

ENHANCING INFORMATION ACCESSIBILITY FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DIVERSE ABILITIES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN EDO STATE: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

By

OMONO VERA AKPUKPU AKHIMIEN

Ambrose Alli University Library, Ekpoma

Abstract

Enhancing information accessibility for individuals with diverse abilities is recognized as critical in promoting inclusivity and equity within between information resources and individuals with diverse needs by implementing the society. As information professionals, librarians are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap accessible information practices and advocating for inclusive policies. This paper explores the various strategies librarians can employ to enhance information accessibility, such as the adoption of assistive technologies, the provision of materials in alternative formats, and the design of library spaces and digital resources that are compliant with accessibility standards. Additionally, the paper highlights the importance of continuous education and training for librarians to remain updated on the latest accessibility tools and techniques. By embracing their role as advocates for accessibility, librarians can significantly contribute to the empowerment of people with Diverse abilities, ensuring that they have equal access to information and can fully participate in educational, professional, and social activities. The study underscores the need for librarians to make information accessible to those living with diverse abilities, problems that could affect information accessibility, recommendation and conclusion.

Keywords: Librarian, Diverse Abilities and Information Accessibility

Introduction

Information accessibility is a fundamental right that ensures all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can obtain and use information effectively. In academic institutions, libraries serve as crucial hubs for learning, research, and knowledge dissemination. Libraries play pivotal role in ensuring equitable access to information resources for all students, irrespective of their diverse

background or disabilities. However, individuals with diverse abilities often face barriers to accessing information resources. This paper examines how librarians in Academic Libraries in State University in Edo State, can enhance information accessibility for individuals with diverse abilities.

In today's digital age, information accessibility is a critical issue, particularly for people living with diverse needs. Information accessibility refers to the ease with which individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities can obtain and use information. However, Ensuring that information is accessible to everyone is not only a matter of social justice but also a legal requirement in many countries. For instance, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are key frameworks that guide accessibility efforts in the United States and internationally (ADA, 1990). The Nigerian law that specifically addresses the rights and welfare of people living with diverse needs is the Discrimination against Persons with Diverse Needs (Prohibition) Act, 2018. This Act was signed into law in January 2019. Which means discrimination against such persons is a crime punishable by law. The Act imposes penalties for non-compliance, including fines and imprisonment for individuals and organizations that violate the rights of persons with diverse needs. This legislation is a significant step forward in promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with diverse needs in Nigeria.

Additionally, it is important for people living with diverse needs to have access to information as it allows them to participate in social and civic activities, contributing to a more inclusive society. For instance, accessible voting materials ensure that individuals with diverse

needs can exercise their right to vote independently and to access information like others. Accessible information plays a key role in fostering social inclusion, enabling individuals with diverse needs to participate in civic life.

Individuals with diverse needs

The term individuals with diverse needs refers to people who require different types of support or accommodations due to various factors, such as physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional differences. This term is often used in inclusive settings, such as Education, Libraries, and workplaces, to acknowledge that every person has unique needs that should be considered. Some examples of these people living with diverse needs are; blindness, deafness, intellectual, or neurological disabilities, those who may have mobility challenges, hearing loss, or vision impairments, Individuals who may need emotional or psychological support etc, all these fall under people living with diverse needs. However the social model of disability further elaborates on this by arguing that disability is created by societal barriers rather than the individual's impairment. This perspective suggests that while impairments might limit certain activities, it is the societal attitudes, physical barriers, and inaccessible environments that disable individuals (Oliver, 1996). However, Academic libraries must adopt policies that cater to the specific needs of these individuals to foster an equitable learning environment.

The Role of Librarians in making information accessible to people living with diverse needs (PLDN)

A librarian is a professional who is trained in the management, organization, and dissemination of information resources within a library setting. Librarians are responsible for acquiring, cataloging, and maintaining library collections, as well as assisting users in locating and accessing information. Their role often extends beyond traditional book lending, encompassing digital resource management, user education, and the implementation of information literacy programs. According to the American Library Association (ALA), librarians play a vital role in supporting lifelong learning and providing access to a broad range of informational, educational, and cultural resources (ALA, 2020). Librarians should play a crucial role in assisting individuals living with diverse needs by providing tailored services, resources, and support that enhance information accessibility and also making sure that material are available to them in various format. Furthermore, libraries should prioritize accessibility, offering specialized services and accommodation to support individuals with disabilities, ensuring that information is available and accessible in various formats and mediums.

