

PREPAREDNESS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES TO SERVE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: REFLECTIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI'S CHANCELLOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper reports on an empirical study which was conducted to investigate the preparedness of academic libraries to serve students with disabilities at University of Malawi, Chancellor College and University of Zululand. This is a qualitative study that employed an interpretive paradigm. The study used Oliver's social model of disability as an underpinning theory. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students with disabilities and library staff. In addition, physical audit of the two libraries was conducted. The study revealed that the two libraries are not ready to serve students with disabilities. Inaccessibility of library buildings, lack of materials in alternative formats, lack of assistive technologies, and lack of awareness of library electronic resources by students with disabilities are some of the barriers facing students with disabilities in the two libraries. Practical implications of the findings include developing enabling policies as the first step towards creating inclusive environments in libraries. Librarians must also move beyond acknowledging the need for equal provision of services by making it a reality. This paper encourages academic libraries to critically reassess their role in building inclusive universities where all students, whether disabled or not, are given an equal opportunity to full participation in the university education system. Regarding social implications, access to any form of information is a fundamental human right that must be enjoyed by everyone in society including persons with disabilities. The UNCRPD and Sustainable Development Goals, especially goal number 4, visualise an educational environment where persons with disabilities have equal and timely access to information like everyone else. Libraries as inclusive societies must champion this vision. As the social model of disability entails, access barriers must be identified and removed to make this a reality.*

KEYWORDS: *Sustainable Development Goals, students with disabilities, University of Malawi, University of Zululand.*

INTRODUCTION

African countries, including Malawi and South Africa, are committed to implementing inclusive education following the Salamanca Statement and Framework for action on special needs education UNESCO (1994). Subsequent treaties and instruments have reinforced the need for countries to treat education for children with disabilities as a priority. The United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) United Nations (2006) obliges state parties to perceive education for persons with disabilities through the human rights spectrum, and not as a welfare policy. The convention emphasises on the right to information for persons with disabilities, which must be respected by all service providers. Academic libraries are centres of knowledge within universities. As noted by Kenyon (2009, 6), access to information in developing countries is an institutional burden and not a personal one. As such, libraries are expected to provide all prescribed and recommended texts for students. Considering the increasing population of students with disabilities in

higher education, academic libraries should be prepared to cater for the information needs of all students, including those with disabilities. Moreover, students with disabilities have the same academic goals as those without disabilities Seyama (2014). Thus, they have the same rights as the non-disabled students.

UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI, CHANCELLOR COLLEGE LIBRARY

The status of information access and services for persons with disabilities in Malawi has been discussed by Eneya, Ocholla and Mostert (2018). The college started enrolling students with disabilities as early as 1970 (Kamchedzera 2015). Some of the services offered by the library include reference services, book lending, internet, printing and photocopying. The library also offers an information literacy programme which covers the following areas: libraries services, resources and facilities for students, online reference tools, plagiarism, e-resource searching techniques, and reference management tools.

The library website is a gateway to the different electronic databases provided by the library.

UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND LIBRARY

The vision of the library is “to be an integral part of teaching, learning and research at the University of Zululand by offering a world class dynamic and quality information service using multi-skilled personnel” University of Zululand Library (2018). Its motto is “the right information to the right person at the right time.

To fulfil its vision, the library conducts information literacy programmes for both students and staff. The programmes include among others (i) an overview of libraries services, resources and facilities for students, (ii) How to use e-books, (iii) Online reference tools, (iv) Plagiarism, (v) E-resource searching techniques, and (vi) reference management tools. These programmes are compulsory for all first-year students, both under- and postgraduate students. Students have hailed these programmes as being helpful in writing their research projects Ocholla, Mutsunguma, and Hadebe (2017, 12). However, a recent study by Eneya, Ocholla and Mostert (2020) revealed little or no consideration of students with disabilities in the planning and delivery of these programmes thereby denying them the necessary skills for navigating through the information maze.

PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Increased awareness of rights for persons with disabilities has led to growing enrolments of persons with disabilities in higher education. The University of Malawi’s Chancellor College and the University of Zululand have seen increased enrolment of students with disabilities over the past years. Additionally, the two institutions are implementing inclusive education as espoused by their respective governments. However, no study has been undertaken in either of the two institutions to investigate the preparedness of academic libraries to serve the growing population of students with disabilities. Considering the critical role that academic libraries play in students’ academic success, this study aimed to investigate the preparedness of the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College library and University of Zululand library in terms of library service provision for students with disabilities.

The following were the five objectives of this study:

1. To establish the availability and accessibility of library and information resources and services for students with disabilities in the two academic libraries;
2. To establish the accessibility of the buildings of the two academic libraries under study;
3. To investigate the awareness and training of library staff in disability issues of the two libraries;
4. To investigate the existence of library policy on students with disabilities;
5. To propose recommendations for disability service preparedness in the two academic libraries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on the interpretive paradigm. Linton (1998) recommends the use of qualitative approach to studying disability issues as it is key to understanding the genuine experience of persons with disabilities.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from students with disabilities and library staff from both universities. The existing disabilities during the period of study were physical (mobility), visual and hearing. Although there were students with medical disabilities, they were not included as it was beyond the scope of this study. The students were recruited through the disability units of the two universities. Library staff members were recruited through the office of the College Librarian at Chancellor College, and the deputy director of Library and Information services at the University of Zululand. Library staff included the deputy director/college librarian, client and information services librarian, short loan collection librarian, and electronic resources librarian, for both libraries.

