Building an Inclusive Open Distance Learning (ODL) Framework in Namibia: Addressing Learning Disabilities to Foster Resilience and Socio-Economic Growth

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Abstract
Open Distance Learning (ODL) plays a crucial role in mitigating educational inequalities in Namibia by addressing geographical and socio-economic barriers. However, learners with learning disabilities face challenges such as limited access to adaptive technologies, inaccessible platforms, untrained tutors, and cultural stigma. This study explores how ODL can be adapted to meet these learners' needs and examines the role of community engagement and policymaking in fostering inclusivity. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combined qualitative interviews with approximately one tutor, two policymakers and quantitative survey data gathered from an estimated 110 ODL learners. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, while quantitative responses were examined through descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to identify trends, gaps, and correlations. The objectives include identifying barriers, evaluating current practices, and proposing strategies for accessibility through adaptive course design, inclusive assessments, and robust support systems. This study seeks to answer the central question: How can ODL in Namibia be adapted to better support learners with learning disabilities? The findings aim to guide ODL institutions in addressing resource and logistical challenges, emphasising tutor training, infrastructure improvements, and inclusive policies. This research aligns with UNICEF's call (2018) for improved access to education for marginalised groups and highlights open educational resources (OER) as tools to bridge divides and enhance engagement. By advocating a holistic approach, the study highlights the transformative potential of inclusive Open and Distance Learning (ODL) frameworks to promote educational equity and socio-economic growth in Namibia.
These frameworks enhance human capital, support workforce inclusion, and reduce inequality, aligning with Namibia's Vision 2030 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby contributing to broader global sustainable development efforts.

1. Introduction and Background

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is vital for addressing educational inequalities in Namibia, overcoming geographical and socio-economic barriers. However, learners with learning disabilities face challenges such as limited access to adaptive technologies, inaccessible platforms, untrained tutors, and cultural stigma. According to UNESCO (2008), inclusive education involves strengthening the capacity of the education system to serve all learners effectively (Quiroga Ramirez, 2021). They emphasise that this approach is rooted in the belief that education is a fundamental human right and a foundation for building a more just and equitable society. Swarnalatha (2023) also elaborates that inclusion goes beyond mere physical presence in classrooms; and that it aims to foster a supportive environment that promotes social inclusion, positive peer interactions, and a strong sense of community for every student. To foster inclusivity in education, the Namibian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC) established the Inclusive Education policy to provide guidelines and strategies for the schools to respond to all learners (MoE, 2014). These strategies address all issues that could prevent learners from learning, such as disabilities, learning difficulties and discrimination based on gender diversity (MoEAC, 2016). The policy shows Namibia's dedication to ratifying international agreements and implementing national laws and policies. It also indicates that inclusive education is well understood in the context of special education, with a narrow focus on students with physical or sensory impairments, often overlooking those with learning disabilities. Thus, the new definition of inclusive education acknowledges that the word inclusion is a process that should affect all educational institutions and the educational system, leading to inclusive practices that are good for everyone. Although the Namibian government is committed to establishing an inclusive education system and has ratified several international agreements, its policy still falls short regarding higher education processes. (MoEAC, 2016) Greater emphasis is placed on primary and secondary education, while higher education, particularly Open and Distance Learning (ODL), often faces more limitations and is frequently overlooked. Therefore, the study explores how ODL can be adapted to meet these learners' needs and examines the role of community engagement and policymaking inclusivity.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education is interpreted and implemented differently across various national and educational contexts. Bii and Taylor (2013) observe that in Kenya, governmental efforts towards inclusive education primarily emphasise increasing the enrolment of children with disabilities, particularly focusing on access rather than broader pedagogical or systemic inclusion. In Botswana, a similar trend is noted, where inclusive education initiatives predominantly cater to learners with visual and physical impairments (Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015; Molosiwa & Mpofu, 2017).

In Namibia, inclusive education also appears to be variably understood among educators. Several studies have identified misinterpretations and misconceptions about inclusion as significant barriers to effective implementation. For instance, Chitiyo and Dzenga (2021), Haitembu (2014), and Mokaleng and Möwes (2020) report that many teachers exhibit uncertainty about what inclusive education entails, which is often accompanied by negative attitudes. These factors have contributed to challenges in integrating all learners, particularly those with diverse needs, into mainstream classrooms.

