



ACCESSING LIBRARY SERVICES IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING: THE EXPERIENCES OF ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract:

This study sought to examine the experiences by students with disabilities in accessing the library at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Campus. The survey design was used to examine the experiences of students with disabilities in accessing library services at Zimbabwe Open University library. The sample for this study consisted of twenty-five students with disabilities who have access to Zimbabwe Open University library and ten library staff members who are in contact with the students. These participants were used in this study because they have experiences on how students are accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University library. Questionnaires were used in this research in an effort to reach the respondents. The respondents indicated that, the entrance, restrooms, stairs, elevators and special rooms of the library are not easily accessible to students with disabilities. The library needs to have specially trained staff that assists students with special needs. The library should be stocked with modern equipment like computers with JOS connected to the Internet, books in Braille, books on cassette or CD's, for use by students with visual impairment, and also, closed caption decoder, hard-wired, personal FM system and telecommunication devices for the hearing impairment.

Keywords: disabilities, library, library services, special needs, students with disabilities

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1. Introduction

Academic institutions, admit students with special needs, but little is done to meet their information needs as far as their course work and other research activities are concerned. This study sought to examine the experiences by students with disabilities in accessing the library at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Campus. Libraries give services to readers without discrimination of their disability, colour or creed. It is incumbent upon library management to provide the same level of service to persons with disabilities as is provided to users without disabilities. People with disabilities are making use of libraries in their search for data-based materials. With the new technologies available in libraries, users are now being provided with unprecedented access to communication and information all over the world. Information is essential to all human beings and every library's aim is to 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 disabilities.

Disability is conceptualized as a complex process involving bodily functions, health, environment, activity limitations and restrictions in social participation. A disability is a condition in which there is a lack of an individual's mental, mobile or moving functions of its respective organ or part. In this condition, the individual is not able to function or complete any task which is associated to its absent part or organ. It can also entail to any sensory, physical, cognitive or intellectual impairment and various types of chronic disease and mental illnesses. It's not compulsory in disability that the condition should occur from birth; it can rather occur at any time in an individual's life span. The term broadly classifies the illness or irregular capacity of any functioning of a body part, then it may relate to any associative physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, developmental, or some combination of problems. In institutions of higher learning, learners with disabilities have challenges in accessing educational services (Davis & O'Brien 1996). In order to assist in improving the educational outcomes of learners with disabilities, it is essential to understand the challenges that these learners experience in accessing institutional library services. Information resources and services available in any institutional information system must be capable of supporting research activities among students and faculty members of different physical and mental capabilities.

The experience at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Campus, has shown that students with disabilities are not fully using the library resources. This might be due to lack of relevant resources in the library, lack of skills among staff members, lack

of awareness among concerned students and the prevailing economic environment in Zimbabwe. Many learners with disabilities do not hold library cards or accounts that would enable them to use the accessible services that exist in the library. The few that visit the library may not get best services that suit their disability needs. This article sought to examine the challenges that are being faced by students with physical disabilities in accessing library services/materials.

Disabled people have the same information needs as the rest of society. This information is necessary for their participation in society. It enables them to be aware of all their rights and entitlements and to ensure that they can take responsibility for their own well-being. In some situations, because of restricted mobility or sensory impairment the students may not be able to use the services of Zimbabwe Open University library, and as a result may require special service provision, even though the information sought may be no different from that sought by non-disabled individuals.

Librarians may not have the necessary skills to handle various disabilities and how to serve patrons with these disabilities. The non-inclusion of reading materials about services to the disabled seriously incapacitates librarians in their service delivery to the disabled. Materials specifically produced for persons with reading disabilities should be easy to find. These materials may include talking books, easy-to-read books, Braille books and large print books. Attitude from the staff towards people living with disabilities, stigmatization and lack of resources may contribute to unequal opportunities or lack of access to library resources for students with disabilities. Librarians may fail to develop a close relationship between disabled library users and the staff who work with the students in the library. It is also important that the entire staff in a library be comfortable working with the disabled students and knowledgeable about what its library can offer and what services can be obtained elsewhere. Any help rendered to disabled users should not be considered as an act of sympathy but a necessity which libraries must provide.

People with disabilities are often discriminated from social activities within the institutions and are not treated in the same way as their able-bodied equals. These people with disabilities experience a lot of challenges to access opportunities equal to those enjoyed by their peers in day-to-day life (Mandesi, 2007). Academic libraries, as the providers of information and the heart of higher learning institutions, have the duty to remove the challenges that hinder learners with disabilities from accessing information from them. Some disabled students need large print directional signs throughout the library, stack identifiers provided in large print and Braille formats, the circulation desk may not be accessible to students on wheelchair and

telecommunication devices for the deaf may not be available. There may be no library study rooms available for patrons with disabilities who need to bring personal equipment or who need the assistance of a reader, with hearing protectors, or private study carrels available for users who are distracted by noise and movement around them.