Participation was voluntary and participants were assured of their privacy and confidentiality throughout the study.

A total of 15 students were interviewed at Chancellor College and 12 at the University of Zululand. Four library staff members were interviewed at each of the libraries. Table 1 below shows the number of students per disability type for the student participants.

Table 1 Student participants of the study

Disability	University of Malawi	University of Zululand
Physical	4	4
Visual	8	6
Hearing	3	2

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, we conducted library inspection to check compliance with policy and legislation. We developed an inspection checklist from the IFLA checklist (Irvall and Nielsen 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented and discussed in relation to the objectives of this study.

Accessibility of library buildings

Students with disabilities from both universities stated that they rarely went to the library because the entrances were fitted with turnstiles which made it impossible for wheelchair users to get through. The turnstiles were also a barrier to visually impaired students. In addition to the turnstiles, stairs leading to the upper level floors in both libraries were a barrier to physically and visually impaired students. Chancellor College Library had a lift which had broken down for over 20 years. The library lift at the University of Zululand Library had been non-functional for over a year during the time of data collection for the study. Despite this, information literacy sessions in both libraries were conducted at the first floor of the library building, which prevented students with physical disabilities from attending.

Students with disabilities at Chancellor College, mainly those with physical and visual disabilities, stated that they depended on their friends to borrow books from the library. Visually impaired students further indicated that they depended on their friends to read to them. Although the disability unit could at times produce alternative formats of texts, resource constraints made it impossible to do that for all students who needed

the service. This validates a recent study by Eneya, Ocholla and Mostert (2018) which showed that libraries in Malawi lag behind in contextualising the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) despite it being signed and ratified by the Malawi government. UNCRPD devotes the whole article (Article 9), to accessibility of information services and programmes.

Physical inspection in both libraries revealed that the two libraries had paid minimal attention to their physical environment to ensure accessibility for students with disabilities. There were no wheelchair accessible toilets, bookshelves were too high and located in inaccessible areas, with no assigned staff to assist students with disabilities. Library furniture was not adjustable and service counters were too high for wheelchair users. Although the University of Zululand Library had a separate entrance for wheelchair users, this entrance was always locked, and one had to seek permission to use it. The students expressed displeasure at this as it felt like asking for permission to enter the library which was not the case for the other students as stated by one student who had a physical disability:

"I hate it to always ask the security to open the door for me when getting in and out of the library. It's like asking for permission to use the library. It is for this reason that I stopped going to the library."

Another student who uses a wheelchair gave the following response when asked to explain her experience about using the university library:

"There is nothing I can tell you about the library. I don't know the inside of the library. I just know the outside. The first and last time I used the library I just stayed a few minutes because I felt too uncomfortable there. So, I went out and decided to never go back there again. I didn't like asking someone to open the door for me. I wondered why they didn't leave it open like the other door that is used by the rest of the students"

At both institutions, ramps had been constructed around the campuses. However, no ramps were constructed in the library which made navigation between library floors difficult, with the non-functional elevators.

At Chancellor College, students with disabilities were using the resource room located in the disability unit for all their academic activities, including studying. However, the resource room was too small for the number of students with disabilities then. The noise from the Braille embosser in the adjacent room and other students using the resource computers and Perkins Braille was too much for anyone to study. Chataika et al. (2012, 388) argue that the low provision of service for persons with disabilities is caused by society's unwillingness to invest in them as they are perceived to have low returns on investment.

The countries of both institutions under study have disability legislation policies that promote equal access to information for persons with disabilities. South Africa has the strongest disability legislation and policy on the continent. However, these are not reflected in practice. This substantiates an argument by the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions in the northern Metropolis (FOTIM) (FOTIM 2011) that some South African policies are for political symbolism and not practicality, hence their implementation is not a matter of concern.

Availability and accessibility of library resources

Interviews with library staff showed that both libraries had enough resources for students' use, both print and electronic.

Although students with physical disabilities could use the books and other resources, interviews with them indicated that they used them minimally. The book stock in both libraries was located on upper floors which made access difficult due to the non-functional lifts/elevators. This was escalated by the lack of designated staff in both libraries. Lack of information resources in alternative formats in both libraries made access to

library resources virtually impossible for visually impaired students. In addition, both libraries lacked assistive technologies such as Closed-Circuit Television (CCTVs), computers installed with Job Access with Speech (JAWS) and scanners among others.

The situation was slightly different at the University of Zululand. In South Africa, students with disabilities receive a disability allowance which they use to buy assistive devices and software through the disability office. So, the provision of assistive technologies is a personal burden, not institutional. It was not surprising therefore that during interviews with the deputy director of library and information services, she expressed ignorance about the existence of students with visual impairment at the institution, yet the disability office had registered over 20 students.

