Transforming Academic Libraries to Serve People with Special Needs in Nigeria: A Framework for Accessibility and Inclusivity

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the imperative for academic libraries in Nigeria to undergo transformation to ensure inclusive access for persons with special needs. Drawing upon best practices and insights, the paper identifies key challenges faced by individuals with special needs in accessing library resources and 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 academic libraries to become truly inclusive spaces, catering to the diverse needs of all users, thereby fostering equitable access to knowledge and learning opportunities.

Introduction

Academic libraries stand as pillars of knowledge and learning, fostering intellectual growth and academic excellence. However, amidst the pursuit of knowledge, there exists a segment of the population whose needs are often overlooked or most times face with formidable barriers to access and participation known as the persons with special needs. The term special needs can be found in various contexts and have different connotations which by definition encompasses physical,

emotional, intellectual, and sensory impairments (Rayini, 2017). According to Obialor (2018), people with special needs are people who has a sensory impairment (such as vision or hearing), someone with a mobility impairment, or someone who requires support to succeed in an educational environment. He further explained that people with special needs also include people with impairments in communication, behaviour, self-care (sometimes referred to as activities of daily living), social interaction, and cognition.

As the global conversation on inclusivity gains momentum, it is imperative to address the accessibility challenges faced by this demographic within the academic realm. Remodeling academic libraries to accommodate individuals with special needs not only aligns with principles of equality and social justice but also enriches the learning experience for all. 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 academic libraries remains uneven, presenting barriers to information and hindering the full participation of those with disabilities. Whether it be physical, sensory, or cognitive challenges, the traditional layout and resources of many academic libraries often fall short in meeting the diverse needs of their users.

This article aims to explore the pressing need for transforming the academic libraries in Nigeria to create spaces that are inclusive, welcoming, and accessible to individuals with special needs. By examining current challenges and best practices in inclusive design, we can pave the way for a more equitable and empowering educational environment. Through collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to accessibility, academic libraries can become beacons of inclusion, ensuring that every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the academic community.

The Concept of People with Special Needs

People with special needs are regarded as the physically challenged or people with disabilities or impairment. Recently, prisoners have been included as people who have special needs because of the condition they find themselves which may affect their psychology. Hence, Obialor (2018), opined that the terms, impairment, physically challenged, handicapped, disabled, and special needs persons are used interchangeably They are people that are in a state that restricts their ability to function physically, mentally or socially. Atabor (2015) identified those with physical challenges to include those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which

may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others, hence, their need for special attention.

The common disabilities among people include blindness, deafness, deformity, loss of limbs, mental illness, mental-retardation, muscular nervous and sensory disorders. Those with special needs are broadly categorized into four, namely: physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment and mental retardation. However, they have latent abilities, aspirations, visions and dreams that can be harnessed if proper attention is given to them (Atabor, 2015). The United Nations Organization (UNO) advocates that this category of people also have right to independent living in order to make meaningful contributions to their individual lives and to the society at large. In the higher education sector, the University Grants Commission (UGC) lends its support for special education activities that will empower people with different forms of disabilities. This scheme is known as Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (Rayini, 2017).

People with special needs 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 tem 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.

Understanding special needs in library services involves recognizing and accommodating the diverse requirements of patrons who may have physical, cognitive, sensory, or other disabilities which is crucial for ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all patrons.

Understanding the Information Needs of People with Special Needs

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 to know 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 persons with special needs 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

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navigate the space. In the same vein, Rukhsana etal. (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 (2000) 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 Accessing Academic Libraries' Services and Resources by Persons with Special Needs

Academic 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 special needs.

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, academic libraries are continually evolving to meet the diverse needs of their patrons.

Exploration through literatures revealed that there many strategies which academic libraries can implement to support students with disabilities and special needs, 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, academic libraries should conduct comprehensive needs assessments to understand the specific requirements of students with special needs 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 varying needs.

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 familiarize students with their usage. They equally stated that it is important to ensure that digital resources, including library websites, catalogs, 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 and inclusivity 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; inclusive spaces like quiet zones and collaborative spaces; and accessibility features like ramps, elevators and assistive technologies amongst others. He added that library staff should equally be trained to provide personalized assistance to students with special needs, 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 amongst library staff about the needs and challenges faced by students with special needs. Furthermore, libraries should also forge partnerships with disability support services, academic departments, and student organizations to coordinate efforts in supporting students with special needs.

Conclusion/Recommendation

Transforming academic libraries to better serve people with special needs 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. 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 devices amongst others.
- 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 Organizations (NGOs), Special Education Centers and Schools, University Disability Support Services amongst 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.

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