Access Provision for Sight Impaired Students (SISs) in Nigerian University Libraries

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to determine access provision for sight-impaired students (SISs) in Nigerian university libraries. This is based on the principle that accessibility to available information in the library is a necessary fulcrum for effective use of information resources and services and the satisfaction of the information needs and educational growth of people in a community. *Sight-impaired students* refers to students who have sight disability. The main objective of setting up university libraries is to support and encourage scholarship and research in all fields of human endeavor, irrespective of abililty/disability. Thus, this paper examines the concept and characteristics of sight-impaired students and the role of Nigerian university libraries in serving SISs. The paper examines the gaps between available information resources and needed information resources, the challenges Nigerian university libraries face in filling the gaps, and makes relevant recommendations for enhancement of access provision for SISs.

Introduction

The achievement, advancement, and development of a given set of people in any organization depend on the provision of critical information resources. The accessibility to available information is necessary for the growth of people in the community. The entire outlook of the organization is affected if the provision of these services is lacking. University libraries are generally service-oriented organizations that provide services to all members of the university without prejudice or discrimination on the basis of any of its members' physical condition (Babalola and Halisco

2011). University libraries are set up basically to satisfy the teaching, learning, and research needs of their clients with the provision of required information resources (Gani and Magoi 2014).

University libraries constitute hubs of knowledge and information services in their institutions and are usually established as integral parts of their mother institutions (Okello-Obura and Ikoja-Odongo 2010). The information resources in university libraries are diverse but are critical to scholarship and are indispensable tools for the intellectual-capacity development of library users. These information resources should cover the information needs of the entire user community. Therefore, Nigerian university libraries should maintain books, journals, and other collections and services that are relevant to their library users. The implication is that they are supposed to always acquire printed and nonprinted forms of materials for all categories of library users.

The users in Nigerian university libraries consist of students, staff, and the entire academic community. Relevant information resources and services should be provided without discrimination on the basis of physical condition of the users. This is in line with the affirmation that information resources and services available in an institutional information system should be capable of supporting research activities among students and faculty members, including sight-impaired library users (Popoola 2008).

Disabled persons is defined as those set of citizens whose ability to survive in the competitive society around them is limited by mental, physical, or social disability. Among these physically challenged persons are sight-impaired students (SISs). *SISs* refers to students who have low vision of the eyes, the optic nerve, or the sight center of the brain resulting in decreased sight acuity (Williamson, Schauder, and Bow 2000). SISs are students who have vision disability and are unable to see properly because of disease or disorder of the eye.

Access to knowledge and information should be the main mandate of university libraries alongside supporting the mission of their parent institutions, which is teaching, learning, and research (Smart 2011). University libraries should provide access to knowledge, information resources, and works of imagination through a range of resources and services that are meant to be equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, or disability (Obinyan, Obinyan, and Aidenojie 2011). A subset of the disabled population, SISs, has essentially the same needs and desires for information to conduct their daily and business lives as do those who are without sight impairment (Tatomir and Durrance 2010).

University libraries worldwide acquire diverse information materials to meet the various needs of their users. Any university library that cannot satisfy the information needs of its clientele is an irresponsible information-resource center because it has lost its glory, usefulness, resourceful-

ness, and dependability (Ajidahun 2004). Libraries, therefore, should strive hard to satisfy the information needs and intellectual curiosity of their users by acquiring various information materials in order to justify their relevance and continued existence. The ideal library service is one where each student, regardless of the degree of sight impairment, has access to the materials and information at the time they are required, in a format and environment that can be used, in the quantities and quality that are required, and where the needs of the user are understood by the staff (Ayiah 2007). The development of collections should be based on the principle of access for all and include access to formats appropriate to specific client groups, for example braille and talking books for SISs. SISs traditionally use braille, audio materials, and large-print books produced and provided mostly by specialized libraries for the sight impaired.