More recently, Haitembu and Maarman (2023) highlighted that a lack of clarity and understanding of inclusive education remains a persistent challenge in Namibian schools. Their study underscores a notable gap between the policy intentions of inclusive education and its actual practice. The findings suggest that efforts to implement inclusive education risk being superficial or misaligned with its foundational principles without a shared and comprehensive understanding of inclusion. The significance of inclusive education processes is stressed, particularly in its long-term impact on higher education. According to Burrows, Harvey, and Green (1992), the student experience is the 'total student experience' and encompasses academic engagement and supporting students' social and emotional needs. A comprehensive and holistic approach to student development is fundamental to advancing the overall quality of education. The failure to adequately address inclusivity during the early stages of the educational continuum may result in significant negative implications for key quality indicators at the tertiary level. Supporting this view, Hill, Lomas, and MacGregor (2003) argue that the quality of the student experience is significantly improved when university staff actively address academic requirements and the emotional well-being of students, particularly those considered vulnerable. These findings highlight the critical role of inclusive practices in fostering a supportive and high-quality educational environment.

These literature gaps underscore the importance of investigating inclusive ODL practices in higher education, particularly NAMCOL, where institutional frameworks have yet to fully respond to learners with disabilities.

3. Methodology

This study applied qualitative and quantitative methods. The total population comprised 992 students. The online form was sent to all NAMCOL 992 students. Participation in the study was not mandatory. As such, only 110 students responded to the online survey. For the qualitative part of the study. Only one tutor marker out of 12 responded to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted with policymakers at the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment (DNEA) and Programmes and Quality Assurance (PQA) of the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture. These two units of analysis were selected due to their integral role in the Ministry's efforts to formulate and implement Namibia's inclusive education policy. The Programmes and Quality Assurance Directorate oversees the monitoring and evaluation of school policies. In contrast, the Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment oversees the policy's effectiveness by analysing student performance in national examinations. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, which Google Forms computed.

All the participants gave informed consent for this study.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings of this study are presented in two parts. The first part presents the quantitative analysis and interpretation, and the second part presents the interview analysis and interpretation.

4.2 Demographic data

The demographic data presents six categories: age, gender, disability diagnosis, type of disability, grade, and study period at NAMCOL. These categories are presented in sections.

4.2.1 Respondents' age N=110

Regarding to age of the respondents, 54.5% fell between18-24 years, 35.5% between 25-34 and 9.1% between 35-44. The findings imply that most of the respondents were young.

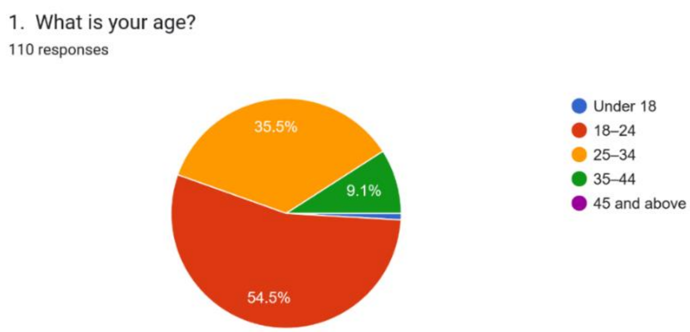

Figure 4.1 Respondents' Age

4.2.2 Gender

Figure 4.2 presents the respondents' gender. The findings show that females were more than males. These findings reflect the reality of the enrolment of students across the institutions where there are more females than males.

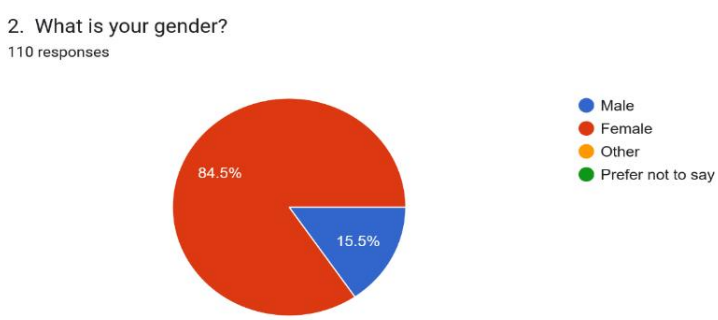

Figure 4.2 Respondents' Gender

4.2.3 Diagnosis of Learning disability

Regarding diagnosis with a learning disability, 89.1% responded 'no', while 6% preferred not to say, and 4% responded 'yes'. These findings are not surprising because of the stigma which disability is associated with. Besides, many may not undergo any formal diagnosis procedure.

