

Agency and Advocacy: Disabled Students in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania

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**Professor Louise Morley, Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research
and**

Dr Alison Croft, Centre for International Education

University of Sussex, UK

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In a globalised knowledge economy



- Who participates in higher education (HE)?
- How can increased enrolment in HE contribute to economic and social development and reduce poverty (Olukoshi and Zeleza, 2004; Yusuf *et al.* 2009; World Bank, 2002, 2009; Commission for Africa, 2005; UNESCO 2009a).

Increasing but unequal participation in HE

- Enrolment expanded in sub-Saharan Africa to almost 4 million (UNESCO 2006)
- Gender received most attention (Bloom and Rosovsky, 2000; Olukoshi and Zeleza, 2004; UNESCO, 1998)
- Women's access improved but still unequal (UNESCO, 2009b)

Disability as a Structure of Inequality



- **Strong connection between disability, educational attainment and poverty** (Yeo and Moore, 2003; Filmer, 2005)
- **Growing recognition in international and national level legislation**
- **Some initiatives to promote access**
- **Being disabled in SSA :**
 - ✓ at least doubles chance of never enrolling (UNESCO 2010)
 - ✓ Increases chance of 'dropping out' (Filmer, 2005; Hunt, 2008).
- **Need to hear stories of those who have 'survived' in education**

‘Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania’



- 200 student life history interviews
- 200 key staff and policymakers interviews
- 200 Equity scorecards (data on access, retention and achievement)
- 2 public and 2 private HE Institutions
- No available statistical data on disability in Higher Education - emerged as a category of analysis in the qualitative data.

Discussing Disability



- 11 disabled students included in life history interviews.
 - ✓ 7 from the public
 - ✓ 2 from the private universities in Tanzania
 - ✓ 1 from each of the public and private universities in Ghana.
- Disability emerged as issue in discussion with:

Ghana

- 25 academic staff - public university
- 7 - private university
- 3 policymakers.

Tanzania

- 42 academic staff - public university
- 25 - private university
- 10 policymakers

Research on Disability in Higher Education in Low-Income Countries



- Little policy or research attention in HE in sub-Saharan Africa (Mumba, 2009)

Access to HE or to specific programmes blocked (Howell, 2006; Karangwa 2008; Sightsavers, 2009),

Lack of planning for accessible buildings, curriculum, academic and non-academic support creates barriers (Chataika, 2010; Matshedisho, 2007; Mumba, 2009)

Benevolent responses: 'helping' staff choice not professional duty (Matshedisho, 2007)

Research on Disability in Higher Education in Low-Income Countries



- Staff development to support disabled students optional (Howell, 2006)
- Tension between market-driven rationale for HE and access and support for disabled students (Howell, 2006)
- Disabled students reliant on informal support of non-disabled peers (Chataika, 2010, Karangwa, 2008)

Understandings of disability

- Social approaches growing influence at some levels (Albert, 2004; Lang, 2007)
- Some influence of interactionist approach (impairment in interaction with social context and human agency creating disability) in understanding disability in developing countries (Lang 2007)
- Evident in WHO International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)
- Personality (Shakespeare, 2009) and 'personal factors' in ICF suggest space for human agency
- ICF used to analyse situation of Zambian disabled students (Mumba 2009)
- Important not to forget harsh reality of social and economic marginalisation (Ghai, 2002; Meekosha, 2008)

Research Findings

Barriers to successful participation: Entry to HE

- Inclusion and exclusion started early
- Encouragement from teachers and family to stay in school

My mum, she used to encourage and congratulate me... even my brother... they are such kind people who encouraged and influenced me to study up to this level. I am really thankful to them...because even with the discrimination that was existing, sometimes even my mother was discriminated because of my disability... she used to tell me “My daughter study hard, all of these will one day come to an end”. Nowadays we remember that time of discrimination and we are just happy for my achievement (Female, mature, low SES student, private university, Tanzania).
- Private sector university staff noted few applications from disabled students
- Public and private university staff noted the absence of disabled students – assuming disability visible
- Disability not included in widening participation policies

Barriers to successful participation: university environments

- Problems of access to the built environment and learning resources.
- Poor quality such as overcrowding particularly affecting some students eg deaf students
- Peer, rather than institutional support.
- Equality model of individual grievance and complaint rather than planning for additional measures
- Support for academic achievement precariously dependent on variable staff attitudes

But when I reached the room to find out we stay four of us, and then I was supposed to stay on the upper bed of the double decker, I looked at it 'My God! I cannot use the upper bed?' There were some who decided to shift so that we can exchange (Female student, private university, Tanzania).

