ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate perceptions of students on challenges faced by ODL learners in fully integrating students with different physical limitations in the Physical Education (P.E) degree at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). It tried to highlight the nature of barriers to total integration of the physically challenged ZOU students in P.E. programmes and tried to offer options available to give such students optimum opportunities. The study employed the descriptive survey design for data collection and an open ended questionnaire was used. A convenience sample of students was made and responded to. The study found that some of the major challenges faced by the special and vulnerable groups of ZOU P.E. students included the fact that exams, tutors and practical activities in the PE subject were generalized in nature and did not give students any room to adapt to subject specific requirements. Specialized equipment to cater for their needs was not readily available. The visually impaired found themselves in a difficult position since the Braille modules are not easily available on registration and can only be produced on request. The students with auditory impairments also face challenges that tutors are not conversant with sign language for them to effectively deal with their unique challenges. The study recommended that ZOU students with physical limitations should be offered special opportunities to meaningfully study the Physical Education subject by ensuring that they levy students to cater for specialized equipment for the excluded. The university should produce special tutors to cater for the specific needs of these students.

Key words: specialized equipment, Braille, excluded, hard of hearing, assistive devices.

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2006 report published by National Association of Societies for the Care of Handicapped (NASCO), children with disabilities are the worst disadvantaged, and experience the most difficult barriers in accessing education. This means that all learners, including those in higher education institutions face almost similar challenges. This means that the number of handicapped people who qualify and go as far as higher education becomes very insignificant as compared to the total number of people without physical handicaps in the country. This is in spite of the fact that Zimbabwe has the legislation that protects handicapped people’s rights is in education and employment, even though this is hardly being enforced.
In higher education institutions, we find that a large number of persons with physical disabilities are taken into the various programmes available but even this small number is not particularly catered for in terms of their specific needs and requirements when taking courses in Physical Education. There are no specialized programmes or ways of dealing with the physically challenged learners in Physical Education programmes. These learners are just thrown into the fray of the able-bodied learners without any differences. Physically challenged learners are even less exposed to P.E programs as compared to able-bodied individuals (World summit on P.E, 1999) in Odiango et al (2010). While it is good to integrate them into mainstream programs in order for them to gain social acceptance, the situation in Zimbabwean tertiary institutions seem to have totally forgotten that physically challenged learners are somewhat different from the other learners and therefore require to be looked at differently when doing different P.E. programs. Disability is in fact a very complex phenomenon that reflects interaction challenges when doing special programs like P.E. which require use of the person’s body and features in a specific way in order to accomplish set tasks. Quality P. E. programs promote lifetime skills and wellness in the learners while teaching elements of self-esteem, management of psycho-motor skills that help to minimize chances of injury and obesity among both youths and adults. (Le Masurier and Corbin, 2006) It is against this background that this research was undertaken to find out and examine the perceptions of students and lecturers of the kind of challenges that are faced by the physically impaired learners in their attempt to specialize in Physical Education Sport programs at ZOU in the Masvingo Region. The Region has one of the most famous institutions of the blind called COPOTA School which caters for the blind and physically handicapped. The institution has a Primary and Secondary with both physically handicapped and normal teachers who all want to upgrade their skills in various areas of study like P. E. The issue that arises is whether Masvingo Region is prepared for such learners and if it is what special considerations it has done for such learners as far as ZOU students and lecturers see it. This is what the paper has tried to articulate

P.E. is a sequence learning subject with formalized courses in various programs offered by ZOU that are taught by Physical Education lecturers who trained to impart specialized skills and knowledge needed to establish and sustain an active Physical Education lifestyle. These tutors have found time to reflect on their professional contact with the blind students they teach on the various programs which include General and Honours emphasis. P.E courses generally focus on physical activities likes sporting dances, gymnastics, track and field events, various ball games and the like over and above courses on general health, nutrition, social responsibilities and the value of physical fitness throughout one’s life (NASPE, 2010:3) The study wanted to find out how students and lecturers viewed the way physically handicapped learners were coping with the specific demands of the programmes and whether there were any specific difficulties for those with physical impairments and what adjustments would be necessary for those learners in the future. For those reasons, the study included some of the physically handicapped learners in the students’ list but did not restrict the views to those learners alone in order to attempt to find out what wider society thought about the physically handicapped learners doing P.E. programs and the programs themselves.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To examine students’ and lecturers’ perceptions of challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities in the BSC-PES programmes.
To find out the role played by ZOU in coming up with appropriate systems that assist and promote special and vulnerable groups in Physical Education and Sport.

