

PROVIDING INCLUSIVE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO DIVERSE USERS IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined the Provision of Library and Information Services to Diverse and Inclusive Users in University Libraries in Nigeria. The study adopted narrative content analysis to collect relevant data on the subject of the study. The role of university libraries in promoting diversity and inclusivity in service delivery, the rationale for diversity and inclusion in library service delivery in university libraries in Nigeria was discussed. The study reviewed some concepts such as diversity and inclusivity; the role of university libraries in promoting inclusivity and rationale for diversity and inclusivity in university libraries in Nigeria was also discussed. Some of the strategies to provide, and sustain library and information services to diverse, and inclusive users in university libraries in Nigeria and the challenges of embracing diversity and inclusivity in university libraries. The study recommends among others that, the university libraries should be committed to removing barriers to library services and promote the culture of inclusiveness and diversity to enable all users to make the best of the university library services. The study concludes that, university libraries should adopt inclusive frameworks that ensure equitable access to information resources and services to all. Effective library service delivery that embraces diversity and inclusivity will showcase the quality of the university.

Key Words: Diversity, inclusivity, university library, service delivery

Introduction

The university libraries' main objective is to foster an inclusive organization that embraces and celebrates diversity and equity as a fundamental principle in all facets of library services. Equity, diversity and inclusivity initiatives in university libraries are noble and commendable. According to Jaeger et al (2015), the ultimate goal of diversity and inclusion initiatives is to make libraries and their workers integral part of the communities they serve,

with the awareness and knowledge of those communities and welcoming attitudes towards those communities. The success of the university library is anchored on the collections and services that reflect expertise and cultural sensitivity and spaces that meet and welcome all scholars, researchers and community members. The university library is dedicated to shaping an organization that actively operates with an education that enriches diversity, equity and inclusion; understanding that the library work is central to the fundamental mission of creating, sharing and preserving knowledge by all and for all.

According to the University of South Carolina (2023), the library is committed to providing spaces and services that are accessible, safe, inclusive and culturally diverse. According to the University, if the library is to remain an indispensable entity in their campuses, they must provide quality services to their increasingly diverse communities. University libraries are obliged as the intellectual centre of the university to proactively meet the needs of the various faculties, staff, visitors and students. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2012) states that, if libraries are to continue being indispensable organizations in their campus communities, they must reflect the communities they serve.

Nigeria is a country with diverse cultures, comprising, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have their different languages, cultures and beliefs. University libraries are known as nuclear social point and are expected to play an important role in developing respect for people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Diversity should allow library users to develop cultural literacy and appreciation of their cultures as well as others. University libraries should offer accessibility to educational resources for all users, despite their language, economic and cultural background or disability. In fact, university libraries in Nigeria should develop respect for every library user, notwithstanding cultural and linguistic background.

Concept of Diversity

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, diversity is a range of many people or things that are very different from each other. Okeke (2018) states that, diversity is the strata of social class, gender, and religion. It is an essential component of any civil society and a global necessity. American Psychological Association (2017) defines diversity as a complex and nuanced construct that represents an array of identity factors, such as race, ethnicity, gender and disability. Diversity and inclusivity look at feelings of inequality and

marginalization, bias and, working against certain groups of persons who are different in terms of race, colour, gender, disability, status, religions affiliation, political class, social class etc.

Diversity is a fundamental value for libraries, as it helps students develop critical thinking and analytical skills as they advance in knowledge. It includes cultural awareness and embraces all races, ethnicity, disability, gender, class, religion, etc. Washington DC states that, diversity is used to describe individual differences, e.g. Life experiences, learning and working styles, personality types, group/social differences, e.g. Race, social-economic status, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, ability, intellectual traditions and perspectives as well as cultural, political, religious and other affiliations that can be engaged to achieve excellence in teaching, learning, research, scholarship, administration and support services. Cruz (2019) examines diversity as a cornerstone of the library profession. He outlined staffing, culture, collections, services and programs as good starting points for libraries to reflect on the current state of diversity in institutions to plan for meaningful change.

Concept of Inclusivity

According to American Psychological Association (2017), inclusion is the practice of providing equal access to opportunities and resource to ensure that, such classes or groups are embraced or accommodated in service delivery. Washington DC states that, inclusion is used to describe the active, intentional and on-going engagement with diversity in people, curriculum, co-curriculum, and in communities, e.g. intellectual, social, cultural, and geographical differences with which individuals might connect.

