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# ACADEMIC ACCOMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN OPEN/ DISTANCE EDUCATION.

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## ABSTRACT

*The presence of individuals with special needs in any society is one reality that cannot be denied anymore. This study therefore, investigated academic accommodation of students with special needs in the open/distance learning mode. The study is a descriptive survey in 5 purposively selected tertiary institutions running open/distance learning programmes and 93 academic heads of departments were sampled. Data obtained from the survey through a structured questionnaire were analysed by frequency count, simple percentages, means and standard deviations. Results revealed that there were no academic accommodation services in all the institutions sampled and the preparation of lecturers was low in academic accommodation of students with special needs. It was therefore, recommended that institutions operating open/distance mode of learning should get their programmes and physical environments modified to cater for students with special needs because they are an integral part of their potential student population.*

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Education can be seen as a concept that involves a system of training teaching and production of students as balanced members of a given

society to be positioned for effective living. Education, through pedagogies and instruction will lead to cultivation and development of an individual into fulfilment, self-actualisation and recognition as a worthy citizen contributing to the welfare of self and society. In essence, all citizens irrespective of their special needs should be educated. The members of the community with special needs include those with learning disabilities, speech disorders, physical, cognitive, sensory and emotional disabilities. In the last three decades, the educational programmes for these groups in Nigeria have undergone series of changes.

With the current global focus on inclusive schooling/education, special need students at all levels now have the opportunity to attend regular classrooms courses with their non-special needs peers. Indeed, the Federal republic of Nigeria, in the national policy on education (2004) includes among its educational philosophy, the need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive, united Nigeria. To this end, school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive while interest and ability should determine the individual's direction in education. Section 10 of the national policy on education is dedicated to special education and that all necessary facilities that would ensure easy access to education shall be provided.

However, the issue of educational accessibility and accommodation of students with special needs has become a dilemma (Ihenacho & Osuji, 2006). Special needs still remain the single most important factor excluding special needs children from schooling, especially tertiary education. Tertiary institution broadly refers to all post secondary institutions, including, but not limited to universities, Colleges of education, and polytechnics. They are diverse and growing astronomically as public and private in nature.

Recently, the number of students with special needs have been increasing in the post secondary environment at an unprecedented rate. Unfortunately, they are surrounded by barriers in the environment and support barriers, which impact the post secondary education of this population and thereby decrease their likelihood of success (Johnson 2006). Many students with special needs experience frustration with their post secondary experiences, stemming from negative attitude from others, physical barriers on campus, lack of appropriate services and suitable programmes. It is worthy to note that some students with special needs not only do well or even exceed their non-special needs peers in terms of academic achievement; many cannot,

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not because of their special needs but because of the inhibiting environment in which they learn. Schools are expected to adjust for the differences of students with special needs by changing factors in the environment that may not favour the students' progress (Price, Mayfield, Mcfadden & March 2001-2002).

The term accommodation or modification has been used interchangeably in literature to refer to the adjustment of the facilities, curriculum and [illegible] to the education of [illegible] if the goals and objectives of education for all (EFA) is to be achieved, accommodation of all students in the learning environment is required. Accommodation refers to approaches whereby the learning environment is modified to cater for the specific needs of each student in a particular institution in order to enhance and maximise learning. The focus is on changing the learning environment or the infrastructural requirements so that the students may learn in spite of a fundamental physiological weaknesses or deficiencies.

Accommodation modification is expected to equip each school, college or university to recognise and respond to the needs of diverse students. It involves modification or adjustments that make it possible for a student with special needs to have equal opportunities.

Open/distance learning is another way of giving access and equal opportunity to all, irrespective of their inadequacies. It is the process of creating and providing educational quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom. Open/distance learning represents approaches that focus on opening access to education training, freeing learners from constraints of time, place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO 2002).

ADEA Working Group on Distance Education (2002) identifies four major characteristics of distance learning. These are institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency, use of variety of media for instructional delivery, provision of twoway communication to ensure tutor-learner, learner-learner interaction and the possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, laboratory practices and library studies.