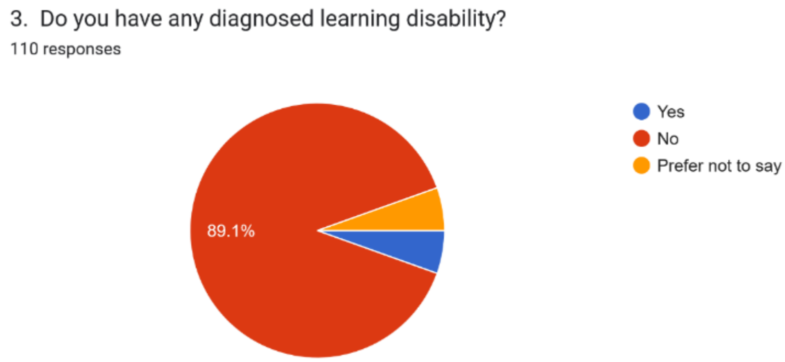

Figure 4.3: Learning Disability Diagnosis

4.2.4 Type of learning disability

Regarding the type of learning disability depicted in Figure 4.4, the findings show that 11.8% indicated 'not applicable', 39.1% indicated they do not have a disability, and 15.5% indicated they were unsure. These finding corresponds with the diagnosis of disability in Figure 4.3.

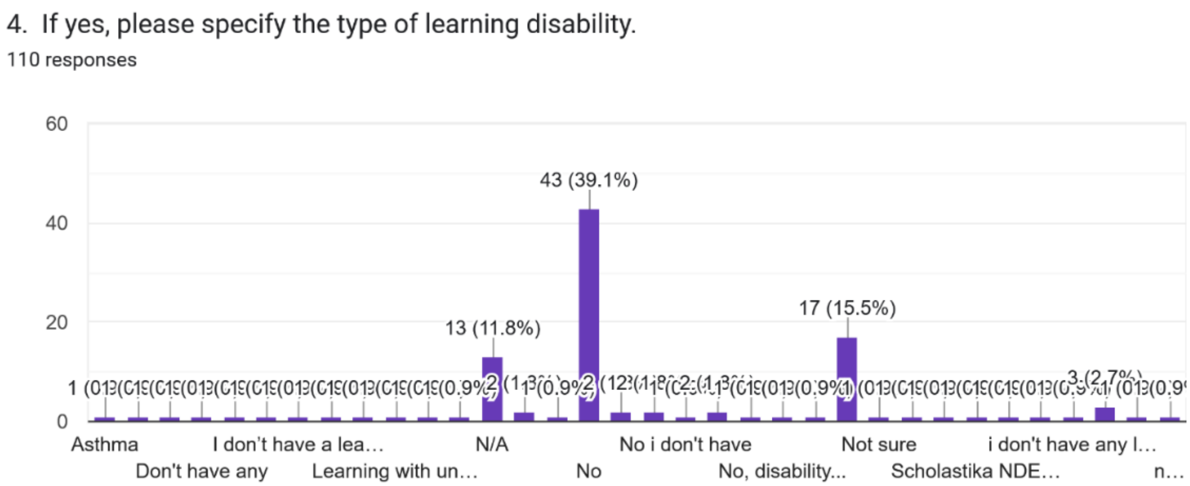

Figure 4.4: Types of learning disability

4.2.5 Highest grade passed

Respondents were asked to indicate the highest grade they have passed. The findings in Figure 4.5 portray that 74.5% completed and passed grade 11, 20% grade 10, and the remaining 5.5% either fell in grade 9 or the primary level.

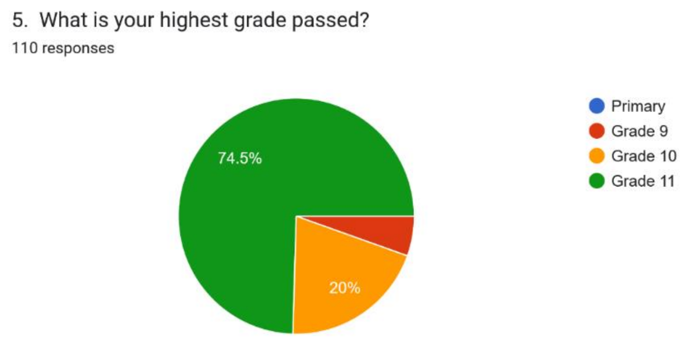

Figure 4.5: Highest Grade Passed

4.2.6 Period studying at NAMCOL

Regarding the period of studying at NAMCOL, the results show that 60% stayed less than 6 months, 23.6% spent 1-2 years, and 16.4% more than 2 years. The findings infer that a larger number of students were new, indicating an awareness of study opportunities for persons with disability which NAMCOL offers**.**

