

Review

The challenges of educating the visually impaired and quality assurance in tertiary institutions of learning in Nigeria

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This paper focused on the challenges in educating the visually impaired and modalities for ensuring quality assurance in tertiary institutions of learning in Nigeria. It examined the global challenges in the higher educational system and made it clear that the visually impaired are those with visual problems be it partial, low vision, or total blindness, as such need higher education to be liberated from the shackles of pity and sympathy. The paper found out that the educational needs of the visually impaired include computer application, optical aids, and Braille writing materials, issues of mobility, funding, library resources, personnel availability and physical infrastructural facilities. Recommendations were proffered to tackle the issues and challenges identified.

Key words: Challenges, educating, visually impaired, quality assurance tertiary institutions, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a key role in developing an individual's talent in any society, be it in Africa, Europe, America and the world over. This makes the individual to be relevant in both the public and private sectors. As a result, the education sector will be proud of available managerial skills for the development of the nation's economy. This is why the attainment of higher education through which quality assurance would be assured for the overall development of humanity & for many nations across the globe is desirable. However, there are global challenges which must be met in order to attain this goal. The visually impaired need higher education which will minimize the effect of their disability and develop their powers and potentials adequately. According to the

National Policy on Education (2004), Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system. People with visual impairments do not need pity and sympathy. They can never live comfortably on these and as such what they need is improved opportunities for qualitative education so that they can have increased versatility in employment. Farouk (2003) stated that education is a social benefit regarded as the right of every citizen in the constitution of Nigeria. He stressed further that individuals must be given equal opportunities and access to education.

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Therefore, what the visually impaired persons need most in this sense is integration into higher education and provided with materials that will enable them cope with academic activities.

In the light of the above discussion, quality assurance in educating the visually impaired in tertiary institutions of learning is necessary and essential. This is because, it makes them to be educationally, vocationally, occupationally, socially, and politically placed in the scheme of things especially if priority is accorded them by governments at all levels. The attention, if given by the government would go a long way to reduce the educational encumbrances derived from the visual impairments.

Who are the visually impaired?

According to Abang (2005), the visually impaired are those with some amount of visual problems which could be remedied either by surgical operation or by optical corrections. This includes those who are partially sighted, low vision and the blind as the case may be. Visual impairment means having difficulties with one's vision. The difficulties could be defined according to the severity of impairment. It is believed that when an individual is visually impaired his learning, social interaction, locomotion, general operation and adjustment are bound to be adversely affected. This is why Anomonye (1982) defined visual impairment as the act of exhibiting reduction in visual performance when compared with the normal visual performance or the "actual drawn back" an individual experiences which others can observe in specific visual tasks. In spite of this condition of visual impairment, they still desire to be nurtured through education to make their intellectual ability global useful. This is simplified through adaptations which are made in addition to regular school curriculum where by the nature of materials used and the teaching methods are so organized to meet their educational aspirations. The visually impaired groups need higher education as it pave way for them to be occupationally engaged in the labour market like any other person who is not visually impaired. This is one reason for quality assurance in their education.

Apart from this, their higher educational attainment enables them to know their duties and to perform them as citizens. This stand out to challenge the negative attitude that some persons have developed towards the capability of persons with visual impairment. Their higher educational qualification gives them full societal acceptance as some of them are employed as lecturer in tertiary institutions, lawyers, journalists etc. From these various occupations, they can take good care of themselves, families as well as their extended relations in any environment or community across the globe. This is an

impact of a quality assurance of higher educational system on the visually impaired persons.

Higher Education

Education is an instrument of national development. The formation of ideas (that is contemporary educational programmes) such as inclusive philosophy; integration of such ideas and the interaction of persons and ideas are aspects of education geared towards national development (Umunna, 2007).

Higher education refers to a level of education that is provided by universities, vocational universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, institutes of technology, and other collegiate level institutions such as vocational schools, trade schools, and career colleges that awards academic degrees or professional certifications (Wikipedia, 2009).

Post-secondary or tertiary education also referred to as third stage, third level or higher education, is the non-compulsory educational level, following the completion of a school providing secondary education such as a high school, secondary school, or gymnasium. Tertiary education is normally taken to include undergraduate and postgraduate as well as vocational education and training colleges and universities are the main institutions that provide tertiary education. These institutions are provided by the federal government, state governments, and private individuals or co-operate organizations.

