

# PROMOTION OF ACCESSIBILITY OF LIBRARY SERVICES TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA UNIVERSITIES

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## Abstract

This paper /examines the accessibility of library services to students with disabilities in Nigeria universities. The role of libraries in providing services to all irrespective of disability has been a daunting task for the universities as a result of management negligence. This paper explores the imperative for libraries in Nigeria to undergo transformation to ensure inclusive access for persons with disability. Drawing upon best practices and insights, the paper identifies key challenges faced by individuals with disability in accessing library services. It proposes a multi-faceted approach to transformation, encompassing physical infrastructure modifications, technological advancements, staff training, and community engagement initiatives. Through practical recommendations, the article aims to provide a roadmap for Nigerian libraries to include spaces, catering to the diverse needs of all users, thereby fostering equitable access to knowledge and learning opportunities. Conclusively, the study further recommends that libraries' collection should be expanded to include materials in various formats such as braille, large print, and audio formats to cater to different learning preferences and abilities.

**Keywords:** Accessibility, Library Services, Students, Disabilities, Nigerian, Universities

## Introduction

As the hospital is important to patients, so is the library important to students and researchers. The library as a reservoir of knowledge exists principally to cater for all its clientele without discrimination or restrictions of any form. Contrary to global standards and best practices, it has been noted that the disability in Nigeria do not benefit maximally from various library facilities and resources (Momodu, 2023). Disability could be occasioned by speech defects, visual impairment, orthopedic cases, autism and other bodily malfunctioning or incapacitation. Disability places some restrictions on individuals and prevents them from access to the avalanche of library resources. It behooves the libraries to mitigate these seemingly barriers to guarantee equality of access to information in order to enhance the performance of the disability. The term disability can be found in various contexts and have different connotations which by definition encompass physical, emotional, intellectual, and sensory impairments (Rayini, 2017). According to Obialor (2018), people with special needs are people who have a sensory impairment (such as vision or hearing), someone with mobility impairment, or someone who require support to succeed in an educational environment. He further explained that people with disability also include people with impairments in communication, behaviour, self-care (sometimes referred to as activities of daily living), social interaction, and cognition.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 defines a disable person as someone with: a physically or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities. However, public libraries own it as a duty to provide facilities and library services to these set of physically challenged

citizens. Custom built libraries with ramps and special lifts, Braille materials, tape recorders for the blind, computers with embossed letters and symbols for the use of the blind. Empirical evidences have shown that libraries in Nigeria often neglect these groups of people in their service. In many countries all over the world, disabled persons are not able to use libraries because the library authorities are not aware of the need for disabled persons to use the library on equal terms with all other citizens observed (Nielsen and Irval, 2024). They further buttressed that manly libraries, both old and new, are constructed in a way that makes it difficult or impossible for disabled persons to enter them. Students with disability should be giving preferences starting from the construction of the library building by adding some aids like lifts and flat climbing steps for wheel chairs, acquisition of their information resources and employment of trained staff specifically for them. Promoting inclusion is the key for reducing or removing several barriers facing students with disabilities. Common disabilities include blindness, deafness, dumbness, retardation, muscular, nervous, and sensory disorders. Disability students encounter barriers in their quest for education (Sambo, 2016).

According toViney (2020), rightly pointed out that they encounter physical access limitation such as retrieving books from the library shelves. In a research on ‘The plight of disabled Nigerians and the need for mass enlightenment by Okoli (2020) observed horrors of architectural buildings which have discouraged many challenged persons from visiting the library. Bradley cited in Sambo (2016), opined that some students with disability stand out with the same qualification and aspiration as normal students, but because they

encounter barriers, they perform poorly. Students with disabilities do not visit the library because they may not be able to access the information resources. Some of them require special tools or alternative forms of library materials to access information (Moisey, 2021). Information accessibility can be referred to the ability of students with disabilities to get and use information (Adekoya, 2023). Accessibility deals with problems of storage, display, and transmission of information resources to users promptly (Lawal, 2022; Nnadozie and Nnadozie, 2018).

Accessibility denotes the ease with which disabled students can obtain and utilise library resources. It encompasses factors such as affordability, physical proximity, and technological access, as well as the absence of barriers that hinder students' ability to utilize available resources effectively. Without access to resources, utilisation is unrealisable, and the value of the resources is meaningless to users. The issue of access poses numerous challenges to both library management and users because making resources accessible demands that the library resources are in an appropriate format tailored for every user, particularly disability students. Access to information is a fundamental right for all students, including those with disabilities. Libraries play an important role in providing materials and services that meet the needs of every student. Accessibility ensures that students with physical, visual, or hearing impairments can use library resources effectively (Aina, 2019).

