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1.0 Overview

Kenyatta University was established in 1974 as a constituent college of university of Nairobi. For over three decades it remained the only university that trained graduate teachers. As a teacher training college, it was required to produce teachers that could competently serve in schools that had students with special learning needs. Whereas there is only one high school for the blind in the whole republic of Kenya, namely, Thika High School for the blind, two factors forced Kenyatta University to introduce innovations to promote access and equity for blind students in university education. In the first place, Thika High School for the Blind over time emerged as an excellent performer in Kenya advanced certificate examinations which determined a student to enter the university. Up to 1989, when the Kenya government reviewed its educational system and scrapped the Kenya advanced certificate of education, Thika High School for the Blind was usually among the best 10 schools in the country.

Since there were only two universities, students from Thika high school for the Blind were admitted to Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi. Those who went to university of Nairobi pursued law and Bachelor of Arts. Since law was very competitive only a few of those students with visual disabilities who qualified for admission to the university were selected. The employment market was very competitive and hence students who were enrolled in Bachelor of Arts found it difficult to access jobs after graduation and usually ended up joining teaching profession. The Public Service Commission that was the main employer of Bachelor of Arts students usually employed those graduates as administrators in various government departments. This employer discriminated against graduates with visual disabilities who had studied Bachelor of Arts. The employer assumed that if one had a visual disability he/she could not be a District officer/Administrator in government ministry for they assumed that lack of sight will affect the performance of these graduates. Even those students with visual disabilities who pursued law could not be employed by the government as magistrates on completion of the Kenya law school for it is believed that a magistrate has to have sight to make sound judgments. Consequently, graduates with visual disabilities in law trained as advocates

and worked in private law firms. Those with partial sight were employed in the Attorney General Chambers to assist in drafting bills and doing other office work.

In the presence of discrimination in the public civil sector in terms of employment, students with visual disabilities who qualified for university admission preferred pursuing Bachelor of Education at Kenyatta University. The Teachers Service Commission that is the sole employer of graduate teachers did not discriminate against teachers with visual disabilities in its employment procedures. Infact it had incorporated incentive in its policies to enable a teacher with visual disabilities to perform his/her duties effectively. For example, teachers with visual disabilities had an allowance to pay readers. These teachers were posted to schools that could provide housing. These teachers were also in high demand in colleges and schools that had intergraded programs for students with visual disabilities. Thika High school for the Blind, Machakos Teachers College, Bungoma High School, Nyandarua High school and Bahati Girls high school were some of the schools that absorbed graduates with visual disabilities. But one of the reasons that inspired the Teachers Service Commission to give special preference to graduates with visual disabilities was the fact that all these teachers were committed to their work and students performed well in national examination in all subjects that were taught by these teachers. These performance inspired principals of secondary schools to seek for graduate teachers with visual disabilities.

Kenyatta University was therefore forced to make innovations to promote access and equity for students with visual disabilities.

1.0 Support services

The university identified provision of support services as a critical sector in promotion of access to education for students with visual disabilities.

2.1 Pathways, pavements and ramps

The university has constructed concrete pathways and pavements around halls of residence and lecture theatres. Similarly ramps have been constructed leading to doorways in lecture theatres and halls of residents. However, these pathways are now used by both sighted and visually challenged students.

2.2 Hall of residents

Students with visual disabilities are allocated halls of residence that do not have staircases. They have wide corridors. Each student with a visual disability is allocated a single room. The staffs who are housekeepers and cleaners have been sensitized about best practices of creating a good environment for students with visual disabilities. Hence barriers are not put in the corridors, pathways and pavements in the halls of residence.

2.3 Equipment

The university provides Braille's and Braille paper to students with visual disabilities. However, currently these Brailers are old and they keep on breaking. The university also provides white canes to students with visual disabilities.

2.4 Personal assistance

Students with sight volunteer their time to read for their colleagues who are visually challenged. The relationship between the sighted and visually challenged students is very good. It's often common for female sighted students who volunteer to read for their male visually challenged colleagues to develop intimate relationships which lead to marriage. But what is evident is that student with visual disabilities do not face discrimination from their fellow sighted students and this provide a conducive learning environment which maturate students with visual disabilities to perform well in their studies.

3.0 Library Services

This is an area where Kenyatta University has provided leadership in east Africa. The main library has a blind resource centre. This centre has five employees. These staff records books on tapes. It also records journals and newspapers. Key reference books have been brailed and put in the centre. The centre has adequate space for the students with visual disabilities. The centre has linkage with faculties so that its reading material is relevant to the curriculum.

However, this centre needs to be innovated to be in line with modern information and communication technology. The centre needs to be computerized and relevant programs that promote reading for student with visual disabilities installed.

4.0 Computer lessons

Students with visual disabilities are taught computer lessons using Jos program. The university has a full time lecturer that offers the lessons. The lecturer has visual disabilities. These lessons prepare student for the dynamic job market where the use of information and communication technology is the order of the day. Students are now able to present their assignment in print instead of Braille. Using these programs students can undertake research on various issues on the internet.

5.0 Examination

The university has allowed students an extra thirty minutes to enable them complete their examinations. This allowance takes into account the fact that brailers could easily reduce the speed of students. Students with visual disabilities are allocated their on examination room with an invigilator. This environment is conducive for students to do their examination in a relaxed manner. Due to the fact that all students are not competent with use of computers, they are forced to use bailers in the examination.

Most of the staff employed to transcribe these brailled papers make mistakes thus reducing the marks for the students. Currently there are four computers for students with visual disabilities.

6.0 Admission

As an incentive to increase access to university education, students with visual disabilities are admitted with one point less in comparison to sighted students. This affirmative action is supposed to take into consideration challenges which these students go through in their high school education. This affirmative action was precipitated by advocacy work of national organizations of people with disabilities. The leadership of Kenya Union of the Blind which is the national organization of the blind challenged the university to explain why the population of students with visual disabilities had dropped from fifty in the 1980s to zero in the mid 1990s. The new education system commonly referred to as 8-4-4 has discriminated against students with visual disabilities. Kenyatta University took this criticism positively and lowered admission points by one point. These resulted into the student population with visual disabilities rising from zero in the mid 1990s to thirty in the mid 2006. This is still a minimal percentage given the fact that Kenyatta University has over ten thousand students.

7.0 Conclusion

Whereas Kenyatta University is an icon in providing a model for promoting access and equity in university education in east Africa there still remain key challenges. Among issues that affect equity and access to university education for students with visual disabilities include:

- 8-4-4 education system whose grading emphasizes mathematics and science as key subjects does not take into consideration special learning needs of students with visual disabilities. Kenyan schools lack relevant learning equipments and materials which can be used to teach science and mathematics to students with visual disabilities. This system of education is a barrier to students with visual disabilities in accessing university education.
- Kenyatta University does not include the needs of the student with visual disabilities in its budget. This makes it difficult for the university to maintain learning equipment and materials for student with visual disabilities.