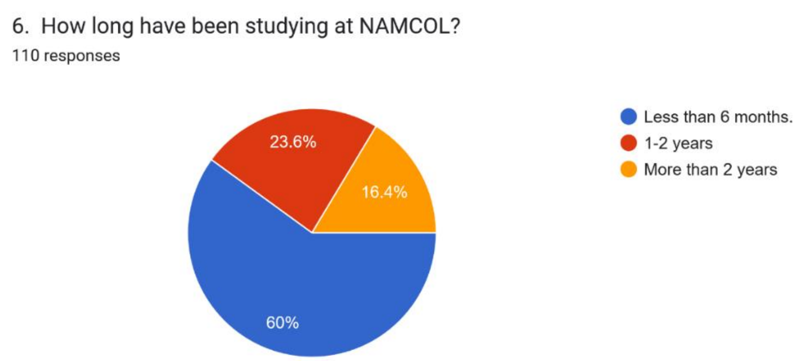

Figure 4.6: Period of Studying at NAMCOL

4.3 Accessibility of the Open Distance Learning (ODL) platforms

Regarding the findings of the rating of accessibility and use of the Open Distance Learning (ODL) platforms, as shown in Figure 4.7, 34.5% indicated very accessible and somewhat accessible, respectively, 11.8% not accessible, and 19.1% do not know the existence of the Open Learning Distance platform. The 19.1% who do not know, though minimal, is worrisome.

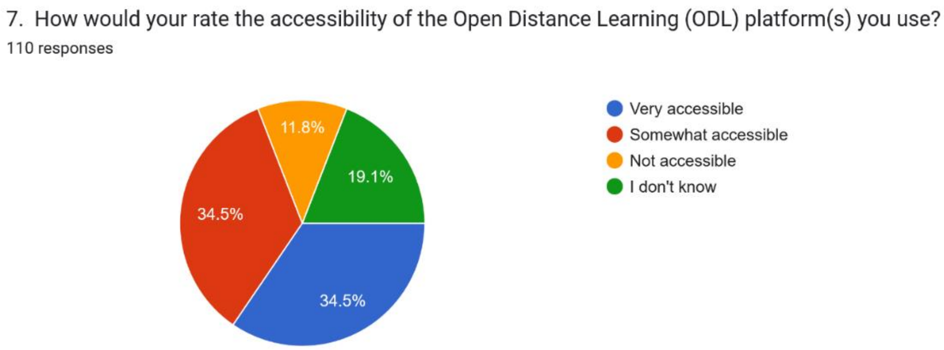

Figure 4.7: Accessibility of ODL Platform

4.4 Challenges of using the ODL platform

When asked to indicate the challenges experienced while using the ODL platform, the findings in Figure 4.8 show that 30.9% experienced difficulties navigating the context, 22.7% had no support for note-taking or highlights, 14.5% indicated a lack of screen reader/audio support, 13.6% mentioned unclear instructions, 11.8% faced inaccessible assessments/exams, and 6.4% reported that the font size was small and unreadable. These challenges and user experiences are worth noting and require attention.

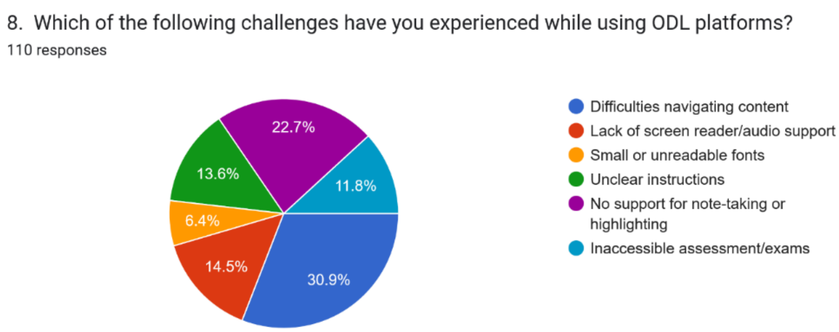

Figure 4.8: Challenges and Experiences using ODL Platforms

4.5 Support tailored for special needs

Regarding support received, which is tailored for special needs, the results show that 50% indicated 'yes', 28.2% indicated 'no', and 21.8% were 'not sure'. These findings are impressive, though leaving room for improvement.

