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The Limits of Inclusion: Disability and access to higher education in Nigeria (0230)

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Background: More than any other period in human history, we are witnessing an unprecedented era of population changes in which diversity issues such as multiculturalism, gender, disability, and sexuality have taken the centre stage. Analysing this context of super-diversity, Stuart Hall (1993) claims that the coming question of the 21st century is the capacity to live with difference. Extending this further, the Delors report to UNESCO (1996) identifies the four pillars of education as: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together and learning to be. Society is changing from narrow hierarchical forms to new modernities in which individuals with diverse range of social identities and ways of living are negotiating access to [higher] education more than ever before. This paper reports the lived experiences of disabled students in the Nigerian higher education. Over the past two decades, policymakers in Nigeria countries have sought to increase access to higher education for this group. The orthodoxy of massification however, masks some underlying inequities in access and participation of disabled people who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Thus, the National Open University of Nigeria, a distance education institution, was established in 2002 to increase access opportunities of disadvantaged Nigerians, including the disabled, to higher education. Despite the overall increases in enrollment, disabled people (estimated as 20% of Nigeria's 167million population) remain underrepresented in higher education (Ojerinde 2008). The research in this paper forms part of a wider doctoral study, which explored polices on access to, and participation in higher education in Nigeria.

Methodology: This paper reports the lived experiences of disabled students at the National Open University of Nigeria, to illuminate how powerful social and structural factors shape their diverse experiences of participation in higher education. The report forms part of a wider doctoral study, which explores access of disadvantaged groups to higher education in Nigeria. Fieldwork combined semi-structured interviews of disabled students, university academics and administrative staff, with analysis of some key policy documents. Theoretical frameworks that facilitated data analysis are the social model of disability (Oliver

2009), and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Findings: Disabled students reported experiences of discrimination, low self-esteem, and restrictions from disabling physical environment, financial inadequacy, and rigid course registration and examinations procedures. There is also general anxiety about post-graduation job prospects based on previous discriminatory experiences. Moreover, findings indicate that disabling university practices and structures impede effective participation of current students, and potentially restrict prospective disabled students from gaining access to university education. Insights from university academics reveal differing views and responses ranging from outright ignorance and disinterestedness to informed awareness about the experiences of disabled students.

Findings and discussions: Disadvantaged groups, including the disabled students report experiences of discrimination, low self-esteem, and restrictions from the social and physical environment, financial inadequacy, and rigid administrative procedures on course registration and examinations. There is also general anxiety about post-graduation job prospects based on previous discriminatory experiences. Moreover, findings indicated that the disabling university practices and structures impeded the effective participation of current students, and potentially restricted prospective disabled students from gaining access to university education. Insights from university academics revealed differing views and responses ranging from outright ignorance and disinterestedness to informed awareness about the experiences of disadvantaged students.

Higher education leaders, policymakers, and academics need to be aware that: i) disabled people's identities and experiences are shaped by complexity of factors including policies and practices within the university social structure (Shah and Priestley 2011); ii) the interpretation and implementation of access policies are affected by the understanding of university staff; and iii) disabled learners have disproportionate resources and opportunities that could complicate their engagement and participation compared with non-disabled students. The works of Pierre Bourdieu and Margaret Archer have relevance in explaining how the identities and subjectivities of disabled people impact on their access to, performance in, and overall experience of, higher education in Nigeria.

Interpretations and conclusion: Higher education leaders, academics, and policy makers need to be aware that: i) disadvantaged students' identities and experiences are shaped by a complexity of factors including policies and practices within the university system; ii) the understanding of university leadership of 'disadvantage' affects the interpretation and implementation of access policies (Fuller et al 2011; Burke 2012); and iii) that disadvantaged learners have differing resources and opportunities that could complicate their engagement and participation in higher education. The implications of these is that the identities

and subjectivities of disadvantaged people, researched in this study, impact on their access to, performance in, and experience of, higher education. Conclusively, the research reveals that distance learning plays, a significant role in widening access to higher education opportunities for disadvantaged groups in Nigeria. The analyses also shows that distance learning can be more successful in reaching disadvantaged students, including the disabled, through a more nuanced support policy that accounts for their experiences, feelings, and values in the pursuit of access to higher education.

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