparts during assessments is a stigmatizing form of provision that identifies students with a disability as being "different" to their non-disabled peers.

With regards the Zimbabwean scenario, the higher education sector has not adequately protected those living with disabilities in the country. In the country, there is yet to be the institutionalisation of policy and legal frameworks on promoting inclusive education in the higher education sector. While the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education is in a process of making an inclusive education policy, they have been doing this at a rather slow rate. The children and people with disabilities have been at a much higher risk of not going to school than any other child in Zimbabwe. This is so because they are living with a disability and are isolated from society. They are facing challenges of sponsorship for them to go to school. Having no access to education, persons with disabilities have no skills which places them at a high risk of poverty. Additionally, this lack of education then leads to unemployment.

In the light of these existing barriers to the learning of students with disabilities, this paper advances that there needs to be an empowerment drive within higher education particularly in curricula and the physical environment with a view to eliminate such barriers.

VI. STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study made use of the qualitative research methodology. This was premised on the view that the study was exploratory in nature as it sought to assess the impact of numerous barriers existent in university curricular on the teaching and learning of those living with disability. Given this, the qualitative research methods which have been regarded as providing rich data about real life people and situations (William, 2005:85) were deemed suitable for this study. Data for the study was collected through in-depth interviews as well as documentary search. A relevant sample of sixteen participants was selected through criteria purposive sampling. The sample was drawn from the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, 2 universities, Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) with a special focus on Disability and Education and students learning with disabilities in universities. The analysis of data was premised on thematic analysis. The presentation of findings was done in line with the themes emerging from the interviews with the research participants.

VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

The presentation and discussion of findings of the study is done in line with the research questions underlying the study.

7.1 Frameworks that empower and facilitate the education of people living with disabilities.

The findings of the study indicated that there are numerous frameworks that have been put in place to deal with the challenges faced by the disabled in all spheres of life, education included. For instance, in an interview with a lecturer from the social work department at the University of Zimbabwe, it was revealed that policy and legal frameworks such as the sustainable development goals, the Convention against Discrimination in Education, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) have been developed to cater to the welfare of people living with disabilities. The same sentiments were echoed by another lecturer from the Zimbabwe Open University who said that "*the chief instrument that deals with the rights of the disabled is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as it is the umbrella framework that safeguards the rights of all humans whether able bodied or disabled.*"

These frameworks indicated that the right to education is a well-established universal human right, underpinned by international human rights treaties and conventions. Nonetheless, complexities surrounding the conceptualisation of disability pose the greatest challenge towards creating an inclusive curriculum in higher education. This is because, conceptualising the term is confronted with intricacies of whether it is a medical condition of rather a social phenomenon.

It was also the finding of the study that there are numerous barriers underlying university education frameworks. A Director at the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education noted that "*the general socio-economic environment within which people with disabilitiesnegatively impact on their learning in the higher education sector of Zimbabwe. The societal setup within which the disabled live tends to be discriminatory towards their access to education.*" Another Director with a human rights civic organisation said that "*The most prominent barriers experienced by persons living with disabilities in institutions of higher learning are institutional and environmental.*" Among the institutional barriers noted by the majority of the interviewees are national and university regulations, policies, resources and practices that ignore the needs of people with.

7.2 The barriers and challenges confronting students with disabilities that affect their attainment of academic goals.

7.2.1 Accessibility to infrastructure

In addition, it was the finding of the study that there is a greater relationship between disability and the quality of learning that those living with disabilities experience. In the light of this finding, a student with disability at the University of Zimbabwe said that "*barriers and challenges such as lack of accommodation impact on our access and achievement of degrees at universities. If I cannot get accommodation closer to the campus, it means that sometimes I am unable to attend lessons or I will be arriving at school late most of the time.*" The same was said by a Director of a local Disabled Peoples Organisation who noted that "*accommodation is a vital requirement for students with disabilities as it allows them to easily access their lecture rooms on time and easily.*" Thus, the experiences of persons living with disabilities are constricted by aspects such as accommodation which in many instances is not available in the majority of institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. This therefore, has a huge effect on the access and academic performance of those living with disabilities in higher learning.