Observations by the researcher have shown that there is lack of awareness among the physically challenged students about the materials which are useful for people with disabilities and are in library. Materials such as music collections, picture books, books in enlarged print, compact discs and digital versatile disc (DVD) are available in the library but there are not being used by students with hearing impairment and print disabilities. Students with hearing and print disability tend to hide their disabilities maybe because of fear of stigmatization. This study sought to explore the experiences of students with disabilities in accessing library services at Zimbabwe Open University Library.

The surroundings of the library, the entrance, restrooms, stairs, elevators and special rooms need to be accessible for persons with different kinds of disabilities. A person in a wheelchair should be able to reach all departments, a visually impaired person should be able to walk with a cane and find his/her way without bumping into obstacles. Mandesi (2007) posits that for people with disabilities to be treated equally, physical barriers to accessing information should be eliminated.

2. Statement of the Problem

Academic institutions, admit students with special needs, but little is done to meet their information needs as far as their course work and other research activities are concerned. Libraries do not have any policy on access and use for students with special needs. Also, the personnel who assist these groups of students do not have the requisite training to assist them. These facilities are in effect not disability friendly. There are no materials in Braille or special computers connected to the internet for use by visually impaired students; no gadgets for the hearing impaired. The physical structures of libraries are clear manifestation that much emphasis is placed on the able-bodied persons rather than physically challenged patrons. It is important therefore to examine the experiences by students with disabilities in accessing the library at Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Campus.

2.1 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of students with disabilities in accessing library services at Zimbabwe Open University?
2. What library services are provided for students with disabilities at Zimbabwe Open University Library?
3. How do students with disabilities access library services at Zimbabwe Open University?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The concept of disability

According to Reynolds and Janzen (2007), disability is *“a condition that may be caused by an accident, trauma, genetics or disease which may limit a person’s mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function”*. The disabled are the people who have physical, visual, mental or hearing impairment. The impairment has a substantial and long term adverse effect on the ability to perform normal day to-day activities, that border on their survival within the society. The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary (1991) describes a disability as anything, or want that prevents one’s doing something especially legal disqualification, physical incapacity caused by injury or disease.

Disabilities cause many personal challenges. In addition, many people with disabilities face economic inequity, illiteracy, cultural isolation, and discrimination in education, employment and the broad range of societal activities. Libraries play a catalytic role in the lives of people with disabilities by facilitating their full participation in society. Libraries may use strategies based upon the principles of universal design to ensure that library policy, resources and services meet the needs of all people.

3.2 Library services for students with disabilities

As more people with disabilities attend higher institutions, it is incumbent upon library management to provide the same level of service to them as is provided to users without disabilities. No doubt this group of people is making growing use of libraries and requires enhanced assistance in their search for data-based materials. With the new technologies available in libraries, users are now being provided with unprecedented access to communication and information all over the world. A crucial requirement for libraries is that the information they preserve and deliver in many formats must be made available to all including disabled users.

Libraries are a part of education system as hub of information resources and services. Therefore, at one side, trained and well managed library staff, resources, and

services, with special reference to disabled students, is the need of hour. While on the other side, frequent and easy access to library, information resources, and services, in accordance with varied requirements of disabilities, are from the basic requirements of disabled students. In addition, library and information system need to fill the gaps of communication and interaction to check the problems faced by disabled library users and students (Beaton, 2005).

Serving students with particular challenges can often be a challenge for example we need to be mindful of visual challenges in creating web pages. Librarians need to make aisle widths in the stacks adequate to accommodate students in wheelchairs. At the same time a significant portion of the collection is not available to the disabled without assistance simply because the materials are placed too high on the stacks.

Library staff may feel uncomfortable and self-conscious when assisting those with disabilities. They may have preconceptions and misconceptions about persons with certain disabilities and may be unaware that some disabilities are invisible and not readily apparent to others. It is only through adequate training those librarians can be sensitized to the special needs of people with disabilities and helps them feel more comfortable interacting with them. Hinton, (2003) pointed out that facility training focuses on the accessibility of libraries and the operation of adaptive equipment. Role-playing and simulation exercises can be effective training tools. Simulating a library patron in a wheelchair navigating the physical area of the library including using the elevator, accessing washrooms, moving through the stacks, attempting to reach books on upper and lower shelves are effective ways of making staff members aware of the difficulties patrons with physical disabilities encounter. Exercises can be developed to simulate patrons with vision and hearing impairments and learning disabilities. Librarians need to know how to operate various equipment that is available. Facility training also gives staff members the tools they need to evaluate what facilities or equipment may not be fully accessible so that they can either design measures to increase accessibility or devise work-around strategies

Another area of challenge to library staff pertains to voluntary disclosure of disability on the part of the students especially among those with hidden disabilities. Weedon et al. (2008) in their studies identified that disclosure and acceptance of the label of 'disability' was problematic for some students. One obvious reason for non-disclosure of disability status was to avoid labelling and social stigmatization. Students visit the library mostly with the encouragement of their teachers. As such students will be deprived of a holistic library experience if they are not motivated to visit the library. Hence lack of interest of the lectures to encourage students to visit the library will cause problems when librarians try to invite them to the library.

