Role of Higher Education in Promoting Inclusive Education: Kenyan Perspective

Edwards J. Kochung

Department of Special Needs Education, Maseno University, Private Bag Maseno, Kenya

Abstract

Higher education is a process of imparting knowledge and skills to individuals and empowers them to participate in development, decision making and democratic process. Effective education takes place when students are able to participate fully and benefit from that education. Higher education in Africa has been perceived as a privilege of the few intellectuals or the rich and therefore those with disabilities are denied accessibility. Currently less than 1% of people with disability in Africa have access to higher education and success of this small portion of the population is limited. Persons with disabilities are unable to access higher education due to barriers outside the institutions and those within. Such barriers include narrowly-defined set of legibility criteria, negative attitude, and inaccessible environments. Inclusive education approach is instrumental in addressing these barriers in order to open higher education for students with disabilities and all those who are currently denied access on racial, ethnic, health, linguistic and cultural grounds. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of higher education in promoting inclusive education in African with a specific case in Kenyan context.

Keywords: higher education, disabilities, barriers, inclusive education, Kenya

BACKGROUND

Disability can be explained in terms of any restriction that results from an impairment and hinders a person from performing an activity within the range considered normal for a normal person (Heward, 2006, Hardman, Drew & Egan, 2005). According to UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), Article 1, (2006), persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full effective participation in the society on equal basis with others (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) others. In this regard, disability is seen as a socially created problem. This definition focuses on the elimination of barriers created by society that prevent persons with differences from enjoying their human rights on equal basis with others in relation to education (UNESCO, 2005). Barriers that limit a person’s full participation include; negative attitude, discriminative policies and practices, and inaccessible environments as a result of these barriers, students with disabilities are being excluded from accessing higher education. According to findings from a series of focused discussion groups from 12 countries carried out in late 2005 and early 2006, access to education was one the main concerns raised by these young people (Ncube & Macfadyen, 2006).

According to UNESCO (2005), inclusion as a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as a problem but as opportunity for enriching learning. Inclusive education constitutes a paradigm based on the concept of human rights and social model that unites equality and difference as inseparable values and surpasses the formal quality model (Jonsson, 2001). There are a number of international human right agreements that support the view that compulsory segregation in education is against children’s and young people’s basic human rights. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UN Declaration on Education for All (1990), the UN Standard Rules on
Inclusive Education in the context of Higher Education in Africa

In African society the traditional education included every member of the society and was provided on equal basis within the community and everyone participated at his/her level. There was respect for individuals, equity and social justice that did not permit any person to suffer because of his difference. This in essence was inclusive education. However, modern education system came with its inequality by creating first class citizen and second class citizens in the name of providing quality education through heterogeneous strategies. The current higher education system in most African countries is based on the same principle where these institutions have been ivory of tower and the surrounding communities have not been part of higher learning institutions. Higher education has been used in many African countries to reinforce inequality in access and success in education as it has remained an agent of exclusion for the vulnerable members of society. In the name of offering quality education, universities and other colleges of higher learning end up isolating members of society who are different. Students who are different are seen in a negative context and same as inequality. In this case inequality in higher education is regarded as normal and continues to exist. Exclusion of certain students in higher education is based on the principle of those who are different in terms of disability, ethnic/racial, cultural, linguistic, and rural has no regard for individual differences.

Higher education has always been associated with specific outcomes such as good employment opportunities and high income but with the dwindling economy many students finish their university and college education without getting any employment. Universities and colleges are also competing for most bright students and those with resources to fill the limited spaces available in universities and colleges. Institutions for higher education still perceive disability from the basis of medical model rather than social model making it rather difficult for them to understand that the student’s learning problem is as a result of interaction between impairment and contextual barriers.