I don't think we have really facilities for these people (Female academic staff, public university, Tanzania)

Barriers to successful participation: Misrecognition and 'benevolent' response

- *We met with lecturers here, who have negative attitude towards us. ... they didn't even know that people with disabilities can even manage to study. They thought that we can't do anything.*

They discouraged us very much because if you need some assistance or any assistance from your lecturer, if you approach him/her, they put their hands in their pocket to take some thing to give you, maybe money. Some of them, they told us especially me 'today I don't have anything please would you come tomorrow?' (Male, low SES student, public university, Tanzania).

Barriers to successful participation: Social isolation and misrecognition

Maybe something that has shocked me is the little recognition of persons with disability - that I can do something - is not only on the side of the students but even university staffs. They are much surprised to see a man with disability doing something, presenting a thing in a right way.

I think they thought maybe he is not a human being so it's something which has shocked me to see them. The mindset of people who are learned, that they can be surprised of something which is normal. Because it is on the normal set that we are human beings because as a human being you can have a certain type of disability due to different circumstances (Male student, public university, Tanzania).

Exercising agency and advocacy: claiming the transformative potential of education

Economically....

Physical impairment seen to limit opportunities for manual work → mental labour/knowledge work as an option

It was the year 2000; one eye started getting problems and finally lost vision completely.... I even went to Dodoma, there was a German Doctor, but he told me that the eye had no cure. When I came back, with one eye having lost sight completely, the other eye began having problems. After that I saw that the only option for my life was to study (Male student, public university, Tanzania).

Some of my teachers were encouraging me ... and actually looking at me being physically challenged but there isn't anything I could do...unless ... I go to school...so that also motivated me to ... do what I'm doing now (Female mature student, public university, Ghana).

Exercising agency and advocacy: claiming the transformative potential of education

- Socially....

Educational attainment was also perceived as an antidote to discrimination and prejudice, countering 'spoiled' or stigmatised identities (Green, 2007).

In my first class, when I joined first year, under those difficult environments I was assigned some cases to present in the class. What I did was I went to the library with my friend, he read them for me then I presented there. Everyone was surprised and it was a challenge that if this blind person can do this, 'What about me!' Most of them, of course, they approached me telling me the same thing, 'How have you managed within this single time that you can stand in front of people and present cases nicely?'.... And of course, it changed most of the students and it made them to be close to me (Male student, public university, Tanzania).

- **Socially....**

I am a disabled, I have to study hard, even people who are normal can understand ‘Ooh even a disabled student can work with this, yes, that’s good’. Now they will exclude you from ‘the people who can’t’ and put you in ‘the people who can’ (Male student, public university, Tanzania).

Student Agency

Disabled students persistently acting to counter:

- ✓ misinformation
- ✓ misrecognition
- ✓ structural and attitudinal disempowerment.

Needed to demonstrate:

- ✓ learning capacity
- ✓ academic potential

in the face of :

- ✓ marginalisation
- ✓ low expectations
- ✓ superstitions and prejudice.



Resilience, Advocacy and Power



- *What I think myself that people with disabilities have to fight they have to fight for their own rights and that is what we were doing (Male, low SES student, public university, Tanzania).*
- **Ultimately, disability is about power- to define, participate and make decisions.**
- **Disability in HE in Ghana and Tanzania = constraints, misrecognition, frustration and exclusion, but great pride in identity transformation.**

Conclusions

- **HE has the potential to help to uncouple disability and poverty by enhancing the capacity of disabled people and also by producing and disseminating knowledge for social change.**
- **Students' stories of the struggle to succeed in education show the agency they have exercised individually, and collectively in disabled people's organisations, in the face of considerable challenges.**
- **Inclusive HE challenges prejudice and negative attitudes towards disabled people in universities.**
- **Students in this study aspired to be advocates for other disabled people in their countries as they sought to redefine what it means to be a disabled person in Ghana and Tanzania.**
- **Need to go beyond the 'technocratic fix' (Slee, 2001) and engage with culture and discourse**

Questions raised

- **What lessons can be learnt from mainstreaming gender in HE?**
- **eg disaggregated statistics, sensitisation, affirmative action**
- **What should every university provide as a matter of course, and what can be provided responsively as and when needed?**
- **Risk when talking about student agency and advocacy of replicating disabled person as ‘superhero’ discourse . What is implied about those unable to maintain struggle to be educated in systems largely designed to select the few?**
- **How useful are interactionist approaches to disability, including agency, in contexts where ‘the problem’ is still largely located in an individual disabled person (medical model/religious model/charity model)?**

A way forward

Universities and disabled students working together

Every year the administration give us money to welcome other disabled people. So we arrange the party and then we welcome others. That is the good thing because we can understand each other, through that we can understand the problem of others, and therefore they give us the special unit there at the library and called it disabled unit, ... if you have the problem you go there...they help you, they find other things for you ... that is a good thing (Female, mature student, public university, Tanzania).