As the global conversation on inclusivity gains momentum, it is imperative to address the accessibility challenges faced by this demographic within the library realm.

Remodeling Libraries to accommodate individuals with disability not only align with principles of equality and social justice but also enriches the learning experience for Nigeria as a nation known for its cultural diversity and rich heritage, is home to a diverse range of individuals with varying abilities and needs. Yet, the accessibility landscape within libraries remains uneven, presenting barriers to information and hindering the full participation of those with disabilities. Whether it is physical, sensory or cognitive challenges, the traditional layout and resources of many libraries often fall short in meeting the diverse needs of their users (Moisey, 2021).

The provision of accessibility of library service to disability students in Nigeria University libraries has been a pertinent issue in the field of special education, as well as library and information science. Library services can best be described as the services a library offers to its users. Accessibility of library services was defined as facilities provided by a library to all users including the disability individuals, as well as those on wheel chairs (Majinje, 2024). Studies have shown that students with disability in tertiary institutions need as much access to information, ideas, theories, and facts as their able counterparts to conduct meaningful research and do well in academics (Katz, 2013; Spungin, Ferrell and Monson, 2017). In addition, provision of library services to students with disability in modes that are appropriate to them gives them convenient access to books and other learning resources. Unfortunately, when the library system is put in place, little or no consideration is made for this group of students, especially in developing countries

(Phukubje and Ngoepe, 2017). This widens the information gap between students with visual impairment and some of their sighted counterparts.

In Nigeria, the education sector has made significant progress in recent years, with an increasing number of students with disability being enrolled in schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). However, despite this progress, many schools in Southwest still face significant challenges in providing library services to disability students (Adeoye, 2019). There is a need to assess the availability and accessibility of these resources to ensure that they meet the needs of disability students. Research has highlighted the importance of library services in promoting social inclusion, reducing inequality, and improving the overall educational experience for disability students. Many libraries still face challenges in providing library services, including lack of funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited staff training. This study aims to assess the accessibility of library services to students with disability in Nigerian universities.

### **Concept of students with Disability**

Although concepts of culture vary as much as concepts of disability, one concept does seem clear. The experience of disability is embedded in culture and the social relations of culture (Machell, 2019). Those relations influence the ways in which the importance and meaning of disability are defined, and they shape the association of disability with functional impairment. Functional impairment generally is recognised as a loss or limitation of physical, mental, or sensory function, typically on a long-term or

permanent basis. Functional impairment gives rise to disability according to this study, which because of physical and social barriers in the environment, limits affected individuals' opportunities to participate in the life of a community to the same degree as nondisabled individuals (Nielsen & Irval, 2015). It should not be assumed, however, that the severity of an impairment equates with severe functional limitation or disablement. Rather, the meaning and significance of a disability derive from the treatment of the individual in the broader cultural context within which that individual lives.

According to Rayini (2017), he has previously mentioned the diversity of conditions that comprise disability that the singular term disability can mask the diversity of conditions involved. Disabilities can involve seeing, hearing, talking, thinking, moving, emotional/behavioural health involving self and relationships with others, and other biological/organ functioning. Disabilities can involve these things in varying degrees and various combinations. Thus, disabilities differ greatly in nature and implications for teaching and learning. Among the many issues involving disabilities is what students with disabilities deserve in their education, and afterward. One must consider not only students with disabilities' lives during their education, but also their education as preparation for life after they leave public education (Pescod, 2019).

According to Cheunwattan (2015), in a different perspective is that some disabilities require acknowledgment of the need for special instruction, that such instruction may require a separate setting and special teacher, and that not all things can be taught well in the same place and by the same teacher. Moreover, students with disabilities deserve

instruction from a teacher especially knowledgeable about their particular disability and skilled in teaching students with it. For example, blind students need a teacher highly skilled in teaching orientation and mobility as well as Braille, deaf students need a teacher fluent in signing, deaf-blind children need a teacher and instruction is more important than being in a class with nondisabled peers, and learning particular skills in school is highly important for students' lives after school. Failure to become competent in the special skills required for functioning as independently as possible after the school years sets up students with disabilities for their failure of inclusion in community settings when they are adults.