The aim is to provide academic excellence that would have positive impact on individuals and the global society.

The higher educational institutions as the apex in the educational career are expected to play leadership role in the nation; providing people with special qualifications and motivation.

They are also to equip the individual with the maximum intellectual and physical skills which he requires to be an innovative, creative, and self-reliant member of the society, able to cope with the economic and cultural demands of the society. Higher education is a stepping stone as it stands to pave way to job opportunities for the graduate to enable them to contribute their quota to nation building.

Quality assurance

It is the systematic review of educational programmes to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained (UNESCO, 2002). The rise in initiatives aimed at promoting the internationalization and globalization of higher education, in particular the rapid development of cross border higher education have underlined an increasingly urgent need

to establish robust frameworks for quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications. UNESCO'S actions in this area focus on providing information and capacity to empower higher education stakeholders for better-informed decision-making in the new world of higher education.

This initiative aims to provide information to protect students from inadequate learning resources, low- quality provision and also provide decision-makers at the governmental and institutional levels with information and skills necessary to better navigate in the new higher education space.

Following the trend in general education and the initiatives of UNESCO towards ensuring qualitative education at the tertiary level, it is solicited that these initiatives should be extended to produce for the intellectual potentials of the visually impaired and promote the overall welfare of such persons all over the globe.

PROBLEMS OF EDUCATING THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN TERTIARY INSTITUTION OF LEARNING

Visual impairment has educational implications on individual concerned. Providing integration and equal higher educational opportunities for the visually impaired in this country is sometimes controversial due to environmental degradation, architectural barriers, negative attitude of the public, inadequate materials/ equipment, cost of education and high cost of the materials invoiced for the effective teaching and learning. In many nations around the globe the possibility of providing the needed facilitates to ease the educational pursuit of the visually impaired is difficult. In Nigeria for instance, a lot of the educational materials for the visually impaired are not manufactured locally unlike in the developed countries like Japan, Australia, USA etc. The means of attaining some of these materials by the visually impaired pose serious challenges which only the intervention of governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ameliorate. Ekwueme (2003) also discussed problems of equipment, teacher training facilities, funding, law and administrative rigidity as key problems inhibiting the steady growth of special education in Nigeria.

It is obvious that the locations of many tertiary institutions of learning in Nigeria are not freely accessible to the visually impaired with hindrances varying from complex storey buildings with coiled stair cases, uncovered gullies, bad lavatory and rough environment which prevent free movement of the visually impaired within the school. In line with this, Milaham (1993) says the visually handicapped persons encounter numerous barriers and hazards ranging from psycho-social, emotional to physical environment which hinder their

successful movement.

As earlier mentioned, educating the visually impaired in tertiary institutions of learning is loaded with many problems. If these problems are not given proper attention by government, they may not be able to acquire qualitative education for their benefit and the benefit of the entire society. Some of these problems are discussed below;

1. Architectural Barriers: It is apparent that many buildings in some tertiary institutions are not accessible to the visually impaired because of the presence of high steps, curved stair cases, and narrow walkways.

Basic design factors are not being considered to assist students with visual impairment in their academic activities.

2. Negative Attitude of the Public: Attitude is a tri-element concept embodying beliefs, emotions and behaviour; these characterize human beings in intra personal and in social interactions. If the attitude of the public towards the visually impaired is positive, more enlightened treatment is ensured and when attitude is negative, they will continue to suffer. This is one of the major problems confronting the visually impaired and their education globally. Hergart and Pocklington (1982) have also established that even in educational institutions where visually impaired persons being educated along with their normal peers (with the objectives of fostering positive attitudes and more acceptance of the visually impaired persons among others), negative attitudes have continued to be expressed towards the visually impaired students by the teachers and normal students.

3. Inadequate Materials/Equipment: The usefulness of materials and equipment in academic exercise cannot be over emphasized as students cannot do without them. Special materials and equipment required by the visually impaired are very important because the items almost replace their eye sight. This makes these essential to their education. These educational items are not easy to come by and the available ones are grossly inadequate to meet their educational requirement. Ntukiden et al. (2005) asserted that facilities/equipment is grossly in adequate. Effective teaching and learning as well as a quality driven educational system cannot take place successfully without facilities/equipment such as cassette recorder, talking books, optical aids, optacon, brailers, typewriters etc.

4. Cost of Education: The provision of education for the visually impaired requires heavy funding and comprehensive planning. For the visually impaired to be successful in achieving higher educational goals, the following supportive services are required.

