Research on Distance Education Learning Support Service for the Disabled

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Keywords: Distance education, Learning support service, The disabled.

Abstract. With the widespread development of higher education, education equity has received increasing attention from all over the world. The Education 2030 Framework for Action (FFA) published by UNESCO in 2015 emphasizes that everyone has equal rights to education and that the agenda gives special attention to the education of vulnerable groups. As a typical representative of the socially disadvantaged groups, people with disabilities are increasingly demanding higher education. Due to the physical and psychological specificity of the disabled, their access to higher education is greatly restricted, and the diverse learning resources and flexible forms of learning in distance education can provide equal and convenient learning opportunities for the disabled. Therefore, distance education for disabled people can be an effective way to improve higher education for the disabled. As an important part of the distance higher education for the disabled, the learning support service can help the disabled to overcome their own difficulties and meet their learning needs according to the characteristics of the disabled, thus improving the learning effect. This paper studies distance higher education for the disabled from two aspects: academic support services and non-academic support services. Firstly, the paper puts forward the significance and influence of distance education for the disabled, and the importance of learning support service in distance education for the disabled. Secondly, the particularity of the disabled and the needs of higher education will be pointed out. Then the paper analyzes the current situation of distance higher education learning support services for disabled people in China, summarizes the existing problems and deficiencies, and learns from the experience of other countries. Eventually, the paper proposes corresponding countermeasures for improving the quality of distance higher education learning support services for disabled people in China, in order to promote the equity and quality of higher education for the disabled. It is hoped that the results of this paper can provide some suggestions for the development of distance education for the disabled and the construction of lifelong education system.

Introduction

Education 2030 Framework for Action, released by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 2015, ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for vulnerable groups. Distance education for the disabled, a special group in society, is characterized by diversified learning resources and flexible learning style. With the help of modern technology in education, the disabled can have more convenient conditions to acquire the cutting-edge knowledge online. That’s how they overcome either physical or mental impairments. Distance education drives the significant progress in education and embodies the welcoming feel from all the society to the disabled. It can also promote educational equity and develop higher quality education for the disabled.

The Impact of Distance Education for the Disabled

Distance higher education for the disabled is a new type of senior personnel training mode that takes the disabled as the specific education object and utilizes modern educational technology such as the Internet [1]. For the disabled, distance education meets their expectations to develop
themselves and improve their comprehensive quality. It can also make our society more civilized and harmonious, and promote fairness in education. The main impacts are listed as follows.

First, distance education helps promote the quality of spiritual life for the disabled. With a flexible work schedules and the freedom of space, the disabled can sink their teeth into study without considering their limited physical or mental conditions. As such, their comprehensive ability can be improved. As they keep on acquiring knowledge, their spiritual life will be enriched. Consequently, the quality of their life can be improved.

Second, distance education is a reasonable path to raise the educational level of the disabled. Admittedly, China is far behind some western developed countries in many aspects, as it is still and will long remain in the primary stage of socialism. It is not surprising that great disparity can be seen in the development of education for the disabled between China and developed ones. Zhu & Yang (2018) pointed out that the education level of disabled people in China is also significantly lower than the world average [2]. According to the 2018 statistical bulletin on the development of undertakings for the disabled, 11,154 disabled people were enrolled in regular institutions of higher learning, and 1,873 disabled people were enrolled in special education institutions of higher learning. That is small compared with the total number of disabled people, who number 85 million. The proportion of disabled people receiving higher education in China is obviously lower than that of the general population. Nevertheless, the distance education for the disabled has raised the educational level for them. It has satisfied their needs, overcome their physical or mental barriers and provided places for them to study. In a developing country like China, the distance education can fix the problem of meager educational resources. It is thus a scientific method to optimize the allocation of resources and maximize the educational benefits.

Third, distance education makes for the construction of a harmonious socialist society. It helps raise the educational level of the disabled and enhance their ability. They will be more confident to integrate into the society as a result. Besides, the disabled, with disabilities in varying degrees, have the same right to be educated as each citizen do. With the help of the Internet and multimedia, distance education allows the disabled to embrace the up-to-date knowledge and educational ideas. That is how their fundamental right to education be respected and protected. The educational equity can be promoted if the disabled gain the equal access to education like others.