Yusuf (2006) avers that open/distance education not only shares the goals of conventional education but it also aims at providing access to historically under-served, place-bound, and highly motivated population.

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Hence, if students with special needs are in conventional education, it is expected that they would also attend open/distance learning. Open/distance learning is a form of education that is external to, but not separated from the faculty of the institution offering distance education programmes (Keegan 1996, Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001). It is against this background that this study set out to investigate academic accommodation of students with special needs in open/distance learning in tertiary institutions in Oyo State.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of academic accommodation equipments are available in the institutions for open/distance learning sampled?
2. How well-prepared are the lecturers in academic accommodation of students with special needs in open/distance learning in the institutions?
3. What are the problems in academic accommodation of students with special needs in open distance learning?

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this research work are to examine academic accommodation of students with special needs in open/distance learning in tertiary institutions. It will also identify the level of preparedness of lecturers in accommodation and the problems envisaged in accommodating students with special needs.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design.

### POPULATION AND PARTICIPANTS FOR THE STUDY

The target population comprises of lecturers in the selected institutions. The participants were academic heads and coordinators of open/distance learning in the identified institutions.

### SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

A total of 93 participants were the sample selected purposively from 5 institutions running open/distance learning programmes in Oyo State. Sixty five (69.9%) of the participants were males while 28 (30.1%) were females. With regard to age, 17 (18.3%) were between 30 to 40 years, 37 (39.8%) were between 41-50 years, 9 (9.7%) were between 51 to 60 years, 1 (1.1%) was between 61 to 65 years while 29 (31.2%) did not indicate their

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ages. Twenty four (25.8%) were Ph.D. holders, while 69 (74.2%) held Masters degrees.\

## RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire comprising of 3 sections. Section A was on the demographic information of the participants while Section B consists of question items to be answered on level of lecturers' preparedness and problem of academic accommodation of students with special needs. Section C was an inventory of available accommodation services and equipment.

## METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from the respondents were analysed by frequency counts, simple percentages, means and standard deviation.

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1:** What kind of Accommodation services and equipment are available in the Institutions sampled

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## Table 1: Accommodation and Services Available for Students

| S/N | Items | Available | Not Available | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Hearing Aids | 24 (25.8) | 69(74.2) | 1.26 | 0.440 |
| 2 | Audiometers | 25(26.9) | 68(73.1) | 1.27 | 0.446 |
| 3 | Speech trainers | 24(25.8) | 69(74.2) | 1.26 | 0.440 |
| 4 | Overhead projectors | 22(23.7) | 71(76.3) | 1.24 | 0.427 |
| 5 | Sign-Language Books | 25(26.9) | 68(73.1) | 1.27 | 0.446 |
| 6 | Sign-Language Interpreters | 24(25.8) | 69(74.2) | 1.26 | 0.440 |
| 7 | Note takers | 11(11.8) | 82(88.2) | 1.12 | 0.325 |
| 8 | Perkins Braillers | 21(22.6) | 72(77.4) | 1.23 | 0.420 |
| 9 | Brail lists | 25(26.9) | 68(73.1) | 1.27 | 0.446 |
| 10 | Study skills and strategy training | 12(12.9) | 81(87.1) | 1.13 | 0.337 |
| 11 | Document conversion to Braille | 15(16.1) | 78(83.9) | 1.16 | 0.370 |
| 12 | Orientation/Mobility Training | 22(23.7) | 71(76.3) | 1.24 | 0.427 |
| 13 | Tape Recorders | 20(21.3) | 73(78.5) | 1.22 | 0.413 |
| 14 | Slate with Stylus | 20(21.5) | 73(78.5) | 1.22 | 0.413 |
| [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] |
| 16 | Wheel chairs | 20(21.5) | 73(78.5) | 1.22 | 0.413 |
| 17 | Accessible classroom furniture | 11(11.8) | 82(88.2) | 1.12 | 0.325 |
| 18 | Advance notice of assignment | 10(108) | 83(89.2) | 1.11 | 0.311 |
| 19 | Captioned film or Video | 14(15.1) | 79(84.9) | 1.15 | 0.360 |
| 20 | Assistive Listening devices | 13(14.0) | 80(86.0) | 1.14 | 0.349 |
| 21 | Assistance Computer technology | 15(16.1) | 78(83.9) | 1.16 | 0.370 |
| 22 | Internet Facilities | 11(11.8) | 82(88.2) | 1.12 | 0.325 |
| 23 | Course Book Programme modification | 11(11.8) | 82(88.2) | 1.12 | 0.325 |
| 24 | Extended time on Examination | 19(20.4) | 74(75.6) | 1.20 | 0.405 |
| 25 | Taped lectures | 14(15.1) | 79(84.9) | 1.15 | 0.360 |
| 26 | Buildings with Railings | 12(12.9) | 81(87.1) | 1.13 | 0.337 |
| 27 | Well-labelled environment | 26(28.0) | 67(72.0) | 1.28 | 0.451 |
| 28 | Distraction-free examination setting | 30(32.3) | 63(67.7) | 1.32 | 0.470 |
| **Total** | | **526** | **2088** | **33.548** | **9.808** |