1. Special facilitates free from architectural barriers;
2. Special equipment and materials
3. Resource centre

4. Personnel development etc

Some of the visually impaired are from poor socio-economic background that makes it difficult for them to afford qualitative education unless governments, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and well-to-do individuals come to their aid.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The world is undergoing dramatic and unprecedented changes in this age of increasing globalization (Philip and Todd, 1999). The knowledge and information technology revolution, as well as many growing social and economic trends have changed our lifestyles and how well countries perform in the global economy. At present, a country's competitiveness and development potentials depends on several factor, including availability of knowledge resources such as human capital, an incentive system to provide economic policies and institutions that permit efficient mobilization and allocation of resources, innovation in utilizing global knowledge, a modern and adequate information infrastructure, and refurbishment of physical facilities, and the provision of adequate library resources in the higher educational institutions such as universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, to mention but a few. Education at these levels plays a major role in increasing a country's development and competitiveness.

Academic systems and institutions globally have faced pressures of increasing number of students and demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, the impact of new technologies among others. The situation in Africa and particularly Nigeria is worse off compared to the other parts of the world like Europe, the united states of America, China, and other developed countries due to the lack of maintenance and refurbishment of physical facilities, lack of technological infrastructure, and poor library resources which are widespread features of current African higher education systems. Philip and Todd (1999) have pointed out that another global controversy of the present era is funding. Higher education is an expensive undertaking and there is much debate concerning how to fund expanding academic systems.

Current approaches to higher education funding emphasize the need for beneficiaries to pay for the cost of instruction, as policymakers increasingly view higher education as something that benefits the individual rather than as a public good where the benefit accrues to society for instance, in the United States of America, the cost of education are born by individuals and are so high, this is one reason why president Barrack Obama of USA made education reform one of his administration

objectives. However, countries like China and other socialist countries view the education of their citizens as an exercise for the public good.

While all these issues need to be addressed in order to meet the global challenges, the education of the visually challenged requires more human and material resources like personnel development, provision of talking books, optical aids, optacon, perkins brailers, writing frame, typewriters embossed Braille machine e.t.c. Another issue to be considered in the education of the visually impaired is the assurance of a conducive and serene atmosphere and a plane learning environment free from architectural barriers and environmental degradation. Adequate mobility services and devices such as guide dogs for the blinds, the laser cane, white cane, the path sounders, the sonic guide, and mowal sensor are crucial in educating the visually impaired, it is important to note that while these devices are available in countries like Australia, the United States of America, and other European countries, they are not commonly found in Nigeria. These devices are not locally made and are often imported at highly exorbitant prices.

In view of the global challenges of education highlighted so far, it is pertinent to note that they can only be met if the peculiar problems identified in the process are given prior attention and are resolved holistically and drastically to make way for quality in our educational system.

Conclusion

Quality assurance in educating the visually impaired in tertiary institutions of learning is fundamental to a good national outlook. Intellectual potentials of the visually impaired which are developed through higher education makes them contributors not only to the national but the global economics like their sighted counterparts of same qualifications. The integration of the visually impaired into the higher education system will no doubt create a lot of benefits. Their contributions as scholars, lawyers, journalists, brailists and otherwise will have a lot of impact on some of the global educational problems identified in this paper. The visually impaired have a lot of educational problems. Therefore, governments, (NGOs) well to-do individuals and well wishers should join hands to work out modalities that will be beneficial in solving the educational needs of the visually impaired across the globe.

Recommendations

In order to actualize a quality assured educational system for visually impaired in tertiary institutions of learning, the following recommendations are hereby submitted.

The school environment should be free from architectural barriers and environmental degradation. This could be achieved by adopting an architectural design of the visually impaired.

The educational institutions should be made available with knowledge resources such as qualified instructors, a modern and adequate information technology, infrastructure, maintenance and refurbishment of physical facilities, the provision of adequate library resources, the provision of special educational facilities and devices such as optical aids, brailers, typewriters etc; the availability of mobility equipment such as guides dogs, path sounders, laser canes etc.

In the area of governing councils and boards of trustees should oversee higher educational institutions without government interference; institutional autonomy and academic freedom have to be respected. This does not preclude institutions from being accountable to the government and to the community for the manner in which they expend resources and for the range and quality of their programme offering teaching, and research.

Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflicts of interest.

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