Students with disability are also in need of library and information services for various purposes. These include education, research, recreational, among others. They are seen as special users of the library. A special user or patron according to Igwela and Opara (2020) is an individual that cannot make use of information resources in the library without adaptive equipment (augmented or assisting equipment or resources). It is also a situation where there is inability to do what is considered 'normal' to a non-disabled person. The term 'special needs' in the context of library services as identified by Lawal-Solarin (2012), is connected to the needs of people who cannot make use of conventional libraries, library materials and services. They need assistance to navigate through the information materials available in databases and new technologies in libraries which has increased access to communication and information globally. They are regarded as special because library services are provided to them with special materials, activities, equipment

and care. Special library services are provided to users with disabilities in order to satisfy their information needs. People with special needs can easily be identified in the society because they possess certain characteristic which often places them in certain psychological level. These characteristics and psychology may be as a result of the way they see themselves or the behaviour of people towards them.

Consequently, people with special needs often suffer rejection, isolation and maltreatment from other members of the society and are usually ridiculed, and seen as those to be pitied. They are viewed as abnormal and denied some public services such as library and information provision. Socially, they are isolated and restricted from interacting fully with their able-bodied counterparts and are seen as being entirely different from others. Educationally, they are prevented either by physical or mental defect from receiving normal education or living a normal life hence the need for them to be given special treatment to assist them blend with the society.

### **Library and Information services to students with disability at Universities in Nigeria**

Provision of Library and Information services to students with disability at University in Nigeria is the absence of specially trained Librarians to serve them. Suggestions from Muya, Ogenga and Owiri (2023), Mwititi (2020) and Koech (2021) have supported the idea of including special courses for Librarians to acquaint themselves with the important skills required in handling and serving persons with visual disability. Aside that Librarians need to know and understand the various formats that information are encrypted for students with so as to be able to disability operate equipment for their

benefit. This has become necessary because persons with disability are among the small but very important segment of the society. In all aspects persons with disability are normal people endowed with all human biological faculties (Alemna, 2017). For them to function effectively and efficiently in the society there is the need for them to get access to library services in the required format. There are a number of library and information services tailored to meet the library and information needs of persons with disability in universities. These services are designed to facilitate their access to information and library with the hope that the information acquired will improve the lives and help achieve their potentials (Busha, 2021). Again, the Ranganathan law also makes it clear that books are there to serve the needs of individual user, regardless of disability, social class, sex, age, ethnic group, religion or any other factor. Every citizen has the right to information.

In Nigeria universities, Library and information services for disability is entirely dependent on resource persons and volunteer students. There are no readers employed by the University to serve students with disability but as part of the Resource Person work schedule, they are supposed to provide that services whenever a student needed it. This is usually not adequate as they mostly rely on friends to read to them on tape. Craddock (2001) has observed that accessing information is of utmost importance for anyone pursuing an academic programme. In that sense if a student with disability is delayed access to information simply because a reader is not available or a Resource Person could not complete a task, the ability of such a student to complete assignment in time is interfered with and consequently, the overall performance will be affected (Onifade and

Babarinde, 2022). Their dependency on few Resource Persons and the goodwill of volunteering is not enough and reliable. This dependency on volunteer student friends often makes it difficult to meet deadlines for assignments especially when these friends are not available because of other commitments.

In a manual on how to provide various kinds of services to persons with special needs (Disability), by Wright and Davie (2015) cautioned about over reliance on volunteers. They write that the motives for offering free and voluntary services might be out of sympathy for students with visual impairment. But they do not need such sympathy, what they need and deserve is to provide them with the appropriate reading services which is reliable and efficient at any given time.

In addition, Bruhn (2018) adds that volunteer transcribers and readers with no professional training in handling library users affect the quality of the service and the product as well. Some volunteer's friends may not be suited for the task at hand and just because somebody is offering free services, there is the tendency to accept what is available hence lowering the quality of the intended service. He supports this line of argument by citing a case in the USA where a volunteer who served in a certain community centre for persons with disability turned out to be a psychopath whose intentions were to abuse the patrons of the centre. Although this is an extreme case, it is not uncommon to find badly taped information due to the use of an unsuitable reader. Not every student who volunteers as a friend to read for students with visual impairment is gifted in reading. Using volunteers to read for students with disability (visual impairment) at University does

provide a temporary solution but the long term, but there is an urgent need to employ librarian and provide easy accessibility of library services, specifically to read to students with visual impairment.

