Scholarship Gives Visually Impaired Woman Reason to Smile Again!

Anna Tawakali, 30, had big dreams for her life – to study development in college and spearhead social transformation anywhere in rural Malawi. Unfortunately, two things stood in her way – she is blind and lost her parents while in junior secondary school.

Being blind meant limited access to quality and relevant study material which negatively pitied her against other students. Losing her remaining parent in form two meant she had lost her source of funds to go further with her education.

“I am not worried about being blind; I can study using brail but the death of my parents dealt a huge blow on my academic journey,” she bemoans.

In a country with access to public universities at a dismal 0.4 percent largely due to limited bed space, students from poor communities and those with physical disabilities are probably the worst hit.

They cannot compete on level ground with students from national, private and boarding schools who have access to quality learning materials and enough qualified teachers. They, therefore, often miss out on selection for university.

Such was Anna’s plight that after the death of her parents, she left Lilongwe where she was staying with good Samaritans and went back to her home village, Jambo, Traditional Authority Mbenje in Nsanje district, having resigned to a hopeless life aged 25.

“I tried severally to apply for various diploma and degree courses but was never successful; I suspect I was deliberately being dropped because of my sight problems,” she complains.

Anna had completely given up ever studying with a public university until this year when the USAID-funded Strengthening Higher Education Access in Malawi Activity (SHEAMA) collaborated with Mzuzu University (MZUNI) to offer a certificate in Early Childhood Development (ECD) through ODL.

SHEAMA which seeks to increase number of skilled and employable workforce supports public universities to design and offer industry-driven short courses. It also promotes the delivery of college lessons through Open, Distance and E-Learning (ODeL) as one way of dealing with lack of space at public tertiary institutions.
In all this, the project targets adolescent girls and young women, persons with disabilities, rural vulnerable groups and youths – persons who would otherwise have no access to higher education. The Activity also provides scholarships to the vulnerable.

Encouraged by SHEAMA’s policy on people with disabilities, Anna tried her luck. For the first time in her life, she received positive feedback that threw her compound and the entire neighborhood into a frenzy.

“I did not sleep that night. I was excited to know that I would study with MZUNI and get a qualification through this public university,” says Anna.

Not only did Anna get selected to study ECD with MZUNI, she also qualified for a full SHEAMA scholarship – fees and stipend.

If it was not for the scholarship, she says, she would not have enrolled and completed her course.

The course was designed in such a way that students would access course content online and through ODL satellite centres close to them.

Unfortunately for Anna, brail content was not readily available at her centre until two weeks later when the content was embossed into brail. Meanwhile, she would listen to recorded lectures. She would also ask her friends to be reading aloud the print notes to her.

“The hardest part was to apply and be selected for both enrolment and the scholarship. The rest, I knew I could do because I had the will,” she says.

Having successfully completed her course, Anna’s desire is to open a kindergarten in her community and help prepare the young ones for school. That way, she will be self-reliant. She also wants to use her certificate as a springboard to study for a diploma and degree in Community Development.

Director for Grants and Scholarships at SHEAMA, Dr Sellina Kanyerere-Mkweteza says Anne’s successful completion of the course in spite of her condition has proved that the ODL programs can work for any other student.

“As a project we are happy to see vulnerable members of the community especially those with physical disabilities access higher learning through short courses,” says Dr Mkweteza.

Dr Mkweteza observes that Anne is not the only person with a physical challenge to have enrolled for the ODe-L programs through SHEAMA scholarship.

“There are two more, one with visual impairment and another with hearing problems. Their success has energized us to encourage such students so they can become self-reliant,” she says.

Dr Mkweteza says she was happy that the five public universities – Mzuni, Chancellor College, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi Polytechnic and Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST) have worked with foresightedness in transcribing the modules into brail so that students with sight problems are helped.
It is hoped that, through the SHEAMA project, 14,940 students will be enabled to attend tertiary education 5,976 of whom will be vulnerable youth and persons with disabilities like Anna in Nsanje.