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Inclusive Education:
Challenges for Distance Learning, Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

All learners, regardless of their educational level, deserve nothing less than a quality education and training that would provide them with opportunities for lifelong learning, the world of work and meaningful participation in society as productive citizens. Therefore, any education and training system should respond to the equity and development challenges that are critical to improving the quality of life of all people. As a teaching and learning delivery model, distance education is practised in many parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot or do not wish to participate in classroom teaching. The expectation is that higher education institutions that facilitate distance learning will be able to create an inclusive teaching and learning environment that provides learners with the opportunity to advance, develop and enrich themselves, both intellectually and materially. Inclusive education involves changes in attitudes, behaviour and ways of working, and has the potential to make an effective starting point to address the rights of learners in a range of cultures and contexts. Following a brief background to, and an outline of distance learning, this paper, highlighting the shift from disability-specific theories, assumptions, practices and models to a non-disability-specific inclusive system of education, focuses on major challenges of inclusive education within a distance learning model. The paper also examines various strategies for inclusive education within a distance learning framework, underscoring the crucial role of diversity with regard to cultures, beliefs and values among learners. Finally, conclusions, based mainly on current practices, are drawn, and recommendations for further study are proposed.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that all learners, regardless of their educational level, deserve nothing less than a quality education and training that would provide them with opportunities for lifelong learning, the world of work and meaningful participation in society as productive citizens. Therefore, any education and training system should respond to the equity and development challenges that are critical to improving the quality of life of all people.

With specific reference to higher education, the principle of equity requires fair opportunities for learners both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them. According to the South African National Plan for Higher Education, (February 2001) it is unacceptable for graduates in general and those from previously disadvantaged communities in particular, to be denied the provision of high quality programmes, as it would not only impact on their ability

to improve their own life chances, but would also adversely impact on the broader agenda for social and economic development. Clearly, although the South African National Plan for Higher Education has been cited by way of an example, the principals it espouses will apply equally to higher education institutions throughout the world. Consequently, higher education institutions, irrespective of the country of origin, must be able to create a learning environment that offers learners the opportunity to advance, develop and enrich themselves, both intellectually and materially.

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education is practised in all parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot or do not want to take part in classroom teaching (Holmberg, 1995:1). In its earliest form, distance education meant study by correspondence, or what is now called "snail mail". As new technologies developed, distance instruction was delivered through such media as audiotape, videotape, radio and television broadcasting, and satellite transmission. Microcomputers, the Internet and the World Wide Web are shaping the current generation of distance learning, and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and knowledge systems may be next (Kerka, 1996.)

According to Eastmond (1995, as cited by Kerka 1996:98), some define distance education as the use of print or electronic communications media to deliver instruction when teachers and learners are separated in place and/or time. However, others emphasize distance learning over education, defining it as "getting people - and often video images of people - into the same electronic space so they can help one another learn" (Filipczak, 1995:111) or "a system and process that connects learners with distributed resources" (ibid, 113). These two definitions imply learner centredness and control. Typical audiences for earlier generations of distance education were adults often seeking advanced education and training at home, on the job, or in the military. They're multiple responsibilities or physical circumstances prevented attendance at a traditional institution (Bates, 1995 as cited by Kerka, 1996:98). Now anyone is potentially a distance learner, a concept that has implications for the organization of educational institutions, and for teaching and learning.

While for some, distance education is identical to private study of prescribed texts with or without special study guides, for others, it is a teaching/learning system including specially prepared study materials and regular, mediated contacts between students and tutors, individually or in groups. However, there are distance teaching universities that offer their students printed and recorded courses with no mediated communication, although they sometimes provide supplementary face-to-face teaching. This applies, for example, to the Dutch Open University and the Colombian Unisur. Others, like the British Open University, provide not only for course materials, but also for correspondence, telephone and computer communication between students and tutors (Holmberg 1995:1). This use of pre-produced course materials and non-contiguous communication, sometimes supplemented by face-to-face contacts, no doubt represents the praxis of most distance-teaching institutions in the world.

A term that is often used to describe the mode of delivery provided by many distance learning institutions is flexible learning, which, according to Moore (2000:56) is not a specific methodology. "It is an approach to teaching and learning that is open to the possible use of a variety of innovative learning practices and combinations of practices. Ideally, it provides the learner with a choice of learning strategies, as well as the choice of place, pace and time. In this sense, it is an extension of the concept of open learning."

Whatever the nature and mode of delivery, distance learning has several challenges for learners and providers, particularly with regard to policy and practice pertaining to inclusive education and training.

3. WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

At the heart of any institution is the learning site community, comprising various stakeholders, namely, learners, educators and other staff, community members, etc. Stakeholders bring to the community their unique characteristics, skills and knowledge, as well as beliefs and values based on their cultures. They interact and participate within the context of the common task of teaching and learning. Inclusive education is the framework that aims at ensuring that all stakeholders can participate in a meaningful way in this common task, contribute in different ways, and be valued and respected as equal members of the community of the educational institution (DoE, 2002.) As a catalyst for change, inclusive education provides not only for institutional improvement, but also for an increased awareness of human rights and a reduction in discrimination. Essentially, inclusive education involves changes in attitudes, behaviour and ways of working, and has the potential to make an effective starting point to address the rights of learners in a range of cultures and contexts.