The advantage of having readers available at all times guarantees continuous access to information at any time. As educational system become more available for persons with visual impairment in Nigeria with the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2006 Act 715, there is bound to be a marked increase in enrollment in the University based on the enactment and awareness in the education of such. Understanding students with disability in library services involves recognising and accommodating the diverse requirements of patrons who may have physical, cognitive, sensory, or other disabilities which is crucial for ensuring accessibility for all patrons.

### **Understanding the Information Needs of students with disability**

Information is recognised as a powerful tool in shaping the twenty-first century and in breaking the barriers to knowledge. It is the gateway to knowledge because it provides basic condition for life-long learning. It is a well-known fact that an informed mind is an educated mind; if one is not well informed, one will be deformed for day-to-day living. Some people perceive information as facts while others see it as data or news. For instance, information means data to answers, reducing uncertainty, bridging gaps, solving problems, understanding (making sense) and coping with life.

Information need could be defined as an individual or group's desire to search and get information to satisfy a conscious or unconscious need. Onifade and Babarinde (2022)

defined information need as an individual or a group's desire to locate and obtain information to satisfy a conscious or unconscious need. Therefore, information needs of individuals in any society are affected by the intent and its usefulness whereas the urgency of the information need, determines the approach to satisfying it. Information need of people with special needs may be categorized according to the purpose and perhaps the nature of the impairment which according to Lawal-Solarin (2012) revolve around six key elements of which continuous education and informal learning needs is prominent. Education provides opportunities for people with special needs to gain a sense of personal achievement and self-respect. It helps to improve a person's ability to communicate, reason, think, to broaden his interests, to introduce him to a wider circle of friends and gradually improve his competence as a person. He equally stated that they need information about the law and their rights in order to see how they can get out of incarceration or where they have gone wrong in other not to commit the offence again. They will also get information on punishment for offences committed. Information gathered can be used to seek for redress in court. Furthermore, he retreated that there are a lot of health hazards in the environment and they need information on how to adapt to the environment. Information needs span across health and hygiene, prevention, cure and management of ill health. Additionally, information is also needed in vocational education. This will help them acquire skills that they need to be independent.

Information materials such as manual can help them acquire knowledge on how to operate or do certain things on their own. In the same vein, he opined that they need information that can help them overcome emotional boredom and psychological trauma. Access to information will help them recreate themselves. He equally maintained that the persons with special needs have the same reading interests and information needs of other free citizens in the larger society as such, require knowing what they can do with their lives that will help them make money. Finally, they need religious information which will lead to their spiritual and character reformation to live better lives.

### **Challenges faced by students with disability in accessing library resources and Services**

Libraries are often referred as the gatekeepers of knowledge, serving as vital hubs for learning, research, and community engagement. However, for people with special needs, accessing these invaluable resources and services can present a myriad of challenges. In an age where information is increasingly digital and technology-driven, it is crucial to address the barriers that impede the inclusion and participation of individuals with diverse abilities in the library ecosystem. As stated by Patil and Kumbar (2020), the term special needs encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions, including but not limited to physical disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, cognitive disorders, and neuro-developmental differences. He expressed that each of these conditions presents unique obstacles that can hinder an individual's ability to fully engage with library materials and facilities. From physical barriers within library buildings to the lack of accessible library

resources, the challenges faced by people with special needs underscore the pressing need for inclusivity and accommodation within library environments.

According to Lipschultz (2010), libraries are meant to be inclusive spaces where everyone, regardless of ability, can access resources and services, however, individuals with special needs often encounter unique challenges that hinder their ability to fully utilize library facilities. Prominent amongst these challenges is lack of physical accessibility. Folorunso and Folorunso (2019), posited that some libraries may have physical barriers such as stairs, narrow aisles, or inaccessible restrooms which makes it difficult for individuals with mobility impairments to navigate the space. In the same vein, Rukhsana et.al. (2017) posited that many library resources and services have shifted online, but individuals with visual impairments or other disabilities may face barriers in accessing digital content that is not compatible with screen readers or other assistive technologies.