Other views that emerged were that the majority of buildings at universities have no ramps for those that move with wheelchairs. It meant that such people could not easily access areas such as lecture rooms or libraries. For instance, a student at the University of Zimbabwe highlighted that "*at the university, we students with disability cannot access the law library's first floor because there are no elevators to take one there.*" A student from Zimbabwe Open University also agreed that they are not able to access many building because they are not made accessible for them. The Zimbabwe Open University Harare Regional Campus is on the third floor and there is no elevator. At times students on wheelchair have to face embarrassment of being carried by their classmates up the stairs. One of the students however stated that the university has a very kind Student Representative who in most cases brought down the information they need on ground floor. Effectively, this has a huge impact on their attainment of educational goals at such institutions of learning. This was supported by what came out of a study done by Kendal and Tarman, (2016) were they also discovered that prominent barriers to education among the disabled persons have been noted to encompass, the physical environment, with difficulties in accessing the campus, rooms, accommodation, library and support services

7.2.2 Accessibility of Information and Learning Materials

In terms of the actual learning, there have been suggestions that there should be a provision of alternative forms of assessment for students with disabilities. Most of the students who were asked whether they need preferential treatment in class. Most refused to be treated differently from other students. This was supported by researchers like, Liasidou (2014) who was of the opinion that the segregation of students with disabilities from their non-disabled counterparts during assessments is a stigmatizing form of provision that identifies students with a disability as being "different" to their non-disabled peers. These were the call for inclusive education comes in.

Some students also face financial challenges to pay for their tuition and for mobility. A student at the Zimbabwe Open University said that financial barrier that affects us as persons living with disabilities. These barriers were noted to be in expanses such as public transport, health facilities, housing, schools, shops, workplaces and the media. For those who learn at distance institutions like Zimbabwe Open University, each time they need face to face interaction they have to travel to the campus, it becomes very expensive because they mostly don't use public transport, they don't have facilities for people with physical disabilities, hence they need to hire transport which becomes very expensive. In terms of tuition, most are failing to raise fees unless the Social Welfare can intervene so that they keep accessing education.

7.2.3 Attitudes

Whilst most universities have student services units that are trained to deal with students with disabilities, most of the other staff in these learning institutions are not trained to deal with students with disabilities. In most cases the institutions are not even equipped with the relevant material for helping these students. Training staff and buying the correct equipment is not prioritised in most institutions and there is also limited legislation to support budgets of higher institutions from government.

In some cases, most students with disabilities feel inferior to other students and at times fail to interact with them because they cannot easily go to discussion groups or other gatherings were students will be. They also feel that the other students without are hesitant to approach them and talk to them.

7.3 Policy recommendations that can be proffered to empower people with disabilitiesin their endeavour to access quality education

In relation to this research question, the study findings indicated that there are indeed ways in which those living with disabilities can be empowered. A lecturer with the Zimbabwe Open University said that "*the predicament confronting people living disabilities can be ameliorated through the introduction of empowerment initiatives such as improving accommodation, the creation of awareness of the needs of persons living with disabilities*." Another lecturer at the University said that "*there is greater need to establish university curricula that recognises the diverse needs of persons with disabilities as well as facilitating the creation of an inclusive education framework that caters to needs of all equitably*."

As such, it was the finding of this study that empowerment should be about directing all education policies and practices towards providing equal opportunities in education for all learners, through the total elimination of all forms of discrimination in the higher education teaching and learning setting.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above-presented findings of the study, the present study has greater implications on expanding knowledge and insight about the need to establish university curricula that is inclusive and caters to the needs of students with disabilities in the higher education sector. To place the findings within the conceptual models that framed the study, it was the conclusion of the study the 'social model' of disability particularly influenced the university experience of students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. Additionally, the study concluded that the existence of a number of barriers (such as institutional, environmental, that is, accessibility to infrastructure, learning materials and attitudes) has negative impacts on the experiences of persons living with disabilities in higher learning. The study further concluded that while there are numerous frameworks aimed at promoting the participation of the disabled in higher education, these frameworks have not really transformed the lives of the disabled.

From the conclusions, the study recommended the following;

- That addressing disability obliges authorities in government and institutions of higher learning to promote inclusive policies and practices at the same time addressing attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers that result in disability.
- Inclusive education and development frameworks should be adopted to create opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making.
- To realise inclusive university education, diversity should be noted as an essential facet of social, economic and human development.
- It was also the recommendation of the study that flexible admission procedures for students with disabilities should be adopted as they offer them an opportunity to get into higher education.
- In line with this, modifications should be made to limit the temporal barriers that many disabled students may face.
- The study recommends that institutions of higher learning ought to invest heavily in facilities that help students with disabilities to learn i.e. ramps, brail and rehabilitation centres.
- In the end, the study recommended that inclusive education only stems from social attitudinal change both among students with disabilities and those without disabilities as well as the staff and lecturers at the higher education institutions.

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