The Significance of Learning Support Services in Distance Education for the Disabled

The key to carry out distance education for the disabled is the learning support services which originates from The Open University in UK. A perfect system of learning support services ensures the smooth implementation of distance education. The services are closely related to the quality of distance education. That means the more perfect the service system is, the higher quality of the distance education could be. Otherwise, an inadequate system will give rise to the limited performance and poor quality of distance education [3].

In distance education, the system of learning support services includes “academic learning support services” and “non-academic learning support services”, which share dissimilarities as well as commonalities. For academic learning support services, related courses can be provided by professional faculties to the students who encounter problems. But for non-academic learning support services, the extracurricular contents for students are emphasized, which include services of emotions, devices and resources. Both the services play a different role. But they serve as an integral part of the distance education for the disabled.

(1) The importance of academic learning support services

Academic learning support services have fixed the problems in teaching and learning, and made it possible the combination of them. It provides the major learning support and offers adequate educational resources to the disabled students. For them, the most important thing to participate in distance learning is to take courses. The disabled students will encounter difficulties in this process. But with the help of academic learning support services, they will quickly learn new knowledge and achieve their learning goals in the end.

Academic learning support services ensure the quality of learning for the disabled students. With
the help of this kind of services in distance education, students’ questions can be answered immediately, their thoughts can be organized, and their learning methods can be developed in a right way. As such, they will increase their learning efficiency and find the right way to study effectively.

Academic learning support services is the key driver to improve the students’ educational background. It is well-known that high-level educational background calls for systematic learning and the completion of higher education. Academic learning support has answered the learning needs of the disabled students, as it has widened their learning field, increased their knowledge and broaden their horizon. What students have learned can be measured by taking periodic assessments. Such an educational pattern is equal to that of the Chinese higher education, which features integrality and complementarity. The educational integrality enables the disabled students to adjust to the development of education. The pattern of distance education allows the students to overcome their own flaws. In this sense, distance education gives the disabled students equal opportunities to improve their educational background, which are favorable to their career development.

(2) The importance of non-academic learning support services

Non-academic learning support services in distance education include four aspects: publicity and consultation service, learning strategy supporting service, technology and resource environment supporting service, and emotional care service. As an important part of distance education, non-academic learning support services also play a significant role to the disabled students. It is a guarantee for the disabled students to acquire knowledge, as it offers them the requisite information and much more convenient learning environments to study. That is how students can receive the distance education in a convenient and flexible way.

The services in courses are the priority in academic learning support. For distance education of the disabled, however, academic learning support services cannot simply satisfy their needs to study. That defect can be remedied by non-academic learning support services. The emotional care services, for example, mainly refer to the care and guidance over the students’ spirit like psychology, emotion, thoughts and state of mind. Consequently, it has practical significance to the disabled. After all, the disabled will generate negative emotions when they receive education due to their physical or mental impairments. Nevertheless, with the help of the caring services, they will reduce the burdens and finish their studies. This is unmatched by academic support services.

The Particularity of the Disabled and Their Needs for Higher Education

(1) The particularity of the disabled

The particularity of the disabled mainly embodies in their special conditions, type of mind and requirements.

The special conditions mean that the disabled have natural defects in their body, mind, intelligence and sense organs. That is why they are called the vulnerable groups. In addition, as the social civilization has not yet reached a relatively high level, the disabled are vulnerable to be discriminated. As such, they would sustain a secondary mental injury.

The special type of mind of the disabled means that they have different mental conditions, such as inferiority complex, sensitivity and suspicion, stubbornness and emotional instability [2].

The special requirements of the disabled refer to the restriction of their own development due to their special conditions. However, the disabled generally have the needs of health care, employment, marriage and education, as they have to integrate into society, develop themselves and realize their self-worth. It is no wonder that some of their needs are even stronger than ordinary people [2].

(2) The Demand of the disabled for higher education

The particularity of the disabled necessitates their desire to acquire more knowledge through higher education. They hope to participate in a professional skills training and generate steady income. In this way, they can better integrate into the society and improve their living environments. Their material and spiritual needs can be thus guaranteed. Distance education has given a more convenient access for the disabled to receive higher education, and made it possible to satisfy their needs.
The needs of the disabled for higher education are not the same. The disabled are a group. But they are impaired or limited by a physical, mental or cognitive condition. Accordingly, different types of disability make it difficult for them to have the same demand for higher education.