Furthermore, in the work of Rayini (2017), he opined that websites, online catalogs, and library databases may not be designed with accessibility features in mind, making it challenging for users with disabilities to navigate and retrieve information. He further buttressed that libraries may not always have staff trained in sign language or other forms of communication, making it difficult for individuals with hearing impairments to communicate their needs or access assistance. Kalyani and Taj (2021), presented that written materials, including signage and instructional guides, may not be available in accessible formats such as braille or large print, limiting access for individuals with visual impairments. He added that libraries may not have sufficient adaptive equipment such as

screen readers, magnifiers, or specialized software to accommodate the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities and even when adaptive equipment is available, it may not be properly maintained or updated to meet evolving accessibility standards. On the other hand, Kinnell and Creaser (2024) wrote that individuals with special needs may encounter stigma, prejudice, or lack of awareness from library staff or other patrons, leading to feelings of exclusion or discomfort.

### **Strategies for promoting accessibility of Library services for Students with Disabilities**

Libraries serve as vital hubs for students' learning, research, and academic success. However, to truly fulfill their mission of inclusivity and equitable access, libraries must ensure that their services and resources are accessible to all students, including those with disability. In the words of Kalyani and Taj (2021), addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities involves a multifaceted approach that encompasses both physical and digital aspects of library services and resources. From ensuring that physical spaces are navigable and accommodating to implementing assistive technologies to providing alternative formats for materials, libraries are continually evolving to meet the diverse needs of their patrons. Exploration through literatures revealed that there many strategies which libraries can implement to support students with disabilities, fostering an environment where every individual can thrive.

According to Atabor (2015), number one strategy is to conduct needs assessments. He maintained that before implementing accessibility strategies, libraries should conduct comprehensive needs assessments to understand the specific requirements of students

with disability which may involve surveys, focus groups, or consultations with disability support services to identify barriers and areas for improvement. He also reiterated that it should be ensured that library facilities are physically accessible by providing ramps, elevators and designated parking spaces for students with mobility impairments. Additionally, consideration should be given to adjustable furniture, such as height-adjustable desks and tables, to accommodate students with disability. Onifade and Babarinde (2022) asserted that libraries should provide assistive technologies such as screen readers, magnification software, text-to-speech converters and alternative input devices to support students with visual, auditory, or motor impairments, making them readily available and offer training sessions to familiarise students with their usage. They equally stated that it is important to ensure that digital resources, including library websites, catalogues, databases, and online journals, comply with accessibility standards such as web content accessibility guidelines. This may involve providing alternative text for images, captions for videos, and ensuring compatibility with screen readers. Adoption of universal design principles to create library spaces, services, and resources that are accessible to all users, regardless of their abilities is another strategy as posited by Lipschultz, (2010).

This involves designing libraries with flexibility in mind which encompasses creating spaces that are adaptable to various needs and welcoming to diverse populations. Examples includes having flexible layouts like modular furniture and adjustable shelves; spaces like quiet zones and collaborative spaces; and accessibility features like ramps, elevators and assistive technologies among others. He added that library staff should

equally be trained to provide personalised assistance to students with disability, which includes navigating the library resources and using assistive technologies effectively, training sessions and workshops is another key factor for promotion of awareness and sensitivity among library staff about the needs and challenges faced by students with disability. Furthermore, libraries should also forge partnerships with disability support services, academic departments, and student organisations to coordinate efforts in supporting students with disability.

### **Recommendation**

This not only enriches the educational experience for students with special needs but also fosters a more diverse and inclusive learning environment for all. The work therefore recommends that:

- Academic libraries should invest in a range of assistive technologies such as screen readers, screen magnifiers, text-to-speech software, braille displays, assistive listening and devices.
- Librarians and staff should undergo training to understand the needs of people with special needs.
- Libraries should ensure that their physical infrastructure is accessible to individuals with mobility impairments.
- Library's collection should be expanded to include materials in various formats such as braille, large print, and audio formats to cater to different learning preferences and abilities.

- Partnerships should be forged with disability services offices such as National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Special Education Centers and Schools, University Disability Support Services Among others to better understand the needs of students with disabilities and tailor library services accordingly.
- Feedback mechanism should be established to continuously gather input from users with special needs.
- Policies at the institutional and governmental levels that prioritize accessibility and inclusivity in academic libraries for people with special needs should be advocated.

## Conclusion

Transforming libraries to better serve people with disability in Nigeria is not only a matter of accessibility but also of inclusivity and equity. By implementing inclusive practices, such as providing assistive technologies, creating accessible spaces, and offering specialized services, academic libraries can ensure that all individuals, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to information and resources.

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