Accessible information is understood as information provided in formats that allow every user and learner to access content on an equal basis with others. Librarians are crucial in bridging the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged, particularly in education settings. Libraries servers as egalitarian space that empowers students regardless of social –economic background. Librarians understand students learning styles and abilities. Therefore they should go beyond traditional prints materials to offer a variety of formats, including audio books for those who are visually impaired, it is important for Librarians to ensure that materials are available in alternative format such as large print and translated language to accommodate individual with visual or linguistic impairment. The commitments to different format ensure that

all students can engage with information effectively regardless of their learning preferences.

Furthermore, Librarians should take advantage of the importance of technology in facilitating access to individuals with disabilities. As such they should invest in assistive technology such as screen readers, text-to-text speech software, and magnification tools. These tools enables student with visual impairment to access and navigate information independently. For instance, screen readers converts text to speech, allowing visually impaired individual to listen to the content of a webpage or document. Also text-to-speech software reads aloud text based materials. While magnification tools enlarge text and images for individuals with low vision. By providing these assistive methods, librarians will be able to assist students with diverse abilities to overcome barriers and participate fully in academic work.

Additionally, librarians should ensure the library has physically accessible environment. For instance, provide wheelchair facilities, elevators and accessible furniture to accommodate individuals with diverse abilities. With wheel chair individual can access different levels of the library, while elevators will enable individuals with mobility impairment to navigate between floors. Furthermore, librarians should as a matter of fact pay attention to ergonomic design principles when selecting furniture to ensure comfort and accessibility for all patrons. It is also imperative for librarians to create inclusive spaces where individuals with diverse abilities can access information and services without obstacles and limitation. By embracing these format individuals with diverse needs can fully participate in the academic community and pursue their educational goals.

Problems affecting information accessibility to people living with diverse needs

Some major problems affecting information accessibility are discussed as follows; many digital platforms and websites do not comply with accessibility standards, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to navigate and use them effectively. For example, the lack of alternative text for images or the use of inaccessible PDFs can create significant challenges (Smith & Doe, 2021). Also, negative societal attitudes and misconceptions about the abilities of people with diverse needs further exacerbate the challenges they face in accessing information. These attitudes often result in lack of effort to create accessible content. Furthermore, Physical barriers are also a major problem the individual encounter in the course of searching materials in the Library, such as inaccessible buildings and public spaces, can limit access to information resources like libraries or community centers. These barriers are particularly problematic in rural or under-resourced areas (Clark, 2020). However, there are several legal and policy frameworks that support the rights of individuals with diverse needs to access information. These include the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The ADA mandates that public entities provide accessible services, including digital content, ensuring that individuals with diverse needs have equal access to essential information (ADA, 1990). The WCAG provides a set of guidelines that help web developers create accessible content for users with diverse needs. These guidelines are widely recognized as the standard for web accessibility.

However, it is imperative for Librarians to collaborate with architects and designers to create library spaces that are physically accessible. This includes ensuring wheelchair access, providing adjustable furniture, and creating quiet zones for individuals with sensory processing

disorders. The layout and design of the Library should promote ease of access for everyone. In addition, Librarians should often conduct training sessions for staff and patrons on accessibility best practices. With this training, library staff will do better in understanding the needs of people with diverse needs and to provide more empathetic and effective service. It will also go a long way in empowering patrons to use the Library resources independently and confidently. Another challenge is that librarians do not advocate for the rights of people with diverse needs. Librarians should advocate for the rights of people with disabilities by promoting accessible information policies and practices. They may work with publishers and content creators to ensure that new materials are produced in accessible formats. Additionally, librarians can collaborate with disability advocacy organizations to push for broader systemic changes that enhance access to information. Librarians are responsible for ensuring that their library complies with legal standards such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or other local accessibility laws. This involves staying updated on legal requirements and implementing necessary changes to meet or exceed these standards. Librarians should offer personalized assistance to patrons with disabilities, helping them locate and use information resources effectively.