A single definition of inclusive education for incorporation in this paper would not be adequate, as it may not accurately reflect what the concept entails. Consequently, this paper explores the scope of inclusive education, rather than offering a watertight definition.

According to the South African *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education - Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (July 2001), inclusive education entails the following:

- Acknowledging that all children and youth can learn, and that all children and youth need support
- Accepting and respecting that all learners are different in some way and have different but equally valued learning needs
- Capacitating education structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the needs of all learners
- Acknowledging and respecting differences among learners, whether due to age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, disability or HIV status
- Acknowledging that learning is broader than formal schooling, and may also occur in the home and community, and within formal and informal modes and structures
- Changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methodologies, curricula and the environment to meet the needs of all learners
- Maximising the participation of all learners in the culture and curricula of educational institutions
- Uncovering and minimising barriers to learning
- Empowering learners to participate critically in the process of learning by developing their individual strengths

In line with this view, Save the Children's Fund (SCF) (1995:4) maintains that inclusive education incorporates the principle of access for all disadvantaged learners, and not merely for those with disabilities. Inclusive education is therefore a shift from disability-specific theories, assumptions, practices and models to a non-disability specific inclusive system of education. Consequently, teaching and learning will become more effective and relevant, meeting the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities. As learners with

disabilities have traditionally been marginalised, the first step is therefore to move from an understanding of disability that is shaped by the medical model to an understanding underpinned by a human rights and development model. The result will be the recognition and acknowledgement that people with disabilities are equal citizens, and should therefore enjoy equal rights and responsibilities. A human rights and development approach to disability therefore focuses on the removal of barriers to equal participation, and the elimination of discrimination based on disability. Inextricably linked to the human rights and development approach is the social model of disability, based on the premise that if society cannot cater for people with disabilities, it is society that must change. This implies that the reconstruction and development of society involves a recognition and intention to address the developmental needs of people with disabilities within an inclusive framework.

4. CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

Although not exhaustive, the following are some of the key challenges of inclusive education and training within distance learning.

4.1 Creating an Inclusive Ethos

A foundation for all learning and development is the creation of an inclusive ethos for the education institution, that is, a secure, accepting, collaborating and stimulating teaching/learning community in which everyone is valued. An inclusive ethos is concerned with developing inclusive values, shared among all stakeholders. The principles, derived within an inclusive institutional ethos, guide decisions about policies and moment-to-moment practices. Without addressing the issues of institutional cultures, a sustainable change is not likely to occur.

4.2 Producing Inclusive Policies

Inclusion must be central to the development process and permeate all policies, so that they provide a framework for enhancing the learning and participation of all stakeholders within the community of the institution. Policies related to behaviour management, assessment procedures, organisation of support, curriculum, professional development, etc. need to reflect the institution's responsibility, both for the teaching/learning development of all learners, and support for educators and the institution. In this context, support encompasses all activities that increase the capacity of the institution to respond to diversity. In particular, the commitment and support of management is a non-negotiable for the successful implementation of policy and practice.

4.3 Evolving Inclusive Practices

Institutional practices need to reflect the inclusive cultures and policies of the site of learning. They are concerned with ensuring that face-to-face and distance learning activities encourage the participation of all learners. Inclusive practices should also promote the creativity of educators with a view to improving their skills and knowledge, making space and time for sharing, supporting and participation.

4.4 Overcoming Barriers to Teaching and Learning in an Inclusive Education and Training System

Barriers to learning are a new theory of knowledge that must be imposed on any framework of thinking that relates to teaching and learning. Barriers may be located within the learner, within the site of learning, within the education system and within the broader social, economic and political context. These barriers manifest themselves in different ways, and become obvious only when learning breakdown occurs, or when learners "drop out" of the system. Sometimes, it is possible to identify permanent barriers in the learner or the system. These barriers can be addressed through enabling mechanisms and processes. However, barriers may also arise during the learning process and are seen as transitory in nature. These may require different interventions or strategies to prevent them from causing learning breakdown, or excluding learners from the system.

Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001:7) which, inline with international focus, acknowledges that learners who are most vulnerable to barriers to learning and exclusion are those who have historically been termed "learners with special education needs," that is, learners with disabilities and impairments. Adopting a social model, this policy document emphasises that barriers to learning reside primarily within the system, and may include the following:

- Negative attitudes to and stereotyping of difference
- An inflexible curriculum
- Inappropriate languages of learning and teaching
- Inappropriate communication
- Inaccessible and unsafe built environments
- Inappropriate and inadequate support services
- Inadequate policies and legislation
- The non-recognition and non-involvement of parents
- Inadequately and inappropriately trained education managers and educators

As a necessary precondition for the identification and addressing of barriers to learning, distance learning institutions must create an inclusive, caring and enabling environment, for it is only within such an environment that any meaningful learning and teaching can occur. Undeniably, early identification of barriers to learning should logically be followed by timely and appropriate support.