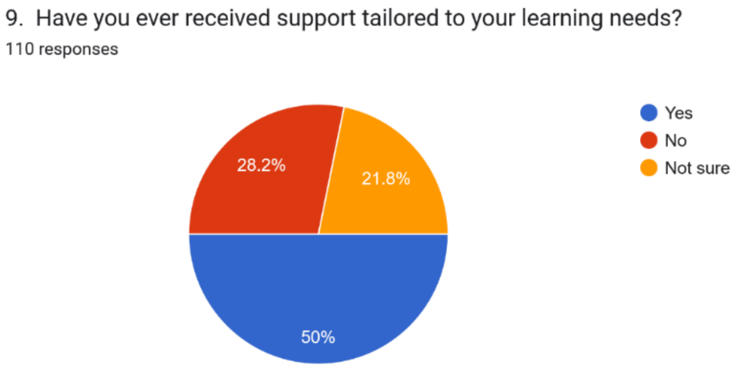

Figure 4.9: Support tailored for Special Needs

4.6 Tutor trained to support students with disabilities

When asked whether tutors were trained to support students with disabilities, the findings in Figure 4.10 show that 52.7% responded 'not sure', 35.5% indicated 'yes', and the remaining 11.8% indicated 'no'. The 'not sure' and 'no' responses highlight the need for action to verify the situation.

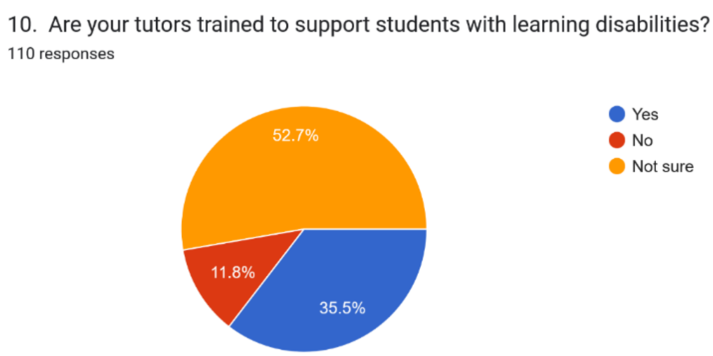

Figure 4.10: Tutor trained to support students with disabilities

4.7 Confident of the institution's understanding and support of learning needs

In responding to the question, 'How confident are you that your learning needs are understood and supported by your institution?', the finding portrayed in Figure 4.11 shows that 47.3% were very confident, 25.5% were somewhat confident, 14.5% were not confident, and 12.7% were not sure. The diverse responses are relatively common.

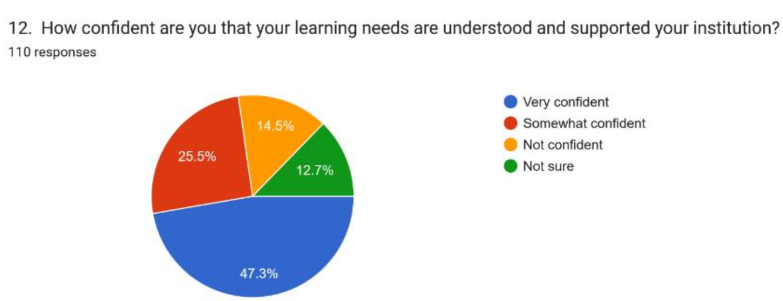

Figure 4.11: Confident of the institution's understanding and support of learning needs

4.8 The kind of device commonly used for ODL studies

When asked about the kind of device commonly used for ODL, respondents were centred on smartphones, 87.2%. the remaining 12.8% were laptops, desktop computers, tablets, textbooks, and nothing else. These responses are not surprising since smartphones are commonly used because they are portable and practical.

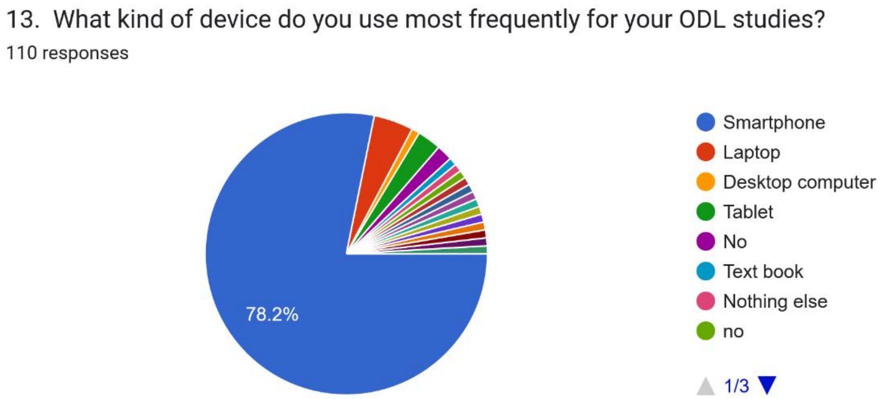

Figure 4.12: The kind of Device commonly used for ODL studies

4.9 Internet access for studies

Regarding reliable internet access for studies, as exhibited in Figure 4.13, 46.4% indicated 'sometimes', 30% responded yes, always, 11.8% rarely and never, respectively. Internet connectivity is an issue, or not stable, especially in remote areas.