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Table 1 above reveals the type of accommodation available in the Institutions for students with special needs. The table shows that hearing aids were not available in sufficient quantity (X= 1.26; SD= 0 440) Audiometers were also not sufficiently available (X= 1.26; SD= 0.440). Speech trainers (X= 1.26) SD= 0.440, Overhead projectors were not sufficient (X= 1.24; SD= 0.427). Sign-Language Books (X= 1.27; SD= 0.446), Sign-Language Interpreters (X= 1.26; SD= 0.440), Note takers were not sufficient (X= 1.12) SD= 0.325, Perkins Braillers were not sufficient (X= 1.23) SD= 0.420, Braille lists were not sufficient (X= 1.27) SD= 0.446, Study skills and strategy training were not sufficient (X= 1.13) SD= 0.337, Document conversion to Braille were not sufficient (X= 1.16) SD= 0.370, Orientation/Mobility Trainings were not adequate (X= 1.24) SD= 0.427. Tape Recorders were not sufficiently available (X= 1.22) SD= 0.413, Slate with Stylus were not adequate (X= 1.22) SD= 0.413, Taylor's Frames were not adequate (X= 1.22) SD= 0.413, Wheel-chairs were not enough (X= 1.22) SD= 0.413, Accessible classroom furniture were not sufficient (X= 1.12) SD= 0.325, Advance notice of assignments were not adequate (X= 1.11) SD= 0.311, Caption film or Video were inadequate (X= 1.15) SD= 0.360, Assistive Listening devices were not sufficient (X= 1.14) SD= 0.349, Assistance Computer technology were not sufficient(X= 1.16) SD= 0.325, Internet Facilities were not fully deployed (X= 1.12) SD= 0.325, Course Book Programme modification were not enough (X= 1.20) SD= 0.405, Extended time on Examinations were not available ($\bar{X}$= 1.15) SD= 0.360, Taped lecturers were not available, Buildings with Railings were not available (X= 1.13) SD= 0.337, Well-labelled environments were not available (X= 1.28) SD= 0.451, Distraction-free examination setting were not available (X= 1.32) SD= 0.470. This indicates that accommodation services were not readily available in the sampled Institutions (X=33.548, SD=9.907.

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2:** How well prepared are the lecturers to accommodate students with special needs in the Institutions for open/distance learning

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**Table 2: Model of How Well Lecturers Prepared for Academic Accommodation Students**

| S/N | Items | SA | A | NS | D | SD | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | All lecturers use strategies that promote independence of the students | 06(6.5) | 09(9.7) | 21(22.6) | 40(43.0) | 17(18.3) | 2.43 | 1.097 |
| 2 | Lecturers have knowledge of the major principles and practice of special learners | 03(3.2) | 12(12.9) | 36(40.9) | 30(32.3) | 10(10.8) | 2.66 | 0.95 |
| 3 | Lecturers are well prepared to adapt materials | 06(6.5) | 14(15.1) | 12(12.9) | 36(38.7) | 26(26.9) | 2.35 | 1.213 |
| 4 | Lecturers relate and collaborate with other care givers | 05(5.4) | 15(16.1) | 14(15.1) | 32(34.4) | 27(29.0) | 2.34 | 1.211 |
| Total | | 20 | 50 | 83 | 138 | 80 | 9.785 | 4.331 |