The following are important barriers which distance learning institutions need to identify and address:

4.4.1. Negative Attitudes to and Stereotyping of Difference

Negative and harmful attitudes towards differences in our society remain a critical barrier to learning and development. Discriminatory attitudes resulting from prejudice against people on the basis of race, class, gender, culture, disability, religion, ability, sexual preference and other characteristics manifest themselves as barriers to learning when such attitudes are directed towards learners in the education system. Even in distance learning institutions where there may be limited contact between learners and the institution, negative attitudes to and stereotyping of difference may occur, being demonstrated in various forms. A major challenge for distance learning institutions is therefore to create a caring, supportive and enabling learning environment that promotes and facilitates mutual respect for differences.

4.4.2. An Inflexible Curriculum

Admittedly, one of the most significant barriers to learning for any learner is an inflexible curriculum. Consequently, barriers within the curriculum must be identified and addressed,

so that it is accessible to and relevant for all learners, irrespective of their learning needs. This means that the curriculum must be sensitive and responsive to the diverse cultures, beliefs and values of learners.

4.4.3. Accessible Learning Materials

To ensure that learners are active participants in the learning and teaching process, distance learning institutions must ensure that teaching and learning materials are evaluated to ensure that the full range of diverse learning needs of all learners is accommodated. Learners must also be provided with learning materials in formats that meet their individual needs. Equally important, the language used must be user-friendly and be understood by the majority of learners. In addition, when planning their learning material, distance learning institutions must be sensitive to the cultural diversity of their learners.

Understandably, given the nature of distance learning, there may be difficulties in establishing the specific needs of learners, as there may be limited face-to-face contact with them. Based on data from the audit conducted by Technikon SA (August 2002), it was found that learners with disabilities do not articulate their special needs. Consequently, very little or no provision is made in providing material in preferred formats. The result is that blind learners are invariably provided with course material and tutorial letters in standard print format. Moreover, in the absence of information on the special needs of specific learners, written feedback from lecturers is invariably provided in their handwriting, as they are reportedly unaware that a specific assignment is from, for example, a blind or partially sighted learner.

4.4.4. Socio-economic Barriers

The relationship between education provision and the socio-economic conditions in any society must be recognised. Effective learning is fundamentally influenced by the availability of educational resources to meet the needs of any society. In many developing countries, there are inadequate numbers of learning and other facilities to meet the educational needs of the large number of learners engaging in distance learning. In most cases, inadequacies in provision are linked to other inequalities in the society, such as urban/rural disparities, and inequalities arising from discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and disability.

4.4.5. Poverty and Underdevelopment

Closely linked to the lack of access to basic services is the effect which sustained poverty has on learners, the learning process and the education system. For learners, the most obvious result of poverty, often caused by unemployment and other economic inequalities, is the inability of families to meet basic needs such as nutrition and shelter. Learners living under such conditions are subject to increased emotional stress, which adversely affects learning and development. Additionally, under nourishment leads to a lack of concentration and a range of other symptoms which in turn affects the ability of the learner to engage effectively in the learning process.

In considering the effects of poverty on the learning process and access to education, it is important to recognise the link between poverty and disability. People with disabilities are often those most easily excluded from the education system and from the labour market and are therefore the most poverty stricken in any population.

4.4.6. Factors which Place Learners at Risk

Effective learning is directly related to and dependent on the social and emotional well being of the learner. It is important to recognise that particular conditions may arise within the social, economic and political environment in which the learner lives, and which impact negatively on the learner's social and emotional well-being, thus placing the learner at risk of learning breakdown. Such factors either influence learners or their family or community directly. In all cases, learners' emotional and social well being and development are threatened.

A learner who is physically, emotionally or sexually abused is not only emotionally and physically damaged. Such abuse may also result in learners initially decelerating their study activities, and eventually "dropping out" of the system. In addition, factors such as substance abuse may affect learners or their families, causing family breakdown and increased stress.

For many learners, these are some of the barriers that impede access to learning. However, in academic discussion on poor learner performance, reference is seldom made to socio-economic and other barriers in the system. According to Kennedy and Powell (1976) as cited by Morgan and Tam (1999:96), "it has long been recognised that any attempt to find a simple, causal explanation for student non-persistence in distance education is futile and it is more appropriate to use an approach that can help to identify the inter-related facets of the experience."

5. CONCLUSION

The concept of inclusion, like the concept of freedom, is intangible, sometimes elusive, and often subject to divergent interpretations (Voltz et al. 2001:2). This is partly why the pace of implementation in both the schooling and higher education sectors appears to be moving slowly. While the pace of change may, in due course, be accelerated in contact institutions, the outlook for distance learning institutions may be different. Unless considerable time and energy are used in striving to establish and maintain direct and ongoing contact with learners, unless the majority of disadvantaged learners have access to the resources of the institution, and unless distance learning institutions conduct ongoing research to evaluate the impact of the teaching and learning strategies, inclusive education in the context of distance learning will remain a mammoth challenge.

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