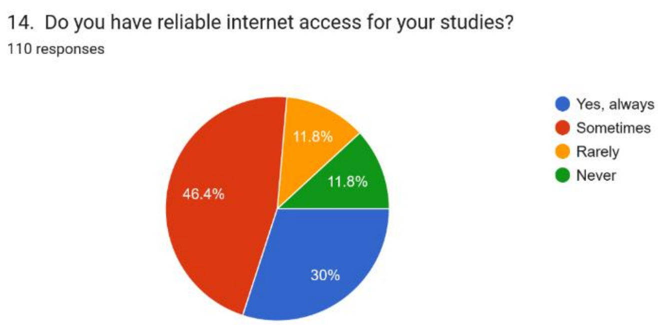

Figure 4.13: Reliable Internet access for studies

4.10 Adaptive technologies

When asked about an awareness of adaptive technology, the results in Figure 4.14 display that 54.5% indicated ‘no’, 26.4% ‘yes’ and 19.1% were ‘not sure. This implies a lack of adaptive technology to cater for the learning needs.

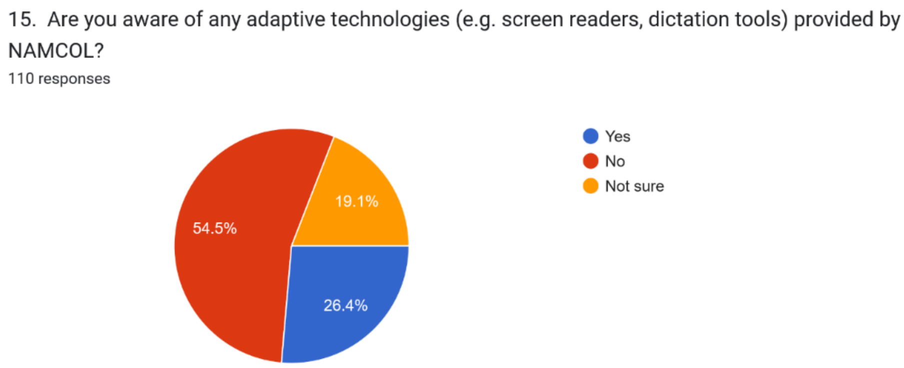

Figure 4.14: Awareness of Adaptive Technologies

4.11 Use of adaptive tools

Regarding the use of adaptive tools displayed in Figure 4.15, 53.6% of the respondents indicated ‘never’, 16.4% ‘daily’, 15.5% ‘weekly’, and 14.5% occasional. These findings imply that there are no adaptive tools and that many do not know or use them, if at all available**.**

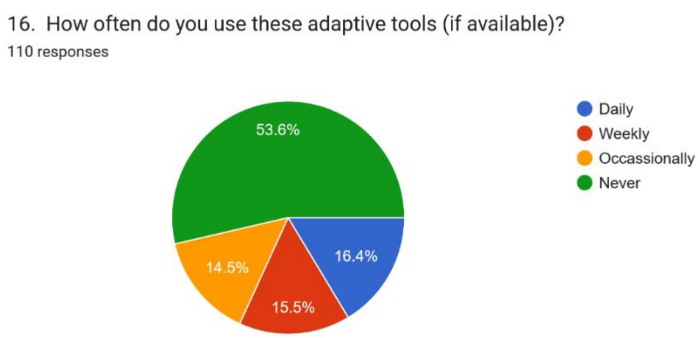

Figure 4.15: Use of Adaptive Tools

4.12 Inclusivity of ODL experience

Figure 4.16 displays the opinions about the inclusivity of the ODL overall experience. The results show that 34.5% indicated ‘somehow inclusive’, 30.9% indicated ‘unsure’, 23.6% responded ‘very inclusive’, and 9.1% ‘not inclusive’. There are indications of inclusivity of ODL considering the scores of ‘very inclusive’ and somewhat inclusive’.