Table 2 above reveals the preparedness level of lecturers to accommodating students with special needs in the Institution. Most lecturers did not use strategies that promote independence of the student($X = 2.43$, $SD = 1.097$) Most Lecturers have no knowledge of the major principles and practice ($X = 2.66$, $SD = 0.95$) Most Lecturers were not well prepared to adapt materials ($X = 2.35$, $SD = 1.213$) Lecturers did not relate and collaborate with other care-givers ($X = 2.34$, $SD = 1.211$). This implied that preparation of lecturers is very low in accommodation of students with special needs in the sampled Institutions ($X = 9.785$, $SD = 4.331$)

**Research Question 3:** What are the problems of lecturers in accommodating students with special needs in open/distance learning?

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**Table 3: Model of Problems Encountered by Students**

| S/N | Items | SA | A | NS | D | SD | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Students with special needs constitute nuisance | 23(24.7) | 21(22.6) | 9(9.7) | 6(6.5) | 34(36.6) | 2.92 | 1.663 |
| 2 | Getting needed materials and equipment for accommodation is very difficult | 7(7.5) | 19(20.4) | 58(62.4) | 6(6.5) | 3(3.2) | 3.23 | 0.809 |
| 3 | Maintenance and repair of material needed are very expensive | 12(12.9) | 15(16.1) | 58(62.4) | 5(5.4) | 3(3.2) | 3.30 | 0.882 |
| **Total** | | 42 | 55 | 125 | 17 | 40 | 9.452 | 3.102 |

Table 3 above reveals the problems encountered in accommodating students with special needs in the Institutions. Part of the problem were that students with special needs constitute a nuisance (X = 2.92, SD = 1.663) Getting needed materials and equipment for accommodation is very difficult (X = 3.23, SD = 0.809) Also, maintenance and repairs of materials needed are very expensive (X=3.30, SD= 0.882). This indicates that these are problems encountered in accommodating students with special needs in the sampled Institutions (X = 9.452, SD = 3.102).

## DISCUSSION

From the findings of this study, it was discovered that academic accommodation services were not available in the sampled institutions. This finding is similar to that of Rath & Roger (2002) Singh (2003), and Reed, Ryerson & LundLucas (2006). They all reported that inadequate equipments, services, staffing, resources and assessment act as barriers to academic accommodation of students with special needs in post-secondary schools.

The result of research question 2 also indicated that the level of preparedness of lecturers is very low in academic accommodation of students with special needs. This study corroborates the findings of Graham & English (2001), Dorwick, Anderson, Heyar & Acosta (2005),



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Johnson (2006). They all reported that lack of understanding and attitudinal barriers of faculty staff as the barriers to access to tertiary education of students with disabilities.

With reference to the third research question and the evidence shown in table three. It is clearly revealed that the problems of academic accommodation of students with special needs in open distance learning is a reality, hindering accessibility and quality educational attention to special needs students in the system. This corroborates the findings of Reed et al. (2006), Yusuf (2006), and Oyewumi (2005).

The implication of the findings from this study is that a sizeable percentage of eligible students that should contribute to the growth and national development of the country are denied the opportunity of getting sound education, and as a result, cannot contribute meaningfully to nation building. Also, the lack of good education reduces the quality of life of the special needs individuals. Furthermore, the observed inadequacies in accommodating special needs students run contrary to the principles and philosophy of open/distance education, which is expected to be flexible with the provision of a level playing ground while accommodating the peculiarities of each learner.

Against this background, it is suggested that the national educational policy should be reviewed to make adequate provisions for special needs students; teachers should be given specialised training on handling and helping the special needs learners. In addition, school environments and architecture should be designed with the special needs students in mind. Finally, the education ministry should put in place effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure fair play and best practices concerning the special needs learners in open/distance learning.

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