In addition, the demand of the disabled for higher education is the financial guarantee. That means a certain economic strength is a must if the disabled wish to receive higher distance education. But the cost of higher education is much higher than that of the normal education. As a result, a reception of higher education will make it worse the poor economic conditions of the disabled.

The Current Situation of Learning Support Services in Distance Higher Education for the Disabled in China

Problems persist in the system of both academic and non-academic support services, as the services of distance higher education for the Chinese disabled are still in their initial stage of development. The current situation of the services will be analyzed in the following passage.

(1) The current situation of academic learning support services in China

Academic learning support services have provided what are related to the courses in distance education. The current development of the academic learning support services in China is dominated by several issues.

First, curriculum resources are in scarcity. In fact, curriculum resources for the disabled are needed in academic support services of distance education for them. However, China is a later starter in the development of courses for the disabled. Its financial difficulties and unsound system of the development are responsible for the undeveloped courses. That is why China’s curriculum resources for the disabled are in scarcity. Besides, the courses that have been developed are mainly skill education, such as acupuncture, massage, painting, etc. The resources for life skills training like health care and cooking are also in scarcity.

Second, the content of courseware cannot meet the needs of the disabled. That means the types of professional teaching resources for the disabled are not rich enough. This is because the poor educational resources fail to satisfy the personal development needs for the disabled in distance education. The specific learning needs and objectives of the disabled students have not been taken into account, as the courseware is revised based on the theory in the outdated textbooks. Personal needs will not come from off-the-shelf courseware.

Third, the system of the academic learning support services can be more effective. The validity of that system means that students’ specific problems can be fixed in an all-round way. Their personal needs can also be satisfied. However, the deficiency of qualified teachers in China is responsible for the low-quality faculties in distance education. That’s how students cannot be provided academic learning support services in time. If their problems cannot be solved timely and effectively, learning-weariness will emerge, which makes it more difficult to study.

(2) The current situation of non-academic learning support services in China

In China, non-academic learning support services can be improved. In general, there are two major problems in China’s non-academic learning support services.

First, there is not much concerns for the disabled students. With the physical or mental impairments and the implicit discrimination from the public, the disabled students are prone to be fear of study. Be that as it may, the disabled students cannot embrace enough and diversified caring service from the Chinese government. That’s how they bear too much pressure as they learn.

Second, the hardware in distance education fail to satisfy the needs of the disabled in some regions. China’s economic inequality gives rise to the lack of hardware in many remote areas. The requirements of a large number of the disabled students cannot be met, as the obsolete hardware fail to fit the cutting-edge technology and the development of multimedia classrooms has been hindered in remote areas [4, 5].
The Countermeasures of Improving Learning Supporting Services for the Disabled in Distance Higher Education

(1) The experience from other countries in distance higher education for the disabled

Learning from those western developed countries with rich practical experience in distance higher education and using it for would have great enlightenments to improve the practical situation of distance higher education for the disabled in China. It can also provide reference for the future development of higher education for the disabled.

The US provides different disabled people with different mode or means of higher education service in order to improve their employability. For instance, the TOPS is targeting students with brain disorder, the PERT for students with autism, and special higher school environment planned for students with hearing disorder [6].

The study and life of disabled college students in UK is fully guaranteed by completed policy system, individualized transition services, comprehensive teaching support and professional service teams. Students have the right of completed learning support services system stipulated by Student Charter launched in 1993 [7].

The Australian government passed Disability Discrimination Act in 1992, which guaranteed the basic right of education for the disabled people by the law. In the meantime, the government has set up service organizations specially working for disabled people applying to colleges. Besides, completed mechanism of complaint has been established in Australia, which allows them to propose appeals when they consider that they are treated unfairly or that they are unsatisfied with the support services. Australia also applies the information software specially designed for the disabled to the distance higher education for the disabled, providing learning support for the distance education for the disabled [8].

The prominent feature of Japanese support system of distance higher education for the handicapped is the continuously financial support of the government. Moreover, the government also works hard to promote their social situation by mending the Basic Law on Persons with Disabilities, and called on powers from various classes in order to offer the handicapped all-round guarantee including admission, study, and employment [9].