In library service delivery, the concept of inclusivity is to serve with equity, encouraging participation, removing barriers of discrimination and oppression, and looking out for the wellbeing of students and library users. Inclusive library service is the process of addressing the varied needs of library users.

Diversity and inclusion are very important aspects in learning processes, as students learn about the world, other cultures and technologies through information found in library collections which influence their social and identity development. The goal of diversity and inclusivity is to foster an environment in which all members of the community are treated

equitably, contribute fully to the university libraries mission, and embrace model values. Diversity and inclusivity are concepts that go with equity and equality.

The Role of the University Libraries in Promoting Diversity and Inclusivity

The university is the lifeline of the growth and development of individuals and of every nation. According to Ifeje and Yusuf (2020), university libraries are central to the academic mission of higher learning and play crucial role in fostering an inclusive environment that support equitable access to knowledge and learning. In diverse societies like Nigeria, where students and faculty members come from different cultural, linguistic, socio-economic and physical backgrounds, the role of libraries in providing diverse and inclusive services cannot be overstated. According to Ifeje and Yusuf (2020), university libraries serve as lifelong hubs that empower users by providing inclusive learning opportunities, access to Open Educational Resources (OERs), and skill building programmes that are sensitive to the needs of diverse learners.

According to Omeluzor et al, (2017), university libraries are responsible for ensuring that all users have equal access to both physical and digital resources in spite of their differences. This includes acquiring materials in accessible formats (eg, braille, audio books etc.), offering multilingual resources, and curating collections that reflects the diversity of the user populations. IFLA, (2022) states that, libraries should be designed to accommodate all users. This includes creating physically accessible buildings (with ramps, elevators and signage for visually impaired), and offering digital platforms that meet accessibility standards, such as compatibility with screen readers, and keyboard navigation for users with disabilities.

According to Igbinovia and Solanke (2014), university libraries curate diverse collections that represent various cultures, histories and perspectives, including materials on gender studies, indigenous knowledge, and minority voices. According to them, university libraries help to validate, and reflect the identities of all users. This promotes a sense of belonging, and respect for different worldviews. Inclusive libraries actively engage with underserved groups through targeted outreach, user education programmes, and personalized services. Examples include; library orientation for students with disabilities, research help tailored for international students, and workshops on inclusive digital literacy (ALA ,2010).

Librarians play vital roles in service delivery and training them in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ensures that, they provide respectful, responsive, and effective assistance to all users. Staff development in this area helps foster an inclusive service culture (Nkiko, 2015).

Rationale for Diversity and Inclusivity in University Libraries in Nigeria.

The rationale for promoting diversity and inclusivity in Nigerian university libraries stems from the growing heterogeneous population of the university system and imperative to ensure equitable access to information. The patrons of the university library include staff and students from various cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, age groups, physically challenged, languages, religions and gender disparities. This demographical shift requires the library to move from traditional services models to more inclusive and user-centred approaches. As Yusuf (2020) rightly pointed out that, digital inclusion and accessible information services are critical to closing the educational gaps in Nigerian universities.

In Nigeria, there are educational divide across the cultures of the society, where issues such as poverty, infrastructural disparities, language diversity, and disability rights remain prominent, university libraries must take proactive measures to address the barriers that hinder access to information resources. According to Igbinovia and Popoola (2016), many students with disabilities in Nigerian universities experienced inadequate access to library resources due to architectural constraints, lack of assistive technologies, and untrained staff. Furthermore, students from rural backgrounds often struggle to use digital resources due to low computer literacy skills or poor internet connectivity. When the university library collections have intersecting characters with different backgrounds, family structures, sexuality, disabilities and colour, this will give more cultural insights to the library users. When students/library users feel represented and see similar identities in the materials they use, they have high interest and enthusiasm towards the course/material.

Moreover, the United Nations' Sustainable Goal 4 (Quality Education) advocate for inclusive and equitable education for all. Libraries as academic support should ensure that, this goal is achieved by ensuring that, every user, regardless of ability or background, can access, understand and employ all the resources meaningfully. This will make the university library, a welcoming place for all users.