To understand the extent to which ZOU provides special facilities and equipment that promotes good learning for special and vulnerable groups of learners, especially the blind, in Physical Education and Sport.

To suggest ways in which ZOU could cater for the special and vulnerable groups of learners in its courses and programmes.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of students and lecturers of the challenges faced by the physically challenged students in the BSC – PES program and assess the impact of ZOU programs on the learners and for the sport. It also sought to suggest ways in which ZOU P.E. programmes and courses could be improved upon to serve special groups of learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is mostly informed by the view of Whitehead (1993) who says participation in many sport and physical activities can lead to feelings of autonomy and competence and may produce joy, excitement, thrills and other satisfying emotions. PE is based in sequence learning. It is also strongly based on the observations that physically challenged learners are less exposed to appropriate P.E programs as compared to able-bodied individuals (World Summit on P.E, 1999) in Odiango et al (2010). These issues should drive all the programs on P.E. in all institutions in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The theoretical framework covers various areas as indicated below:

Impairment

Impairment is a problem in body function/structure and this may lead to activity limitation when encountered by an individual in executing a task or action. While participation is a problem experienced by an individual in life situation; those with physical impairment face problems of lack of balance in some activities. Thus, disability is a complex phenomenon reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he/she lives. So an individual is disabled if he/she has impairment and these may include physically disabled based on a personal or group standard norm.

An activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action, while participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in life situations. An individual may qualify as disabled if he/she has had impairment in the past or is seen as disabled based on a personal or group standard norm.

December 13 2006 UN – Convention of the rights of persons with disabilities tries to look at provision of education Physical Education included should be a basic for all and needs of students should be considered and met. Equal rights to education, employment, cultural life to own and inherit property, not to be discriminated against in marriage and no to medical experiments are some of the rights of the disabled.
Odiango et al (2010) observed that physically challenged individuals suffered from restricted movements, awkward posture as well as low work efficiency as a result of their condition. This then means that those enrolled in the BSc-PES programme with ZOU need tailor-made programmes for their differing disabilities and this will include use of alternate equipment, alternative forms of common activities. The strategies and rules need to be modified as well and so tutors need to understand adaptive physical Education so that they adapt equipment strategies and rules accordingly. Odiango et al (ibid) posit that persons with disabilities are less exposed to P.E programs compared to able-bodied pupils. (World Summit on P.E (1999) in Odiango et al (2010). So it is good for the institution to offer the subject so as to try and integrate the physically challenged into situations where they gain social acceptance. Whitehead (1993) agrees that participation in physical activities can lead to feelings of autonomy and competence and may produce joy, excitement, thrills and other satisfying emotions.

Types of Disabilities

A spectrum models can be used to explain disability and historically four models have been used although these have since been increased. Only four models will be discussed. In BSC-PES the types can include the visually impaired, hard of hearing and those with physical disability. The term ‘disability’ when looked at is a descriptive of the circumstances of the person who is at a disadvantage in displaying the reactions and patterns of behaviour of the normal segment of society because of physical, mental, sensory or emotional ability or any combinations of these. This study is confined to the physical, hard of hearing and visually impaired who normally go through higher education due to their intellectual ability.

Moral Model

According to Olkin (1999) disability is a type of punishment placed on a person or family by some type of spiritual force. e.g witchcraft or religious belief of killing all children born disabled. Olkin (ibid) believes that disability is based on an assertion that disability is a manifestation of sin or moral laps or a test of faith/divine and may have devastating consequences. This may lead to family members hiding disabled relatives to avert feelings of shame and guilt.