According to the experiences of those developed countries in distance higher education for the disabled, we find out that their success mainly depends on the support of powerful laws, individualized service design, massive funds and specialized team.

(2) The countermeasures of improving academic learning support services for the disabled in China

First, we should build up distance education resource pool with abundant contents. It is a time-consuming work that calls for massive teachers of academic learning support service. On the one hand, we need to enrich its content by absorbing in present education resources. On the other hand, we should carefully add the problems proposed by the disabled and corresponding solutions, the assessment requirement and evaluation standard targeting disabled students, and relevant teaching materials and assignments to the resource bank timely. Apart from that, the teachers should spare more effort to develop curriculums for handicapped students, especially life courses, and reform and integrate the curriculum for normal students in order to make the curriculum applying to disabled students and expand the curriculum pool.

Second, we should respect the students’ individuality difference so as to meet the different education needs of different type of incompetence. In this respect, the service model of US provides us with a sound reference. We should start with the features of their disability and develop different courseware, and create different environments for their individuation development.

Third, we should get to know about the students’ needs and purpose so as to offer them instant and dependable service. We can use questionnaires at the initial stage of the distance higher education to know about their specific situations of study, including motivations, thoughts, purpose and feedback during their academic process. In this way, the relevant personnel could ameliorate the problems in the supporting system. To offer dependable support for handicapped students, apart from develop corresponding service zone, more resources should be inclined to the organization of
professional teachers so that more teachers could join in the education of disabled students.  

(3) The countermeasures of improving the non-academic learning support services for the disabled in China

First, more humanistic care should be given to disabled students, respect their individual needs and learning habits, and help them increase their learning confidence. The mental guide room should be set up and enhance care for the disabled. The virtual mental guide room is built on the Internet where people with disability are accessible to professional psychological coaching. This method can ease their mental pressure dramatically and solve the psychological problems in time, invigorate their enthusiasm on study, and help them integrate into the society.

Second, we will improve laws and regulations, and improve the mechanism for protecting the disabled. The support of laws and regulations is a critical element to improve the non-academic learning support services for people with disability in China. Throughout the experience of developed countries on distance higher education for the disabled, the support of laws is indispensable. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the guarantee of their right to education in terms of legislation. Meanwhile, the government ought to launch corresponding policies to protect the disabled, and guarantee their access to education and employment. Institutions of higher learning should formulate strategies to increase admission opportunities for the disabled, establish service centers for the disabled, and open educational service hotlines for the disabled.

Third, we need to expand sources of funding and increase access to education for people with disabilities. China should attach great importance to the higher education of the disabled, increase the special financial investment in the distance higher education of the disabled, implement the special higher education funding or tuition exemption policies for the disabled, and fully meet the needs of willing disabled people to receive higher education.

Conclusion

Distance higher education for the disabled will benefit their mental living quality and education level. It can also help them integrate into the society more easily, which is good for the harmonic development of the whole society. As for distance education for the disabled, the system of learning support services is an indispensable part, as the academic learning support system could make sure the quality and effectiveness of their study while the system of non-academic learning support can ease their pressure and burden from other perspectives, especially from the perspective of mental health. The effective combination of the two systems ensures the work of distance education for the disabled move on successfully.

According to the researches on the learning supporting services of distance education for Chinese disabled people, we found that there are still many problems on academic learning supporting services, including the lack of curriculum resources, teaching materials, and the effectives of learning supporting services. Besides, we also have found that there are problems of insufficient care for the disabled students and relatively outdated devices for distance education in some remote areas in terms of non-academic learning support. By learning from other countries’ experience in distance education, this thesis proposed some advice targeting Chinese learning supporting services for the disabled people: enriching distance education resource pool for the disabled, respecting the differences of the disabled student, strengthening the care for them, making more powerful guarantee for their right to education by the law, and the government also ought to launch relative policies to protect the disabled people.

Acknowledgement

My greatest gratitude first and foremost goes to my employer Jiangsu Open University, for providing me with a platform to contact and learn distance education. And lead me to deeply understand and explore relevant knowledge about distance education and open education.

My special thanks also go to all the colleagues from Jiangsu Open University who have provided me with a lot of useful information and assistance.
Last but not the least, a deep sense of gratitude goes to my family and husband for their endless support for my endeavors on this paper.

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