Libraries in Nigeria face a lot of challenges in providing services to SISs because SISs have difficulty seeing or reading traditional information materials in the library and require special assistance in reading and learning. Nigerian university libraries provide skeletal services to SISs. These services are access to traditional library print collections and nothing more. This is a method of transmitting knowledge not generally accessible to SISs, and it is contrary to Ranganathan's five laws of librarianship, which will be used as a framework for this paper. The frustration of SISs in Nigerian university libraries is because they are disadvantaged in terms of access to educational resources (Dermody and Majekodunmi 2010). Therefore the problem of this study put in question form is as follows: What strategies could be adopted to improve access provision for SISs in Nigerian university libraries?

CHARACTERISTICS OF SISs IN NIGERIA

Sight-impaired students refers to students who are certified blind, vision impaired, or partially sighted. *SISs* refers to students who have low vision. This also means vision disability that, even with correction, adversely affects a student's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness. In Nigerian university libraries, SISs are nontraditional users of the library, thus they are not usually considered when the library wants to acquire materials. Zaid (2017) agreed that university libraries in Nigeria don't usually acquire information materials for SISs. Moreover, libraries are not organized in a way that SISs can easily access materials, and there is no technological equipment to assist them. They cannot read the traditional library print collection available to sighted students, yet the libraries do not have any plans to acquire alternative materials. To make matters worse, library staffs are not trained to assist them, thereby frustrating and discouraging SISs whenever they want to come to the library for research.

Sight-impaired students in Nigeria generally find it difficult to attend

school, gain employment, and be part of societal activities. In searching for information, the people most relied upon by SISs are family members and friends. The university libraries are seldom used by SISs. They prefer direct contact with librarians whom they feel can assist them; however, librarians are not trained to assist the SISs. Thus, it is not easy for SISs to use Nigerian university libraries. Undoubtedly, the combination of a lack of staff education and an unfriendly environment lead many of the sight impaired to eventually resort to begging for assistance, which results in a poor quality of life.

Role of University Libraries in Serving SISs in Nigeria
Nigerian university libraries have a special role to play to ensure that SISs are provided with much-needed materials and to enable ease of access to library resources just as they do for sighted students. We mustn't forget that the main objective of setting up libraries is to support and encourage scholarship and research in all fields of human endeavor, irrespective of whether users are sight impaired or not. Thus the role of libraries is to acquire, organize, and disseminate information in different formats for all categories of library users (Nwezeh and Shabi 2011).

Globally, a wide range of services are being offered by university libraries to SISs; however, such is not the case for SISs in most Nigerian university libraries. Very few Nigerian university libraries today provide services such as provision of audio information materials, CDs, cassettes, audio games, or facilities for SISs to access the internet. Generally, Nigerian university libraries provide services such as traditional printed materials, and braille is provided for only for a few subjects and periodicals. The kinds of services that should be provided by university libraries to SISs are outlined below.

Traditional special-format materials (braille and audio materials; e.g., talking books). Braille is a system of raised dots that SISs can read with their fingertips. In other words, it is a specialized form of writing that can only be understood by the SISs using their fingertips (Kajewski 2011). These braille materials are provided by libraries so that SISs can gain access to information, which has opened doors for SISs in all fields of human endeavor. Talking books are recorded information or knowledge in sound-media format (Johnson and Christiansen 2012). They are recorded information for the blind, either on audio tape, computer diskette, or CD-ROM (Makondo and Akakandelwa, n.d.). Unfortunately in Nigeria, because of the expensive nature of these audio resources, braille materials are more feasible alternatives.

Adaptive and assistive technologies for SISs. Provision of adaptive and assistive technologies for SISs should be accompanied by training activities for SISs and librarians alike (Vaccarella 2001).