This one-on-one support is vital for patrons who may face barriers in navigating traditional information systems. In their role as information professionals, Librarians are pivotal in making sure that people living with diverse needs have equitable access to information. By offering accessible formats, utilizing assistive technologies, designing inclusive spaces, and advocating for accessibility, Librarians help create a more inclusive and informed society. Their commitment to accessibility not only enhances the library experience for people with diverse needs but also enriches the entire community by fostering a culture of inclusion and respect.

Most libraries do not have assistive tools. Libraries can enhance accessibility by providing assistive technologies and tools that help users with disabilities to access information. This includes screen readers, magnifiers, Braille displays, and voice recognition software.

Additionally, Libraries should offer adaptive computer workstations with adjustable desks and accessible keyboards to accommodate users with physical disabilities. These technologies empower users to interact with digital content independently, fostering greater inclusion (Wallace & Quinn, 2020). Ensuring that the physical library environment is accessible is another crucial aspect of making information available to people with disabilities. This includes providing ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, as well as ensuring that shelving and service desks are at appropriate heights for wheelchair users. Libraries should also have clear signage with high contrast and tactile elements to assist users with visual. Another challenge is that libraries do not have regular training of Librarians thereby disability awareness and accessibility best practices is not known by most Librarian in these institutions.

This training should cover how to assist users with disabilities, how to use assistive technologies, and how to create an inclusive Library environment. In addition, staff should be aware of legal obligations under laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and be equipped to provide accommodations as needed (Mulliken & Bejune, 2017). Inclusive programming and services that is accessible to all users, including those with disabilities is another problem. Libraries can offer inclusive programming and services that are accessible to all users, including those with diverse needs. This could include story time sessions with sign language interpretation, workshops on using assistive technologies, and accessible reading

groups, Libraries can provide remote services, such as virtual reference which helps digital lending, and can be particularly beneficial for users with mobility impairments or those who cannot physically visit the Library. In addition, not Collaborating with local and national disability organizations is also a challenge. Librarians can collaborate with local and national disability organizations to better understand the needs of people with disabilities and to improve library services. These partnerships can help Libraries develop targeted programs, improve accessibility features, and ensure that the library remains a welcoming space for all community members. Collaborating with disability advocates can provide valuable feedback on how to enhance accessibility in library services

Strategies for improving accessibility of information for people living with disabilities.

To overcome the barriers to information accessibility, a combination of technology, policy, and awareness initiatives is required. Universal design is an approach that aims to make products and environments accessible to all people, regardless of their abilities. By applying universal design principles, information systems can be made more inclusive (Mace, 2008). People living with disability should be assisted with various assistive technologies like mobile phone, voice recognition software etc. this is in accordance with (Johnson, 2021) which states that Assistive technologies, such as screen readers, Braille displays, and voice recognition software, play a critical role in enhancing information accessibility for people with disabilities, raising awareness and providing training for content creators, educators, and developers on accessibility best practices are essential for creating an inclusive information environment.

Libraries and information centers should adhere to established accessibility standards, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) for digital content and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for physical spaces. Regular audits and updates should be conducted to ensure compliance and address emerging accessibility needs. Provide Multiple Formats Offer information in a variety of formats to accommodate different disabilities. This includes providing materials in large print, audio formats, and accessible digital formats. Ensure that digital content is compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies. Libraries with a range of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, magnification tools, and hearing loop system encourage people with diverse need to use the Library. Regularly update and maintain these technologies to ensure they meet current standards and effectively support users with disabilities. Design Inclusive Physical Spaces to ensure that library spaces are physically accessible, including ramps, wide aisles, adjustable workstations, and accessible restrooms. Create quiet and sensory-friendly areas to accommodate users with sensory processing disorders or other needs. Enhance Digital Accessibility Develop and maintain websites and online resources that comply with WCAG standards. Implement features such as text descriptions for images, keyboard navigability, and captioning for multimedia content. Regularly test digital resources for accessibility and usability offers personalized assistance. Provide individualized support through one-on-one consultations to help users with disabilities locate and access information.