Social Adapted Model

Although it poses some limitations in an able-bodied society, society and environment are more limiting than disability. The model advocates that the issues of disability are a socially created problem that needs to fully integrate the individual to society which will make that individual fully participate in physical activities using assistive devices education is a human right and equal access to physical education is one’s basic right. Olkin (1999) says this group has limited access and belongs to a minority group as they are viewed as a disempowered lot and as such, it requires socialization collective responsibility to make environmental modifications for full participation in areas of social life. However one may see the group as experts who navigate between disabled and non-disabled worlds. Dealing with the group will not be a problem as they can mix and mingle due to early integration.
Medical Model

Wikipedia views disability as directly caused by disease, trauma and other health conditions and the aim is to cure to ‘cure’ or at least perform surgery that will result in effective cure. Longmore and Umanksy (2001) emphasize on responsibility lying on physically challenged emulating non-disabled counterparts or colleagues. Since ZOU uses an integrated approach it is hoped that interaction among students will assist colleagues to perform at their highest potential.

New Paradigm of Disability

National Institution on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (1999) argues that disability is a product of interaction between characteristics of individual and that of the natural built, cultural and social environment. So disability is seen as an interaction between environments and the individual as opposed to individual alone. In this case at ZOU these students will be afforded opportunities to interact freely during physical activities.

Empowering Model

Here the individual is empowered and decides on cause of treatment and decide on services to benefit from. So as an institution ZOU can assist fulfill client’s decision to take up P.E and pursue personal goals by supporting the student materially especially where specific equipment is required to fulfill the course requirements. Empowered students are easy to deal with as they make decisions of making own choices. Physically handicapped have poor posture and low cardio-respiratory fitness because they are rarely exposed to exercise programmes. They also have low endurance compared to able-bodied persons. Having said this in ODL the focus should be to assist them to improve their cardio-respiratory fitness so as to reduce incidents of heart attack and excess fats through physical activity. Some advocates object to describing certain conditions (notably deafness and autism) as ‘disabilities,’ arguing that it is more appropriate to consider them developmental differences that have been unfairly stigmatized by society.

Adapted Physical Education and Sport

Adapted physical Education is an individualized programme of physical and motor fitness, fundamental motor skills and patterns; and skills in aquatics, dance, and individual and group games designed to meet unique needs. (Winnick, 2000) Individuals with disabilities should be given the opportunity to receive an Individualized Education Programme (IEP). ZOU as an institution should then make endeavours to attempt to offer ZOU students the (IEP) since they will be in integrated programme. The main aim is to provide personal development, self-actualization and benefits to the society.

Winnick (2000) defines adapted Physical education as a sub-discipline of Physical Education that allows for safe, personally satisfying and successful participation to meet the unique needs of learners. So at ZOU practical activities should be adjusted to suit learners of specific impairment. A number of game rules can be adjusted to accommodate the form of disability. It is then important to make learners develop independence whenever possible. Again safety of learners should be emphasized. Currently ZOU physical education students have a module adapted physical Education and sport which is covered theoretically.
**Assistive Technology**

Dell et al (2008) describe assistive technology as any item, piece of equipment, product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain and improve functional capabilities of an individual with disabilities. These are devices and modifications help overcome or remove the disability, e.g. prosthesis, wheelchair, curb-cut, standing frame, text telephone, accessible keyboard, Braille machine and Braille slate and stylus, Taylor frame, mobility cane, magnetic chess board speech recognition computer software and other software like voice fingers, the grid, smart box AT’S, freedom scientific’s JAWS, free and open source alternative (ORCA) etc. Technology is seen to be changing at a dynamic pace and as such it is important to choose a correct device that is suited for the individual. Physical mobility is an area of need in Physical Education and assistive devices support beyond the confines of an activity so as to allow students to maximize their potential.

**Research Design**

A descriptive survey was used in this study. Thomas and Nelson (1996) see a descriptive survey method as a fact finding operation in which views of respondents are based on the phenomena under study so as to come with functional proposals. Bobby (1997:62) sees a descriptive survey as a method of what we see over and beyond. According to Borg and Gall (1989) a descriptive survey is seen as an excellent vehicle for the development of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population.