Although both libraries provided electronic resources through their library webpages, students with disabilities indicated that they were not familiar with them. This points to their exclusion from information literacy programmes, which includes usage of electronic resources. This is worrisome because the web has the potential to help students with disabilities to overcome the barriers presented by the physical library environment. It is noteworthy that websites of both libraries do not mention anything about students with disabilities. Even the promotional materials displayed at the entrance of these libraries make no reference to students with disabilities. This silence is worrisome as it gives an impression that the library does not recognize students with disabilities. It is not surprising that the students felt that the library was not meant for them as revealed in the interviews.

These findings echo the many studies highlighted in the earlier section that academic libraries have moved slowly in preparing to serve students with disabilities.

Staff awareness and training

Interviews with library staff responsible for check-in and check-out counters, short loan collection and e-resources section in both libraries indicated that library staff did not receive any awareness training on disability issues. The staff stated that there had been times when they did not know how to assist a student with disability, more especially those with hearing impairment. In turn, one student with a hearing impairment who made regular use of the library expressed dissatisfaction with the difficulty in communicating with library staff as he stated that:

"I don't like it when I go to the library and the staff cannot communicate with me. They keep referring me from one person to another, thereby wasting my time. I really don't like it."

Students with disabilities stated that library staff needed training to serve them better as some of them displayed an attitude that was discriminating. Sensitized and trained staff are key to creating a welcoming atmosphere for students with disabilities and fostering a sense of belonging to the library environment (Bodaghi, Cheong, & Zainab 2016, p. 93). Furthermore, Braathen and Loeb (2011, 73) attribute discrimination and stigmatization of persons with disabilities to lack of awareness in society.

Existence of library policy on disability

The study revealed that both libraries did not have any policy on library service provision to students with disabilities. This echoes Morley's (2010, 14) assertion that disability has not received policy or research attention in relation to higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. In the same vein, an earlier study by Mostert (2001) found that most libraries in Africa operated without a written policy. At Chancellor College Library, lack of a library disability policy has led to inconsistencies in the application of reasonable accommodation where some students with disabilities were given longer loan periods for short loan materials while others did not. This finding also reaffirms Morina's (2018, 14) claim that lack of a disability policy amounts to a barrier

in itself. Library disability policies highlight the library's recognition of and commitment to serving users with disabilities, hence their absence impedes library service provision to this group of users.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study shows that there is an inadequate provision for students with disabilities in the two participating libraries. Inaccessibility of the library buildings by physically and visually impaired students is a major barrier to accessing library information services in both libraries. Although a special entrance was provided at the University of Zululand library, the students felt uncomfortable with this arrangement because it remained closed and students had to seek permission to use it.

The silence on students with disabilities in the services and programmes offered by both libraries under study is too loud to be ignored. The non-mention of disability in library promotional materials and library websites and lack of library policies on students with disabilities demonstrate the lack of commitment to serve such students by the two libraries. This may create a hostile environment for students with disabilities as stated by some students who felt that the library was not meant for them. This kills the sense of belonging in the students which may have a negative impact on their studies.

Continued reliance on services offered by other units within the institutions like in the case of the University of Malawi's Chancellor College library smacks the "let the other guy do it" philosophy Nelson (1996, p. 399) which has resulted in continued marginalisation of students with disabilities by the library. Similarly, expecting students with disabilities to bridge the accessibility gap using their disability allowance pushes the disability burden to the individual students, and results in continued marginalisation of students with disabilities, as is the case at the University of Zululand library.

The two libraries in this study need to move out of their comfort zones and re-assess their services in relation to access needs for students with disabilities. Collaboration with the existing disability units at both institutions is the key to reaching out to students with disabilities in the libraries' services and programmes.

Access to information is a human right. Academic libraries have a moral and legal obligation to provide services to students with disabilities. The UNCRPD entails that the library, together with all resources and services, should be accessible to students with disabilities in the same way non-disabled students access it. Academic libraries should be prepared to contribute to the academic students with disabilities to achieve the SDGs. Libraries should realise their role of providing non-discriminative services to all users, in the light of ratified policies. While some modifications require national and institutional support with substantive financial investments, other improvements can be done with little or no financial investment, as shown in the recommendations below. The biggest investment towards serving students with disabilities is attitudinal change and sensitisation of staff as no policy or legislation can influence these. In the spirit of the social model, the library's physical, virtual and social environment should be designed in such a way that they are not a barrier to persons with disabilities.

From the findings of this study, for the two libraries to demonstrate preparedness for students with disabilities, we recommend the following:

- The libraries should conduct a needs assessment to identify potential use of special services and determine priorities for implementing improved services.
- The libraries should assign staff to assist students with disabilities and act as an intermediary between the library and disability unit.
- The libraries should develop guidelines for service provision to students with disabilities.
- Both libraries should conduct awareness and sensitisation training for all staff and the same should be offered to all new staff.

- The libraries should conduct information literacy sessions in rooms that are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities.

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