The five laws of library science. In an effort to emphasis the role of libraries in serving users, Professor Shiyali Ramamarita Ranganathan developed five laws to guide libraries to serve users better. Professor Ranganathan, born in 1892, was one of the greatest librarians of the twentieth century. He was an educator, a librarian, and a thinker. His immense contribution to the field of the library profession, which includes the five laws of library science (1931), surpassed all others. The laws were posited for librarianship by Ranganathan as a guide to understanding and fostering professional roles, purposes, and goals for the profession. These laws are as follows:

- Books are for use.
- Every reader his book
- Every book its reader
- Save the time of the reader.
- A library is a growing organism.

Ranganathan concentrated on using the term *books* in his laws because he was aware of the role librarians can play in making these information materials available to readers. Librarians ensure that library services are provided to users. "Books are for use" means they are meant for use—a critical concept relevant to the accessibility of materials in libraries. In addition, the provision of these information materials should be founded upon easy access, storage, and retrieval by library users whenever they need it. This principle at the same time justifies Ranganathan's law of "Save the time of the reader," which means that when an enabling environment is created by libraries, it saves time spent by users in retrieving items. This reduces the burden users go through in getting their hands on these materials. The fifth and final law, "A library is a growing organism," expresses the need and importance of the growth of both the human and material resources of libraries. Libraries and librarians should not be stagnant. There should be steady development so that libraries can best serve users.

Ranganathan's laws of librarianship are an excellent benchmark for librarians to tap into for the benefit of the users they serve in particular and their profession in general. Thus, libraries should strive to create an enabling environment and be able to be at the peak of their services for the very purpose of satisfying not only the sighted students but also the SISs. The laws are a suitable foundation for this study as they emphasize the critical importance of books to teaching, research, and learning; the special relationship between books and their users; and the crucial role of librarians to be service oriented in order to enable quick access to the information materials in the library and save the time of the users who face challenges in accessing library materials.

Gaps between Available Information Resources and Needed Information Resources

The information needs of SISs include media devices, audio materials, braille, and audio extraction from printed books. In addition, SISs should have access to digital computer systems, customized packages, customized screen monitors, screen magnifiers, customized scanning machines with cutting-edge technology, and speech synthesizers (Bernardi 2004). If library users are made up of anybody that makes use of the library, whether sighted or sight impaired, then Nigerian university libraries should put facilities in place for SISs as they are also library users. It is sad that students who are sight impaired encounter many constraints in accessing information services in Nigerian university libraries. This is due to the fact that majority of the library collections are in traditional print format. Even when the libraries have braille in their collection, it is available for only a few subjects, which limits the information resources for SISs. This situation makes it quite difficult for SISs to access information. They spend a lot of time at the library waiting for volunteers to read to them the traditional library materials usually meant for sighted students.

Persons with any form of disability tend to be despised, marginalized, and to a greater extent, discriminated against all over the world. For these reasons, the range of services made available to them is usually limited. Kirkpatrick and Morgan (2001) emphasized that SISs should be provided with a wide variety of means to satiate their information needs. University libraries should therefore create an enabling environment for all categories of users to access information resources in the library. These university libraries could achieve this by rendering quick and understandable services to SISs through the following steps:

Step 1: Transforming printed information into braille formats
The delivery of information is the most effective means of reaching out to SISs for academic purposes. Since they can read braille materials, transforming the method of delivery will make their readings understandable. The majority of the existing information on almost every human endeavor appears mainly in traditional printed forms mostly inaccessible to the SISs. University libraries should therefore strive to convert their printed material into braille formats.

Step 2: Transforming printed information into oral formats
The delivery of information orally is another effective means of reaching out to SISs for academic purposes. Since they can listen, translating subjects into oral formats will make their learning interesting and relatively easy. Trained librarians who possess skills in information storage, retrieval,

and dissemination would be effective in guiding SISs to the information resources that are translated into oral formats.

Step 3: Use of focus-group discussion
Information related to the activities and areas of interest to sight-impaired students can be repackaged in the form of stories, songs, and drama and presented orally to them in groups. This would help SISs to share ideas so as to learn from each other and even from the people organizing the focus-group discussion.