Train staff to understand and address the specific needs of users, offering assistance with using assistive technologies and navigating resources. Create Accessible Programs and Services, develop and promote library programs that are inclusive of people with disabilities. This includes

workshops, events, and educational programs designed with accessibility in mind. Ensure that all program materials and presentations are available in accessible formats. Foster Staff Training and Awareness. Implement ongoing training programs for library staff on disability awareness and accessibility best practices. This training should cover the use of assistive technologies, effective communication strategies, and how to support diverse user needs. It is imperative to engage Community collaboration with disability advocacy organizations and community groups to better understand the needs of people living with disabilities. Use feedback from these groups to inform and improve accessibility practices and services. Advocate for Policy Changes Support and advocate for policies at the local, state, and national levels that promote information accessibility and inclusivity. Participate in discussions and initiatives aimed at enhancing accessibility standards and practices. By implementing these recommendations, libraries and information centers can significantly improve access to information for people living with disabilities.

Recommendations

1. There should be a Universal design approach that aims to make products and environments accessible to all people, regardless of their abilities.
2. People living with diverse needs should be assisted with various assistive technologies like mobile phone, voice recognition software etc.
3. There should be training and retraining of staff to create awareness and providing training for content creators, educators, and developers on accessibility best practices which is essential for creating an inclusive information environment.

4. Libraries should be the forefront of accessibility innovation, with features like Voiceover that allows visually impaired users to navigate their devices independently. Sectors should have features like voiceover to allow people living with diverse needs to navigate their devices independently.

5. Libraries should offer information in a variety of formats to accommodate different disabilities. This includes providing materials in large print, audio formats, and accessible digital formats. Ensure that digital content is compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies.

Conclusion

Librarians have a pivotal role in making information accessible to people living with diverse needs. By ensuring accessible resources, providing assistive technologies, ensuring physical accessibility, and offering inclusive services and programmes, libraries can serve as vital centers of information and community support for individuals with disabilities. Continuous training and collaboration with disability organizations will further strengthen these efforts, ensuring that libraries have inclusive spaces where everyone can access the information they need. Librarians are essential advocates for accessibility in our communities, working tirelessly to ensure that people living with diverse needs have equal access to information and library services. In addition, their efforts in creating accessible collections, implementing assistive technologies, creating inclusive environments, and advocating for accessible practices, librarians can help to break down barriers and promote a more inclusive society. However, their role is not just about providing access to information but also about empowering individuals with diverse needs to engage fully with the world of knowledge and ideas.

References

- American Library Association (ALA). (2020). *Library and Information Studies: Core Competences*.
Retrieved from <https://www.ala.org/educationcareers/libcareers/corecomp>
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). (1990). *Title II Regulations*. U.S. Department of Justice.
Retrieved from https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleII_2010/titleII_2010_regulations.htm
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). (1990). *Title II Regulations*. U.S. Department of Justice.
Retrieved from https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleII_2010/titleII_2010_regulations.htm
- Apple Inc. (2021). *Accessibility Features*. Retrieved from <https://www.apple.com/accessibility/>
- Clark, D. (2020). Physical Accessibility in Public Libraries: Best Practices and Guideline. *Library Journal*, 145(8), 34-37.
- Guder, C. S. (2019). *Assistive Technologies in Libraries: A Guide to Inclusive Services and Resources*. Libraries Unlimited.
- Hill, K. A. (2021). Collaborative Approaches to Library Accessibility: Engaging with Disability Organizations. *Journal of Library Administration*, 61(1), 72-88.
- Mulliken, A., & Bejune, M. (2017). Disability Awareness and Library Accessibility Training for Librarians: A Case Study. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(5), 398-404.
- Oliver, M. (1996). *Understanding disability: From theory to practice*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Wallace, S. L., & Quinn, K. (2020). *Technology Accessibility and Library Services: Meeting the Needs of All Users*. *Computers in Libraries*, 40(3), 14-18.
- World Health Organization. (2023). *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>