

**MEETING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING
DISABILITIES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA.****By****Ailakhu, Ugonna Vivian****Abstract**

This paper discussed the importance of meeting the need of information services delivery for open and distance learning students with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities arise from neurological, neurobiological, developmental, and language-based learning disabilities that affect an individual's ability to learn to read (accuracy and fluency) and the development of spelling skills, lack the ability to synchronize letters amongst others. It affects an individual's ability to receive, store, process, retrieve or communicate information. The paper established the meaning of learning disabilities, the types, and symptoms. It also examined ways open and distance learning academic libraries can provide library services to these special needs people that could be used to get maximum satisfaction. The paper also recommended that the Nigerian Government both state and federal should ensure that all libraries in their schools from nursery to university levels are adequately equipped with the necessary resources and qualified staff that will meet the information needs of all library users irrespective of their learning disabilities. The paper concludes that librarians, Nigerian government (state and federal) must ensure that disabled students, especially students with learning disabilities are not left out in the information world.

Keywords: Learning Disabilities, Library Needs, Open and Distance Learning Academic Libraries.

Introduction

The main objective of academic libraries in both conventional and open and distance learning institutions is to live up to their prospects, by providing and maintaining the good quality of library resources and services provided to all categories of users irrespective of their learning abilities. Provision of adequate library resources and quality information service delivery to individuals with learning disabilities will: enhance the status of academic libraries in Nigeria towards meeting the information needs of people with learning disabilities; enhance the patronage of academic libraries by the students, staff with learning disabilities; ensure that all library users including people with learning disabilities are carried along in this era of technological advancement; enable other disadvantaged groups to embrace and avail themselves of the services provided by the academic

libraries in Nigeria; and ensure that staff and students with learning disabilities will be adequately involved in academic library services in Nigeria.

Information is an important educational resource commonly sought by students to support their research and decision- making. Information is essential to all human beings and the academic library's aim is to manage and provide the right information at the right time and in the right format to its patrons regardless of race, religion, age, nationality, and language. This core function includes the provision of information to people with disability. Open and distance learning academic libraries specialize in serving the information needs of distance education faculty, staff, and students which includes special needs students. It ensures adequate access to library resources for those who enroll in and teach distance education courses.

The Association of college and Research Libraries (ACRL) recognizing that distance education offerings were growing in post-secondary educational institutions published "*Guidelines for Distance learning libraries in 2000*". The guidelines asserted that members of the distance learning community are entitled to library resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in conventional university settings. The main objective of any academic library whether a library of a conventional university or a library of an open and distance learning university is to provide necessary information to its patrons. Academic libraries must ensure that objectives of learning are realized by providing educational and information needs of the open and distance learning community. According to Ailakhu & Nkata, (2017) functions of an open and distance learning academic library include but not limited to: Acquisition of knowledge; Organization of knowledge; Preservation of knowledge for easy access, and Dissemination of knowledge.

The concept of learning disabilities has been defined variously among which is that of the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) which presents learning disabilities thus: as a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction (Cited in Abdulrahman, 2015). However, it has been reported that there is a higher incidence of learning disabilities among individuals living in poverty, possibly this could be due to increased risk of exposure to poor nutrition, ingested and environmental toxins (e.g., lead, tobacco, and alcohol), lack of adequate information and other risk factors during early and critical stages of development. Learning disabilities are both real and permanent. It is common to see that individuals living with learning disabilities suffer from low self-esteem, set low expectations for themselves, struggle with underachievement and underemployment, have few friends and, with greater frequency than their non-learning disabilities colleagues.

What is Learning Disability?

Learning disabilities (LDs) refer to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, comprehension, or the use of either verbal or nonverbal information. This activity describes and reviews the role of the primary care pediatricians and developmental specialists, along with other members of the inter-professional team in evaluating, managing, and improving the outcome for patients with this condition (Odeilis, 2021). Al-Mahrezi; Al-Futaisi& Al-Mamari defined learning disabilities as a group of heterogeneous disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or non-verbal information. A student with a learning disability cannot try harder, pay closer attention, or improve motivation on his

own; they need help and assistance to learn how to do those things. A learning disability or learning disorder is not a problem with intelligence, however, learning disabilities are caused by a difference in the brain that affects how information is received, processed or communicated (Abdulrahman, 2015).

A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and doing math. Learning disabilities vary from person to person. One person with learning disability may not have the same kind of learning problems as another person with learning disability. One person may have trouble with reading and writing. Another person with learning disability may have problems understanding mathematics.