Librarians should also be made aware of and trained in the library's various assistive technology and referral services so that they can aid patrons with disabilities. Pakistan (2001) argues while all librarians need not become experts in disability services, they should know enough about disability issues to recognize when a student is in need of disability screening, and know who to collaborate within the disability field. Trainers on disability competency are available in many communities through disability advocacy and resource organizations, as well as state or county disability services agencies. Further, some social work departments at universities can provide staff training in serving people with disabilities in the student welfare system. Some schools of library and information studies now address the topic as one compound of a broader course. Librarians often rely on staff in their campus office for students with disabilities for information and support, including training to use hardware and software required to make collections accessible.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

The survey design which was mainly qualitative in nature was used. The survey was used to examine the experiences of students with disabilities in accessing library services at Zimbabwe Open University library. Since the present study sought to establish the challenges students with disabilities are experiencing in accessing library services at Zimbabwe Open University library, the survey design was chosen as the most appropriate design for the study.

4.2 Sample

The sample for this study consisted of twenty-five students with disabilities who have access to Zimbabwe Open University library and ten library staff members who are in contact with the students. These participants were used in this study because they have experiences on how students are accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University library. They are also in a position to give the required information on the inclusion of students with disabilities in accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University. The sample was drawn from 25 students with disabilities and ten library staff members who were purposively selected.

4.3 Instrumentation

Questionnaires were used in this research in an effort to reach the respondents. The questionnaire items for this study were open ended questions that sought to find the

challenges students with disabilities are experiencing in accessing library services at Zimbabwe Open University library. Two education experts were asked to check on the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items.

4.4 Procedure

The researcher distributed and collected the questionnaires. He explained the purpose of the study to potential participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the study.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were presented and analyzed qualitatively. Descriptive statistical tools such as frequencies, percentages were used to analyse the research questions.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Availability of required tools, materials and technology for students with disabilities when accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University

The needs of students with disabilities are being taken care of as most of the required facilities for them are available in the Zimbabwe Open University Library. The respondents showed that the availability of facilities and access to information about the availability of required tools, materials and technology for students with disabilities when accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University were difficulty to come by.

Some of the learners with disabilities pointed out that: Poor access to the library has manifested in a number of ways such as difficulty in reaching the shelves, difficulty in locating books and poor access to library staff for assistance.

The visually impaired students complained about inadequate reading materials with large prints and while students with deaf and hearing impairment also complained about lack of hard-wired devices and closed caption decoders which were conspicuously absent from the library. This implies that students with disabilities are faced with challenges in accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University.

5.2 Availability of trained staff to assist students with disabilities in accessing library facilities

The respondents from library staff members indicated that the library does not have specially trained staff members that assist students with special needs. Even though the

staff members sometimes assists those who visited the library, they have not been given any formal training in the form of workshops, in-service training, seminars or short courses to assist learners with disabilities.

Asked to comment on what should be done to improve on the services provided by the library staff to these special group of users, the staff members suggested that they would want the authorities concerned to train some of their Library Staff in the areas of locating shelves for reference books through to the use of Internet services for learners with disabilities.

5.3 The challenges that learners with disabilities face in accessing library facilities at Zimbabwe Open University

The respondents indicated that, the entrance, restrooms, stairs, elevators and special rooms of the library are not easily accessible to students with disabilities. A physically challenged student in a wheelchair should be able to reach all departments, a visually impaired person should be able to walk with a cane or a guide dog and find his or her way without bumping into obstacles. Deaf persons should be able to communicate with library staff.

The majority of the students with disabilities pointed out that the library does not have facilities that help them to access information. Students with hearing impairment and low vision do not have equipment to help them in researching in the library. However, there is a wide range of adaptive equipment used for a variety of disabilities that could be adapted for use with these groups of users as well as equipment and programs designed for this use.

6. Conclusions

From the above findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. From the responses of the physically challenged, it can be concluded that physical access to libraries is a challenge to these learners. The institution and the library need to enunciate policies that address the barriers faced by the physically-challenged in their quest to be educated.
2. The library does not have specially trained staff members that assist students with special needs. Even though the staff members sometimes assist those who visited the library, they have not been given any formal training in the form of workshops, in-service training, seminars or short courses.
3. There is lack of library materials such as Braille books, talking books, screen magnifier or visually challenged students.

7. Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations

1. There is need to re-design the libraries facilities to cater for both the physically able and disabled to access and use the libraries to promote teaching and learning.
2. The library should come up with a policy on how to cater for the needs of students with special needs and also disseminate the policy to all categories of library staff so that they would be well informed of the policy.
3. The library should be stocked with modern equipment like computers with JOS connected to the Internet, books in Braille, books on cassette or CD's, for use by students with visual impairment, and also, closed caption decoder, hard-wired, personal FM system and telecommunication devices for the hearing impairment.
4. In-service training in the form of workshops, seminars, or short courses should be incorporated into the training of library staff members in handling students with special needs.

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