**Population and Sampling**

The population targeted both students and lecturers involved in physical education and sport at ZOU in Masvingo Region. This was done on a small scale so as to see what currently occurs in this region and the researchers would like to extend it to ten other regions countrywide in future. A sampling procedure is a process used to select a sample. (Vincent, 1995). Shafer (1980) says a sampling procedure allows for economical collection of data. For this particular study, researchers used a convenience sample and targeted those students who came to the Region for consultations. A total of ten open ended questionnaires were distributed to ZOU students studying physical education and sport in Masvingo Region. Again five part time lecturers were also given the questionnaire to solicit for information on challenges faced by students with physical disabilities in the BSC-PES programme at ZOU.

**Research Instrument**

An open ended questionnaire was developed by authors and it consisted of the following themes; suitability of ZOU courses and programmes for the specialized group of students, the role ZOU plays in the provision of specialized facilities and equipment for promotion of good learning, challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities at ZOU. Respondents were also asked to suggest ways in which ZOU could cater for special and vulnerable group of learners in its physical education courses and programme.
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed and presented in a qualitative form. Both lecturers and students saw equipment, Braille material, computers and hearing aids as well as physical guidance as a hindrance to access to necessary services for students with physical impairments. Skilled personnel who were capable of signing and using specialized equipment were not readily available and this impacted badly on students. These skilled personnel will ensure that they use methods that would allow for interaction of physically challenged and the able-bodied since they would be integrated. This is also confirmed by Longmore and Umanksy (2001) who say integration would help the physically challenged to emulate their counterparts as they interact. Students should also be given the Individualized Education Programme and tutors should be knowledgeable so that they can assist the student accordingly. Both lecturers and students observed that the current tutoring model is not geared towards the needs of these students and no one plans for an eventuality in case these students enroll. There are no curriculum materials readily available to support these students. Students expected to be treated equally rather than being segregated against. Respondents felt that those students who register should be given their full package on registration. Inclusive education would address the needs of all students irrespective of ability or disability. (Mani 2000). This would be seen as the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating and building inclusive societies, thereby achieving true education for all by distance at ZOU.

Students also expect to have easy access to their tutors’ offices and lecture rooms. Respondents felt that offices were not easily accessible since there were no ramps and students wishing to see the regional Director faced problems since his office was upstairs. Odiango et al (2010) say physically challenged students already suffer from restricted movements and this can be compounded by the fact that some offices are upstairs thereby limiting access to staff offices. Students also expect to have access to modern technology and adequate resources to help them pursue their course. Olkin (1999) agrees that these challenged students are a disempowered lot and as such, they need to have equal access through use of assistive devices that would adapt even the environment and have modifications that will allow full and meaningful participation. Since ZOU does not provide equipment for students doing PES, a concession should be made for the Institution to buy assistive devices for use by students.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that a lot still needs to be done by the institution if it were to cater for all students in the Physical education area. ZOU needs to put up systems in place that would ensure easy access to all those students desiring to study Physical Education. The systems might include sourcing assistive devices and specialized equipment for the challenged so that they are included in ODL.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Tutors need some training to effectively teach the physically challenged and this can be done at national level so that expertise is shared during these seminars. That way the University will try to ‘reach the unreached’
• Supportive learning materials should be sourced in advance e.g Braille equipment, books, and assistive devices so that a student gets all the necessary materials at registration.

• Model regions for dealing with students with disabilities in physical education and sport can be established so as to assist students of this nature as well as lecturers who teach these students.

• Students’ affairs should have a readily accessible desk to cater for these students’ needs. Buildings should have ramps for easy access by those students who are physically challenged and use assistive devices.

• Braille books can also be available rather than these students relying on modules only.

• There is need for sign language courses for both students and lecturers so that there is improved communication during tutorials and physical activities

• The University must provide specialized support services for the physically challenged so that they can access internet services

• Ensure tutoring is tailored to specific physical challenges so that they also engage in participative learning with fellow students since they also have something to share as adult learners they are knowledgeable and experienced.

REFERENCES