There are three types of Learning Disabilities as discussed below:

1. Dyslexia (Learning Disability in Reading)

Dyslexia is a developmental syndrome that has a neurological basis. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is majorly characterized by having difficulties with accurate and or fluent recognition, by poor spelling and decoding abilities. Dyslexia is a lifelong condition that has no cure, it is a problem associated with reading accurately and fluently, reading comprehension, spelling, writing, and mathematics. It is the most common learning issue. According to Roitsch and Watson (2019) Dyslexia is a neurobiological, developmental, language-based learning disability that affects individuals' ability to learn to read (accuracy and fluency) and the development of spelling skills. Individuals with dyslexia have difficulty connecting spoken language and the printed word because they have deficits in the phonological component of language. The National

Institute for Neurological Disorder and Stroke (2010) categorized dyslexia into different six (6) types: Trauma dyslexia: caused by trauma to the area of the brain responsible for reading and writing, Primary dyslexia: is a result of malfunction rather than damage to the left side of the brain. This form of dyslexia does not change and is hereditary in nature. It is also more common among males than females, Secondary dyslexia: is caused by hormonal development during the early stages of fetal development. The positive side is that it diminishes as a child grows. It is also more common among males than females.

Visual dyslexia: this manifests by number and letter reversal and inability to write symbols in the right order. Auditory dyslexia: presents when the affected person has difficulty with sounds. He/she perceives sounds to be mixed up or not heard correctly and Dysgraphia: is when an individual experiences difficulty in holding and controlling a pencil to write correctly. According to (Abdulrahman, 2015) dyslexia is a spectrum disorder with symptoms ranging from mild to severe. People with dyslexia have particular difficulty with phonological awareness, verbal memory, rapid serial naming, and verb processing speed.

Symptoms of dyslexia include problems with: Letter and word recognition; Understanding words and ideas; Reading speed and fluency, and General vocabulary skills.

2. Dyscalculia (Learning Disability in Mathematics)

Dyscalculia is also known as having a specific learning disability (or difficulty) in mathematics. Kaufmann, Kucian & Von Aster, (2015) defined dyscalculia also known as developmental dyscalculia as a specific and persistent learning disability that affects the development and performance of arithmetic skills. Dyscalculia or mathematical learning disability is a specific learning disability that affects around 6% of the population. Students with dyscalculia are not

unintelligent only that they struggle to learn mathematics, despite having an adequate learning environment at home and at school. Generally, dyscalculia as a learning disability is presumed to be due to a difference in brain function. Dyscalculia varies greatly depending on an individual's other strengths and weaknesses. A student's ability to do a calculation will be affected differently by a language learning disability, a visual disorder, or a difficulty with sequencing, memory or organization. A student living with dyscalculia or a math-based learning disorder may have problems with memorization and organization of numbers, operation signs, and number facts (like $2+5=7$) or ($10+5=15$). Students with Dyscalculia might also have trouble with counting principles (such as counting by forwarding or counting by twos) or even have difficulty telling time.

Symptoms of dyscalculia include problems with: Struggling with concepts such as measuring, time, and estimating; Being unsure of how to approach word math problems; Difficulty following the order of operations, and Finding it challenging to count and group numbers together.

3. Dysgraphia (Learning Disability in Writing)

Dysgraphia or learning disability in writing can appear as a student having difficulties with spelling, poor handwriting, and trouble putting his/ her thoughts on paper. Dysgraphia can be either a language-based and/or non-language-based disorder. Many students have poor handwriting, but dysgraphia is more serious. Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder that generally appears when children are first learning to write. Dysgraphia can involve the physical act of writing or the mental activity of comprehending and synthesizing information. Basic writing disorder refers to physical difficulty in forming words and letters. Expressive writing disability indicates a struggle to organize thoughts on paper. Symptoms of dysgraphia include problems with: Neatness and consistency of

writing; Accurately copying letters and words; Spelling consistency, and Writing organization and coherence.

It is important to know that reading, writing, and solving mathematics are not the only skills impacted by learning disabilities. There are other types of learning disabilities that involve difficulties with motor skills (movement and coordination), understanding spoken language, distinguishing between sounds, and being able to understand visual information.

Impact of Learning Disabilities on Students

- a. Increased grade retention: Huge performance gaps exist between students with disabilities and their non-disabled colleagues. Researchers on retention show that grade repeaters as adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance, or in prison than adults who did not repeat a grade.
- b. Amplified possibility of students' dropping out: Students with disabilities fail large-scale tests at higher rates than other students, especially in the years immediately following the introduction of such tests. Some students with disabilities may even be encouraged to leave school and pursue alternative routes.