The pursuit of diversity and inclusivity in university libraries is not only a ethical obligation but also a fundamental requirement for equitable access to knowledge in contemporary academic institutions. As university admit students and employ staff from increasingly varied cultural, linguistic, socio economic, gender and ability backgrounds, it becomes imperative for libraries ; being central hubs, to reflect and support this diversity through inclusive policies, collections and services.

Strategies to Provide and Sustain Library and Information Services to Diverse and Inclusive Users in University Libraries in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a very diverse nation. This implies that diversity is inherent in our languages, dressings, foods, family structures and culture. Integration of diverse cultures in library service provision will enhance interrelation among the university communities. The main purpose of the library is to be readily, equally and equitably accessible to all library users. University library services are committed to fairness and equality. The library ensures to remove barriers to their services and to promote the culture of inclusiveness and maximise the personal achievement of users and the library staff. University libraries should improve on their service delivery and provide appropriate collections for the library users by imbibing diversity and inclusivity. Moore (2023) states that, librarians in university libraries serve diverse communities to the best of their ability. This they do by setting the environment, providing the resources and helping people to access the resources needed. According to Moore, the library collection needs to be diverse, containing materials, and literature/story books written by diverse people and in diverse languages. There should be subject librarians to interpret various materials for cataloguing and reference purposes. The library building should have some comfort like ramps, accessible restrooms, water, conveniences, quiet zones and spaces.

The University library services should be designed to strengthen the integration of diversity in culture, gender, religion, social class, physical disability, etc. Segregation among social identities, ethnicity, religion, gender and age among others will bring discouragement and dissatisfaction among library users in the university libraries. Relevant and appropriate materials will help users get more background on cultural awareness. Community events that highlight cultures should be promoted. Library collections should be diverse and inclusive. Students feel represented when they see similar identities in the materials they read and use,

making their interest and enthusiasm towards the course to increase. Appreciation of different faculties and cultures in the university library is a healthy way to embrace diversity and inclusivity in effective library service delivery. This will ensure lifelong use of the library by majority of the library users. The various categories of library users for instance, the physically challenged should be considered when building and setting the library. This is to accommodate the peculiarities of persons with disabilities. The library resources/collection should include the necessary assistive technologies that can aid the use of the digital resources by users with special needs.

Innovative activities like, group reading and gaming in the university library will help students and library users to understand similarities and dissimilarities in different cultures and the university system, and orchestrate mixture of ideologies. This will help students and library users to interrelate with one another, thereby, fostering respect and appreciation of other faculty, courses, culture and ways of life. This will, in the long run, foster unity, love, and long-time friendship among students and library users.

According to UWA (2020), diversity and inclusion are essential in the library because, it helps students develop critical thinking skills, as libraries are uniquely equipped to lead the charge in celebrating diversity among students and library collections. UWA stated that, the American Library Association (ALA), highlights the ways, libraries can successfully eliminate barriers and become accessible when they create culturally equitable practices. These practices include:

- Offering new collections of books that sincerely present new cultural experiences across marginalized communities.
- Providing library service support to community events that highlight different cultures.
- Planning and implementing new services to respond to community needs
- Creating a diverse library staff to allow more people to see themselves represent in the physical space.
- Librarians should be sensitive to what perspectives are represented in their collections
- Highlight characters with intersecting identities.
- Feature characters with different gender identities, family structures and disability
- Access social justice issues in the community, the nation and the world.

- Focus on the perspectives of people of colour.

One of the ways to improve diverse and inclusive services in the university library is to know and understand the library community and their needs. The university library community and their interest could be known by talking and interacting with them and through the courses and activities offered by the university. Based on these insights, the university library librarians will provide effective services and be able to fill the gaps, to be as diverse and inclusive as possible.

According to [www.linkedin](https://www.linkedin.com), the following steps are the procedure to follow for effective diverse and inclusive library service:

1. Understand your community: This is the first step to provide information services to diverse and inclusive library users. Know who the patrons are; their information needs, interests and goals. Understand their cultural, linguistic and social characteristics. Help them know how to access and use their information. By understanding your community, you can identify the gaps and opportunities in the service delivery and act accordingly.
2. Develop your collections: The university library collection should reflect the diversity and inclusivity of the community. Properly arrange the collections to ensure they are easy to find, browse and borrow the library collections. Cataloguing, classification and metadata can be used to organize and display the collection. Patrons of the library should be involved in the collection development process, feedback and suggestions should be solicited.
3. Deliver your services: Service delivery in the university library should be responsive, respectful, and relevant to the patron's information, needs and preferences. Various channels and methods should be used to reach and engage the library patrons. Tools such as websites, social medias, webinars, chat pots etc. can be used to communicate and interact with patrons. Collaboration with other libraries, partners and library and information stakeholders to provide holistic and integrated services is very necessary.
4. Evaluate your impact: Evaluation of impact on the services delivery to patrons is needed. Measure and monitor the outcomes and effects of your services on the library patrons i.e. their satisfaction. This can be done through data analysis, from the library patrons, partners, staff and library stakeholders. This is to assess the strength and weakness of the services rendered. The result of the evaluation should be used to improve and innovate the library services.

5. Evaluate Yourself: To provide library and information services to diverse and inclusive library users, the library should continuously update the knowledge and skills of the librarians in diversity and inclusion issues. Librarians should participate in professional development opportunities, such as conferences, workshops, webinars etc. One can as well learn from experts, mentors and role models in library profession. With these self-educations, one can enhance competence and confidence in providing effective library and information services to diverse and inclusive library users.
6. Embrace your role: Know and appreciate the importance and impact of the role of a library professional in serving diverse and inclusive library users. Acknowledge and address the challenges and barriers that one may face in the service, such as bias, discrimination etc Celebrate and share your achievements and successes as services are rendered. Inspire and support others for effective service delivery in the library profession. This will help foster a positive and inclusive culture in the library and library profession.

According to Onifade and Alex-Nmecha (2024), diverse collection development, staff training on cultural competence, and accessibility to library settings and resources are the top strategies to provide and sustain diversity and inclusive initiatives. According to them, access to periodic training, networking opportunities, and professional development workshops are valuable support systems needed by libraries, and librarians in Nigeria to enhance their effectiveness in diverse and inclusive services delivery. This aligns with the view of smith et al (2018), who emphasized that, training and professional development foster cultural competence and promotion of inclusive practices within libraries.

Challenges of Embracing Diversity and Inclusivity in University Libraries

Despite the perceived importance of diversity and inclusivity in the society, and all efforts to modernize library services, many university libraries in Nigerian face persistent challenges in implementing diverse, and inclusive practices. According to Onifade and Alex-Nmecha (2024), lack of library policies on diversity and inclusion, coupled with resistance to change and navigating socio-cultural sensitivities, emerges as part of the major barriers to the successful implementation of these initiatives. According to them, institutional barriers and cultural complexities are factors limiting libraries and librarians in advocating for diversity and inclusion. Ifijeh and Yusuf (2020) argues that inadequate funding, lack of assistive technologies and insufficient staff training hinder the smooth practice of inclusivity. Similarly Zaid and Zaid (2017) asserted that the challenges of embracing diversity and

inclusivity are: inadequate library budget, poor information and telecommunication infrastructure, limited access to high-speed internet, a low take off of open access repositories and digital libraries, non-availability of adaptive technology and specialized software packages.

Recommendations.

Based on the literature reviewed the following suggestions were made:

- ❖ The university libraries should be committed to removing barriers to library services, and promote the culture of inclusiveness and diversity to enable all users to make the best of the university library services.
- ❖ The university management and decision makers should adequately allocate library resources, and support systems to enable libraries and librarians to effectively and efficiently deliver the library services. This include; investing in professional development opportunities, networking platforms, mentorship programmes.
- ❖ There are varied categories of university library users, the physically challenged for instance should be considered when building and setting the library .This is to accommodate the peculiarities of persons with disabilities.
- ❖ The university library collections/resources should include the necessary assistive technologies that can aid the use of the digital resources by users with special needs.
- ❖ Continuous professional development in inclusive librarianship, disability awareness, and cultural competency should be encouraged.
- ❖ University libraries should integrate diversity and inclusion into their strategic planning to accommodate policies on accessibility, equity, and multilingualism.

Conclusion

The need for diversity and inclusivity in university libraries in Nigeria is more pressing than ever in this 21st century. As academic institutions continue to serve an increasing heterogeneous population, comprising individuals from different ethnicities, languages, disabilities, socio-economic, and backgrounds, university libraries should adopt inclusive frameworks that can ensure equitable access to information resources and services to all. Effective library service delivery that embraces diversity and inclusivity will showcase the quality of the university.

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