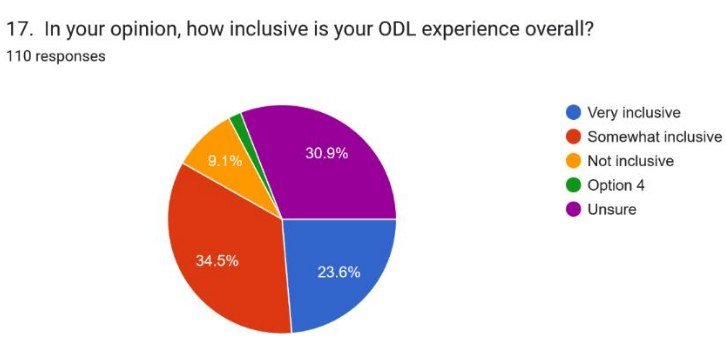

Figure 4.16: Inclusivity of ODL Experience

4.13 Suggestions for improving the learning experience

Concerning the suggestion for improving the learning experience, the findings in Figure 4.17 show that 47.3% indicated 'more tutor support. While 16.4% indicated 'better access to assistive technology,' 11.8% indicated 'more inclusive assessment,' and 9.1% indicated 'improved platform accessibility. The remaining, though not significant, were scattered on key issues of concern, too.

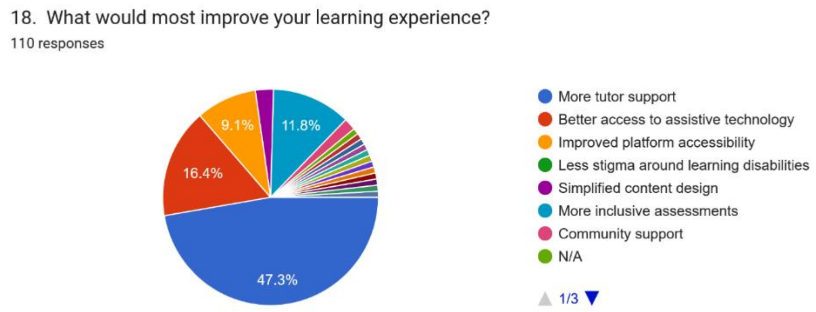

Figure 4.17: Suggestions for improving the learning experience

4.14 Participation in ODL and Socio-economic growth

Respondents were asked to express their feelings about whether participation in ODL contributed to socio-economic and personal growth. The results displayed in Figure 4.18 depict that 42.7% agree, 30% strongly agree, 14.5% were neutral, 9.1% disagree, and 4% strongly disagree. Though the responses were diverse, they indicate that participation in ODL was beneficial.

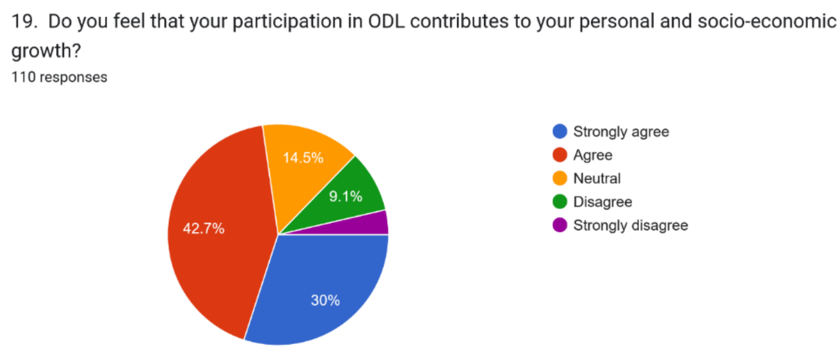

Figure 4.18: Participation in ODL and Socio-economic growth

4.15 Recommendation of NAMCOL Programme

Regarding the recommendation of the NAMCOL programme to learners with similar challenges, 82.7% of the respondents indicated 'yes'. Only 9.1% were 'not sure, and about 7% responded 'no'. implying that the programme suits the needs of students with disability. See Figure 4.19.

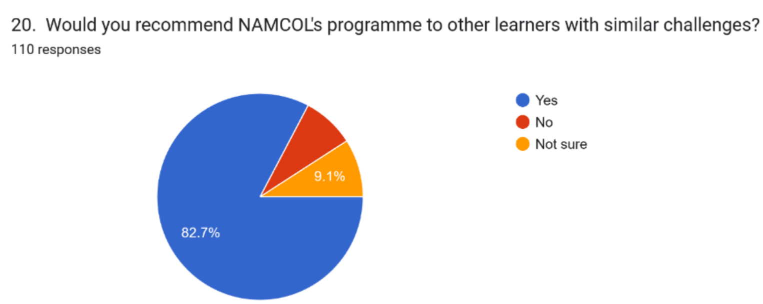

Figure 4.19: Recommendation of NAMCOL Programme

4.16 Interview Responses

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of interview responses gathered from one tutor and two policymakers involved in the survey. The insights reveal several key challenges and gaps in supporting learners with learning disabilities in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments.