There are no statistics to show the number of people with disabilities in higher education institutions in most countries in Africa and considering human rights and equality in education, accessibility to higher education for persons with disability is still far in many countries in Africa. This state of affairs may be attributed to negative attitudes, discriminatory policies and practices, and inaccessible environment in higher education. Various African countries have made political declarations commitments, particularly through the adoptions of the UN Convention on the rights of the child (1989), World declaration on EFA (1990), The Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with disabilities (1993) and UN Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities. However most of these countries have no legal frameworks and policies for implementing these resolutions. It is therefore not strange that in most African countries, inclusive education is still at concept level and where attempts have been made most of them do not go beyond the pilot stage.

Students who enrol in higher education institutions are expected to come from high schools, however most countries in Africa especially south of the Sahara the majority of students with special needs and are vulnerable do not complete high school education and when they compete they do not meet university and college admission criteria that is based on high academic performance and economic ability. The few vulnerable students especially those with disabilities who complete high school are in special education institutions where the quality of education offered is low due to the negative attitude of teachers.

Challenges to Inclusion in Higher Education

The main challenge to implementation of inclusive education is policy issue. While the World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) recognised the need for reforms in schools, without significant changes in the policies in the universities and middle colleges, the objective of inclusive education cannot be achieved. Universities need to move from ivory tower and work with communities so as to provide accessible housing and other services for students with disabilities.

In African countries where human rights policies have been enacted, those policies only exists on paper and in the majority of those countries they are hardly translated into practice. Most of these policies have no clear goals and defined principles which ultimately make those policies difficult to implement. As a result of inability to implement human rights policy, there is lack of interest in developing policy on higher education for persons with disability. This lack of policy on higher education means that
institutions of higher learning cannot invest in the elimination of barriers, which is evidenced by poor architectural accessibility to higher institution buildings, low number of lectures with training in special needs education and lack of awareness about education for students with disability. The presence of students with disability in secondary schools and their absence in universities and middle colleges confirm that there are some concern in universities and colleges. Lack of interest in developing policy on education of persons with disability may be attributed to poor attitude, ignorance, professional protectionism towards segregated education, antagonism towards inclusive education from within disability itself. It is also sometimes difficult to accept policy on disability and education with the assumption that it is costly without any evidence. However, some countries in Africa, such South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia have policies on disabilities.

The role of higher education in inclusion of students with disability in Africa must be considered against the background of current existing myriads of challenges. Although current studies suggest that more students with disabilities are in high schools and ready to pursue higher education in middle colleges and universities than in the past, there is lack of evidence on the number of people with disability who complete secondary education and enrol in higher education.

Universities and colleges of higher learning lack policy on inclusive education and are hardly prepared to enrol students with disabilities. There are no transitional systems in place for students with disabilities when they move from high school to higher education. There is need to have strict transitional process for students with disabilities when they move from primary to secondary and when those students are enrolled, those students should be represented in student organisations and University managements so that their concerns can be heard.

The universities and colleges of higher learning do not have teachers with knowledge in instructional methods for students with disabilities. In institutions of higher learning where inclusion is being practiced, there are biases on the inclusion of some categories of disabilities, such as those with intellectual impairments. Higher education institutions are further faced with high cost of higher education against weak national economies and even where the economy is good, there is lack of commitment on financial support to students with disabilities. Individual African countries have to make commitment to support those who are coming from economically weak background by reducing direct costs on education to individual households and introduce grants and make loans available to those who need it. They should promote community participation in order to maximise resources so as to ensure that there is sufficient, efficient and sustainable resource allocation to education for vulnerable students.

The current common practice is that students enrolling into higher education are coming from regular or special needs education high school systems. High school institutions catering for students with disabilities are prepared for such learners. Most of these institutions have sign language teachers and interpreters and brail specialists which higher education institutions do not have. Institutions of higher learning are not prepared to convert text books to electric formats for certain groups of students and provide sign language interpreters and captioning at campus events for those who are deaf or blind. Some students require voice recognition technology (voice input), the software allows students to speak into a microphone and the commands and texts are relayed to the computer, this is important for those who may not use standard keyboard due to motor or visual limitation and helps students having difficulty writing or reading. Whether students go through regular or special education system, they face certain barriers before enrolling into higher education and after getting into higher education.