Step 4: Use of audio devices in the library
A major advantage of packaging information through audio devices is the depth of its penetration and its affordability to power and operate. Therefore much of the information useful to SISs, including online resources, could be repackaged in local languages and disseminated through audio devices in the library. Most of the SISs like using audio devices because doing so significantly helps them gather useful information.

Challenges Nigerian Libraries Face in Filling Gaps
In providing library services to SISs, there are challenges. Dike (2003) listed the challenges Nigerian libraries face in filling these gaps as follows:

- The negative attitudes of some librarians. The idea that disability is a curse that will bring misfortune has been accepted by some people that would help them. Some believe that their condition is a burden; therefore helping them is seen as a waste of time and effort.
- They are hidden and find it difficult to associate with people. They often do not visit libraries or attend schools, either because their parents think that it is of no use or that they should not be wasting money on a sight-impaired child who does not have a bright future while able ones are suffering at home.
- They are in the minority group. They are easy to overlook or dismiss when the needs of the majority are overwhelming, as in Nigeria. People underrate and ignore them in social gatherings, and so information is not seen as being for people like them.
- Their needs are seen as expensive. These needs are not seen as cost effective because SISs are regarded as a minority who don't deserve higher funding for services per capita than other library users.

The greatest challenge facing Nigerian university libraries in filling the gaps is unavailability of funds due to the government's underestimation of the needs of SISs. Enough money is not allocated for the creation of good learning environments for SISs. The government does not have any special policy to compel institutions of higher learning to get materials in proper format (e.g., braille), quantity, and quality suitable for SISs. The

special paper used in provision of information in braille is very expensive because it is not available locally. Machinery used in making it is also very expensive, and maintenance is challenging as there are no spare parts in the country. However, the problems of SISs could be minimized if the recommendations below are considered.

Recommendations

Based on the identified problems that hinder the access of information by SISs in Nigerian university libraries, the following recommendations are made:

- Nigerian university libraries should be strongly supported with funds from the government and other support organizations and encouraged to create an enabling environment by providing facilities for SISs where they do not exist and to improve on them where they do exist.
- Establishment of a braille press should be of high priority among Nigerian university libraries. If the machines are already available, they should be quickly assembled and deployed for the making of braille information materials.
- The university libraries should double efforts in bringing common problems to the front burner while seeking solutions to them. With a common forum, they could approach the government and set forth their demands for better facilities for SISs. These cooperative forums should take the form of employing uniform books to be used as standards for each subject. These cooperative forums could also ease the work of the braille press and give it an opportunity to supply more relevant information materials to SISs.
- Training programs should be provided by the university libraries for librarians who will work with the SISs. Right now, there are no librarians specially trained for such services to SISs.
- Public awareness campaigns should be maximized on all broadcast media to enlighten people on the capacity of SISs to contribute to nation building and also to encourage resource persons to volunteer to create materials for SISs on CDs or tape at local studios. This would provide a rich source of information material for SISs in learning institutions.
- Members of the society should stop seeing SISs as burdens. Thus, raising public awareness about how SISs can contribute to and fit into society should be a focus of authorities and agencies that see to their welfare.
- There is need to adhere to Ranganathan's laws, which focus on the interests and needs of the user. For this reason, SISs requires a well-planned and friendly library that provides efficient and easy access to books and other information materials in various formats. The acquisition, organization, and dissemination of information materials should not deny SISs their rights in the library.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has dwelt on access provision for SISs in Nigerian university libraries—a focus founded on the principle that accessibility to available information is necessary for effective use of information resources and the satisfaction of the information needs and educational growth of people in a community. The paper has largely brought to light the role of university libraries in enhancing information provision and access for SISs. It also has highlighted how university libraries could render quick and comprehensive services to SISs.

There should be special library services targeted at facilitating access to needed information materials by SISs in Nigerian university libraries (Patte and Hannesdóttir 1984). These services should be designed to ease their access to information materials in the library with the hope that the knowledge acquired will improve their lives and help develop their potentials to achieve their dreams.

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