The Need for Knowledge of Learning Disabilities among the Academic Librarians

Quite a lot of students with special needs /specific learning difficulties have the perception that libraries have nothing to offer them. It is the responsibility of the entire library staff which includes the librarians and the library assistants to make sure that frail readers receive attentive service when they do visit the library. As academic librarians in an open and distance learning institution, we have the sole objective to make an extra effort(s) to create a welcoming and conducive environment for this large group of people who are unaccustomed to the library when they visit. This

entails changing the attitude/ approach of library staff and training them on the appropriate way to interact with and assist library users that have a learning disability. It is important that open and distance learning institution libraries include information about learning disabilities in their policy. Students and staff of open and distance learning institutions should acquire a broad knowledge of various reading difficulties and the needs of people affected by these. It may be useful to invite a special needs person for instance a dyslexic person to talk to librarians about what they would like to see the library make provision in their respect in terms of materials and services.

Library materials for students with learning disabilities

Open and distance learning academic libraries can meet the information needs of the special needs patron of the library for instance, the dyslexia students, by providing materials adequate for their learning such as:

1. Easy-to-Read books: There are two types of Easy-to-Read books: Adaptations of existing books, and Books written especially for students with reading difficulties

Some Easy-to-read-books are produced together with a taped version. The reader listens to the tape and follows the text in the printed book. This is a very good way to improve reading comprehension as well as reading culture. Students with learning disabilities would benefit from Easy-to-Read-books.

2. Talking books: Listening to a well-recorded book is very helpful for students with learning disabilities. "Reading by listening" gives them access to the same literature as those "who read by seeing". Talking books on tapes, compact discs (CDs), or new digital media are produced either by commercial publishing houses or libraries for the blind. A special kind of talking book has 2-3 different speed levels; it is particularly useful for improving reading skills/comprehension. The

reader listens at a comfortable speed level and follows the text in the printed book. These talking books are produced both for children and adults.

3. Periodicals: Students with reading difficulties need access to information in other formats besides books, e.g. recorded periodicals. These contain current information on world events, science, medicine, art, and various consumer areas. Recorded periodicals may be available through libraries for the blind. Through the audio format, persons with reading difficulties are given equal access to information that could make an important difference in their lives.

4. Reading Service: Reading personal letters and other written communication can be a major obstacle to students with reading difficulties. The academic libraries may be able to offer a reading service to their patrons who could bring or mail their material(s) to the library and have it recorded. It may also be possible for the libraries to scan a text into a computer where the patron can read it with the help of synthetic speech. The introduction of music in the library resources could also be very beneficial to all students with learning disabilities.

Challenges of Providing Information Services for Students with Learning Disabilities in Open And Distance Learning Academic Libraries.

An open and distance learning academic library is an indispensable tool in information services delivery. Irrespective of how important the library is, there are challenges or barriers influencing the effective information services delivery to students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities are not taken into consideration in most libraries in Nigeria, open and distance learning academic libraries are not exempted. Conspicuous among the challenges faced are inadequate funding of academic libraries, lack of awareness about available technology, lack of qualified and trained staff to handle learning disabled library users, inadequacy/lack of appropriate reading materials to mention but a few. Learning disabled library

users such as the dyslexic are confronted with the problem of reading aloud and understanding, slow and labor-intensive reading and writing, avoiding activities that involve reading, mispronouncing names or words or problems retrieving words, difficulty memorizing, difficulty solving mathematical problems, confusion about signposts indicating location, the problem of communicating with librarians and unwillingness to declare their status as being special needs. There are also insufficient library services and libraries often fail to have specific special provisions that encourage staff and students living with learning disabilities to use the library.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made to enable open and distance learning academic libraries in Nigeria to rise up to the needs of people with learning disabilities.

1. There is a need for open and distance learning academic libraries to present special library user education programmes for people with learning disabilities which will be aimed at educating all on their information needs and how to go about accessing such needs.
2. Nigerian Government at both state and federal levels should ensure that all libraries in their schools from nursery to university levels are adequately equipped with the necessary resources and qualified staff that will meet the information needs of all library users irrespective of their disabilities
4. There should be a section in the libraries marked out for people with reading disabilities and it should be attractively designed.
5. Open and distance learning academic libraries should make provision for the purchase of talking books for dyslexic persons.

6. Open and distance learning academic libraries must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities and should ensure that people with learning disabilities have equal access to library resources.
7. Good learners' support should be visible. Educative posters should be displayed in conspicuous places in the library and on the university premises. This would make the library welcoming to them and give some form of comfort.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that training and equipping librarians for an improved information service delivery mostly in this era of information and communications technology (ICT) to serve every library user(s) including disadvantaged users is vital. Librarians must give critical thought to inform every member(s) of the society with adequate information in order to meet their information needs and also to be relevant in the society.

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