Barriers faced by students before enrolling into higher education include:

- Social exclusion and stigmatisation by the society
- Higher education institutions catering for those with disabilities are not available in every community.
- Environments where higher education institutions are situated are not disability friendly and the facilities within the community that they are expected to use are also inaccessible.
- Admission criteria to higher education institutions are complex, inflexible and stringent for vulnerable students intending to be enrolled.
- Most vulnerable students intending to enrol into higher education are coming from poor economic background

When students meet all the requirements for admission into higher education they still face certain barriers within higher education institutions. These barriers within the institutions include;

- Rigid curriculum and examination systems
- Lack of appropriate teaching methodology
- Feeling of inadequacy by teachers
- Content based teaching
- Rote and memorisation learning
Inclusive Education in Kenyan Context

Background: According to Kenya National Survey for Persons with Disabilities, (2008), overall disability rate is 4.6. This means that there were about 1.6 million people living with disabilities with 55% males and 45% females respectively. In Kenyan constitution guarantees that all citizens are equal and have a right to freedom regardless of race colour, gender, religion, disability political affiliation and that every person has a right to basic education.

Education for children with disabilities was introduced in Kenya in 1940s and has been running parallel to general education system. However, the majority of students with disability are still not accessing education due to expensive separate special education system among other reasons. Although special education policy was developed in the year 2009, only about 10% of children with disability are accessing education and the majority of who are in urban areas. University and college education is offered in both public and private institutions. In public institutions, the government through the ministry of education subsidizes. Loans are made available and sometimes those who are very needy are given stipends to meet accommodation expenses.

The Children’s ACT 2001, makes Primary education is free and secondary education is highly subsidized. Policy framework: It was not until the year 2009 that Kenya had a specific policy document on special needs education. Implementation of special needs education has always been guided by reports of various commissions, taskforces and committees dating back to 1963 when Kenya attained its independence. These commissions include Kenya Education Commission (1964), the National Education Committee on education objectives of (1967), The Presidential Working Committee on Education and Training for the Decade and Beyond (1980), The Totally integrated Quality education and Training (1999) and Task force on Special Needs Education (2003). The reports of these commissions emphasised the need for early identification and assessment of children with disabilities, awareness creation, integration of children with disabilities into regular schools, integration of special needs education in the training of all teachers and addressing educational needs of all learners in terms of curriculum, examinations, learning aids and physical facilities.

Although there is no policy document on inclusive education per se, Kenya is a signatory to UNESCO Convention on the Rights of the child and UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities which are addressing issues of inclusion. The ideas on inclusion are contained in the Special Needs Education Taskforce report (2003) and Special Needs Education policy (2009). General education policy documents emphasize equal right to education and training for all children and youth. The Kenyan constitution and Children’s Act (2001) gives all children a right to free and compulsory education regardless of their differences. The country education policy on Free Primary Education (2003) requires the state to provide education to all vulnerable members of the society including those with disabilities.

Inclusion Practices in Higher Education:
The political, social and economic structures in Kenya do not favour inclusion in higher education. The structures are discriminatory, and exclusive to vulnerable members of society especially those coming from poor families and those with disabilities. While in and secondary education, there is additional resource support in terms of personnel, and equipments, there are no support systems in
higher education. While there is affirmative action for admission of students with disabilities in colleges, the universities do not have any.