The tutor (one of thirteen approached) indicated a limited understanding of learning disabilities, mainly identifying visual and hearing impairments, and reported having received no formal training to support such learners. Teaching challenges included difficulty adapting content, lack of familiarity with braille and sign language, and absence of assistive technology. Similarly, assessments were not adapted to accommodate students with disabilities and support systems were limited to general counselling services. Policymakers acknowledged that while inclusive education policies exist, such as the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education, implementation across institutions is inconsistent and lacks effective monitoring. Infrastructure and learning materials are often not accessible, and although adaptive technologies such as screen readers and braille tools are seen as transformative, their availability remains limited. Although partnerships with NGOs and international bodies are vital for advancing inclusion, this study found a lack of structured engagement with community organisations and disability advocates.

5. Discussions

The findings of this study align with existing literature highlighting systemic challenges in implementing inclusive education within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) contexts. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Haitembu & Maarman, 2023; Mokaleng & Möwes, 2020), this study confirms that a lack of adaptive technologies and insufficient tutor training remain significant barriers to supporting learners with disabilities. Many educators at NAMCOL are not equipped with the diagnostic tools or pedagogical strategies necessary to accommodate diverse learning needs, particularly those associated with dyslexia, ADHD, and related conditions.

Unexpectedly, a considerable proportion of the study's participants were female students with learning disabilities, many of whom were unaware of the existence or benefits of assistive technologies. This finding suggests a gendered dimension to awareness and access that warrants further investigation.

6. Limitations

The study was limited by low qualitative response rates from tutors and policymakers, and the data were self-reported, which may affect the generalisability of the findings.

7. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

7.1 Concluding Remarks

This paper aimed to emphasise that many learners ending up at NAMCOL have learning disabilities such as dyslexia, ADHD and other related difficulties. However, the study reveals higher female participation consistent with institutional enrolment trends and a low reported rate of diagnosed learning disabilities, likely influenced by stigma and limited formal assessments. Most respondents have attained relatively high educational levels and are recent entrants to NAMCOL, reflecting growing awareness of its offerings, especially for persons with disabilities. While most find the Open Distance Learning (ODL) platforms accessible and beneficial to socio-economic growth, notable challenges persist, including navigation difficulties, lack of adaptive tools, and inconsistent tutor training. Support tailored to special needs is present but unevenly distributed, and many students remain uncertain about institutional understanding of their learning needs. While smartphones are the predominant device used for Open and Distance Learning (ODL), consistent internet connectivity remains a major obstacle, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Furthermore, limited awareness and the use of adaptive technologies highlight persistent gaps in the provision of inclusive learning support. Despite mixed perceptions of inclusivity, recommendations for strengthened tutor support, assistive technology access, and platform improvements reinforce the overall positive outlook. Ultimately, the findings highlight NAMCOL's positive impact and suitability for learners with disabilities while emphasising areas needing targeted interventions to strengthen accessibility, support, and inclusivity in ODL.

Research also finds that a lack of specialised training in effectively identifying and supporting these learners is a significant challenge in Namibia. A significant number of teachers lack the pedagogical competencies and diagnostic tools necessary to tailor their instructional approaches to accommodate diverse cognitive and learning profiles. This challenge is further exacerbated by limited access to inclusive educational resources, such as phonics-based reading interventions and assistive technologies. Consequently, many teachers continue to rely on traditional teaching methods, which often fail to address the needs of learners requiring more individualised or multi-sensory strategies. The situation is compounded by the absence of institutional support mechanisms, including specialised personnel, remedial programmes, and ongoing professional development opportunities, leaving teachers inadequately prepared and increasingly overwhelmed. As a result, learners with learning disabilities struggle to keep up with subject content, leading to reduced academic confidence, poor performance, and increased dropout risks; many are now enrolled at NAMCOL, where the vicious cycle continues. This gap highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions, policy support and capacity building to promote inclusive education practices in Namibian schools.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, to support learners with learning disabilities in Namibia, particularly in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) contexts such as NAMCOL, targeted interventions are essential. Key recommendations include specialised training for teachers and tutors in inclusive pedagogies, diagnostic tools, and assistive technologies. Instructional methods should incorporate multi-sensory, individualised approaches supported by phonics-based resources and adaptive tools like braille and screen readers.

Institutions must strengthen support systems by employing trained special education staff, offering remedial programmes, and facilitating ongoing professional development. To align institutional practices with inclusive education goals, a National Inclusive ODL Framework is required, ensuring assessments and materials are available in accessible formats such as audio, large print, and captioned video. Also, collaborations with international institutions that have successfully implemented adaptive tools can offer valuable insights and best practices.

Finally, national education policies must prioritise inclusive education through consistent implementation, sufficient funding, and robust monitoring. Improved infrastructure, equitable access to technology, and active community and stakeholder engagement are critical to creating a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all.

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