Although there is no formal statistics on the number of people with disabilities accessing higher education in the country, it is evident that there are three public universities and one Diploma College that offer inclusive education. The universities are Maseno University, Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi and the diploma college is Kenya Institute of Special Education. In these institutions students are given support by special teachers and other professionals. These institutions admit students with disabilities into their various programmes. For example, Maseno University has had students with different forms of disabilities since 2003 including those with cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, and blind. hence every year there is always a student completing and graduating with a degree however with some difficulties. Students who go through Maseno University confess that although they successfully complete their degree programmes they face various barriers. They site barriers such as curriculum during instructions and examination process which make it difficult for them achieve their maximum

Maseno University offers programmes in special needs education and has adequate staff to support those with special needs. The university has also made it mandatory that all students taking education have to take an introductory course in special needs education and those taking special education needs programme are trained for inclusive classes. The lesson learnt with these few students are, peers have no problem and are always ready to assist, teachers need very short training or support services

Barriers to inclusion in higher education in Kenya: The implementation of inclusive education in institutions of higher learning has been affected mainly by the negative attitude of teachers and other stakeholders. Since inclusive education involves learners with special needs, its success to a large extent depends on the attitude of teachers. Teachers in HE institutions feel that they have no experience to handle such students in their classes. They cite factors such as class size, lack of support staff, workload and less motivation as some of the hindrances to inclusive education.

Instructional methods, examination systems and rigid curriculum used in HE are some of the barriers to implementation of inclusive education in universities and colleges in Kenya. Universities and colleges have common curriculum and educational objectives for all students. Inclusion requires flexible learning/teachings and assessment based flexible and accessible curriculum that is sensitive to individual differences. Barrier to inclusion has also been attributed to resources. Resource barriers to inclusive education can include; lack of peripatetic services, lack of support staff (sign language interpreters and Braille transcribers), and community involvement, shortage of regular and special teachers among others.

Socioeconomic aspect is another factor that affects inclusive education in HE. Education in Universities and colleges is not free and the cost is far above the ordinary citizen. Bearing in mind that majority of students with special needs in Kenya come from poor background. It is evident that their families are not able to meet expenses for higher education. In cases where students with disabilities have been enrolled in universities the HE authorities have complained of lack of funds to reduce environmental barriers such as; school buildings and toilets, class size, acoustic environments so that they are accessible to all students regardless of the differences.

As observed in other African countries, lack of policy on inclusion is another important barrier to inclusive education in Kenya. There is lack of policy guideline on admission criteria of vulnerable students into higher learning institutions and the type of learning and financial support given to them when they are enrolled in HE. Such policies would also address issues of curriculum, staff/student ratio, language used in, examination procedures and grade transition criteria.

Despite these barriers, Kenya has demonstrated gains in special needs education and has now embarked on strategies that will make inclusive education work. What is required is that national agencies such as Joint Admission Board(JAB) and Higher education Loan Board (HELB) which are given mandate to implement higher education policy have an obligation to provide technical and financial assistance to all students regardless of their differences and in particular those with disabilities. They should publish regularly disability statements indicating how they give support to students with disability. The Universities and colleges need to provide; course materials in accessible formats, ensure buildings and materials, are accessible, encourage flexible teaching methods, provide support during exams, and allow additional time to complete courses. Students will also need assistance on a daily basis; interpret words in sign language, take notes for students, helping students to overcome physical barriers

CONCLUSION
The universities are not aware that their institutions are discriminative against students with differences including physical, intellectual, sensory, ethnic, or emotional. HE institutions to become sensitive and
responsive to the diverse context of students conditions (Anittos and McLuskie 2008)

Higher Education in Africa has a responsibility of promoting lifelong learning that enables an individual to participate in development and decision making, by making education accessible to ALL through eliminations of all forms of barriers from both within Higher education institutions and in society. HE ought to ensure that all professional courses offered at the universities include information on the needs of vulnerable members of society

Higher education has a responsibility to restructure its programmes to include: provision of assistive devices, accommodation of academic flexibility, supporting aids and services, modification of the classroom environment, sign language interpreters and note takers among others. Higher education policy should recognise and appreciate differences among students who enrol or intend to get into higher education programmes and such formulation of such policy ought to involve people with disability in planning, implementation and evaluation.

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