

## **Library and Information Services to the Blind and Visually Impaired: The Role of Academic Libraries in Nigeria.**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Provision of information and its resources is very vital in any society. Getting access to right information at the right time is very essential because an informed individual has better chances of doing things differently and would end up achieving excellent results. Information is supposed to be made available to every individual irrespective of social or economic status, region, country or even physical appearance or disabilities. Special needs library users which include the blind and visually impaired people have similar information needs as others. They read newspapers, listen to a music or recorded lectures or download electronic information from the Internet; the blind and visually impaired people also need access to relevant information in their chosen accessible format. Developing an efficient library service for special needs people is extremely important because there are significantly fewer books available commercially in accessible formats compared to what is published in print for the general public. Libraries (special, academic, public) have a moral obligation to make information available to all categories of users. This paper describes the information needs of blind and visually impaired people, the barriers faced by them, it also highlights the special equipment and services that the academic libraries are expected to provide for all library users irrespective of any health challenges. The paper also provides suggestive guidelines for improving the library and information services to the blind and visually impaired.

**Keywords-** Blind, Visually impaired, Library and Information Services, Academic libraries.

### **Introduction**

Libraries are repositories of knowledge and information. The willingness of the library and information professionals to proactively accept the evolving changes into new knowledge is by helping library and information science profession to remain significant and useful in the fast changing society (Majid & Khoo, 2009). Libraries provide access to information that its users need to participate in the society. They play a fundamental role in the society by providing resources and services that would create opportunities for learning improve literacy and also help create new ideas .Thus, the libraries and the librarians have the moral obligation to make information accessible to all categories of library users. Quite simply, libraries offer a means by which we can gain access to knowledge (White, 2012). 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, sex, nationality and language. This core

function includes the provision of information to people with disabilities. According to Abang (2005), the visually impaired are those with some amount of visual problems which could be remedied either by surgical operation or by optical corrections. This includes those who are partially sighted, low vision and the blind as the case may be. Visual impairment means having difficulties with one's vision. The difficulties could be defined according to the severity of impairment. It is believed that when individuals are visually impaired their learning, social interaction, locomotion, general operation and adjustment are bound to be adversely affected. "Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations." (World Health Organization). It is based on the above background that this paper examines the role of academic libraries in Nigeria in library and information services to the blind and visually impaired.

### **The Visually Impaired**

The terms means partially sighted, low vision, legally blind and totally blind are used in the educational context to describe students with visual impairments. These terms are defined as follows:

- Partially sighted- indicates some type of visual problem has resulted in a need for special education;
- Low vision- generally refers to a severe visual impairment not necessarily limited to distance vision. Low vision applies to all individuals with sight who are unable to read the newspaper at a normal viewing distance, even with the aid of eyeglasses or contact lenses. They use a combination of vision and other senses to learn, although they may require adaptations in lighting, the size of print, and sometimes braille.
- Legally blind- indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye or a very limited field of vision (20 degrees at its widest point) and totally blind students, who learn via braille or other non-visual media. Visual impairment is the consequence of a functional loss of vision, rather than the eye disorder itself. Eye disorders which can lead to visual impairments can

include retinal degeneration, albinism, cataracts, and glaucoma, muscular problems that result in visual disturbances, corneal disorders, diabetic retinopathy, congenital disorders, and infection.

The effect of visual problems on a child's development depends on the severity, type of loss, age at which the condition appears and overall functioning level of the child (Chen, 2014). Many individuals that have multiple disabilities may also have visual impairments resulting in motor, cognitive, and or social developmental delays during childhood. The visually impaired have little reason(s) to explore interesting objects in the environment and thus, may miss opportunities to have experiences and to learn. This lack of exploration may continue until learning becomes motivating or until intervention begins. Because they cannot see their parents or peers, they may be unable to imitate social behavior or understand non-verbal cues. Visual disabilities can create obstacles to a growing child's independence. Therefore, students with visual impairments may need additional help with special equipment and modifications in the regular curriculum to emphasize listening skills, communication, orientation and mobility, vocation/career options and daily living skills. Students with low vision or those who are legally blind may need help in using their residual vision more efficiently and in working with special aids and materials. Students who have visual impairments combined with other types of disabilities have a greater need for an interdisciplinary approach and may require greater emphasis on self-care and daily living skills.

Visual impairments seem to evoke more awkwardness than most other disabilities. People are uncomfortably aware of blindness because of its visibility. According to Giridher, Dandona, Prasad, Kovai & Dandona (2002), research has shown that most people have a special fear of blindness. It used to be the third most feared condition with only cancer and AIDS outranking it but now COVID-19 tops the list. One reason people may be so frightened of

becoming blind is that our eyes seem as vulnerable as they seem dangerously exposed. Another reason people fear loss of vision is that the sense of sight is linked so closely with the traditional concept of beauty. Great pleasure is derived from our sight and as people; our feelings about others are often based largely on physical appearances that we visually perceive. People's apprehension about visual impairment can be attributed to our lack of experience in interacting with individuals with visual impairment. It is not until we talk to them or read about their appreciation for sound, smells and touch that it is realized that sight is not the only sense that enables us to enjoy beauty or interact socially with other people.

### **Information Need and Information Seeking Behaviour of the Blind and Visually Impaired.**

Not much is known about the information seeking behavior of blind people; the information needs of blind people have been studied by Williamson, Schauder, & Bow (2000). Taylor (2008) viewed that information needs is a personal and unconscious conditions. He further articulated four levels of information need that an individual passes through before he or she makes formal encounters with an information professionals. These levels are visceral need, conscious need, formalized need and compromised need. Information need is defined as an individual or groups' desire to locate, access and obtain information to satisfy a conscious or unconscious need(s) (Yusuf, 2012). Wilson (2000) in (Yusuf, 2012) opined that information needs are influenced by a variety of factors such as the range of information sources available; the uses to which the information will be put; the background, motivation, professional orientation and individual characteristics of users. Other factors are socio-political, economic, legal and regulatory systems surrounding the users as well as the consequences of information use. The quality of sources of information available to the users is also important because

relevant sources are most likely to get useful information. Igwe (2012) also categorized the information needs into the following: (1) Educational and academics information needs. (2) Political information needs, (3) Job opportunities and business information needs. (4) Economic information needs, (5) Social and entertainment (arts) information needs. (6) Agricultural, geographical and environmental information needs, (7) Medical and health information needs, (8) Scientific and technological information needs (9) Religious and cultural information needs, (10) Legal and human rights information needs. (11) International and global information needs, Information Seeking Behaviour

According to (Yusuf, 2012) Information seeking behaviour is a basic activity indulged in by all people and manifested through a particular behaviour. It is also an aspect of scholarly work of most of the academic libraries who strive to develop collections, services and organizational structures that facilitate information seeking behaviour. Information seeking behaviour is expressed in various forms, from reading printed materials to asking friends or colleagues as the case maybe.

Some studies and reports have shown that library service to blind individual is not as good as could be. In interviews with blind library users, (Rayini, 2017) reported that Eldridge (1982) study showed that many blind people do not make use of the libraries; according to one patron, this is because they did not use libraries before losing their sight, so they are even less likely to use libraries after becoming blind. Other patrons suggested that blind and low vision patrons would like to be able to browse the stacks and make their own choices among talking or Braille books. Some of the patrons Eldridge interviewed also felt that society does not take blind people seriously and that most people with sight feel uncomfortable around the blind. Blind people would like to be taken seriously unfortunately, many struggle with poor self-image.

Eldridge also interviewed librarians and library school students. Many had creative ideas on how to improve services to blind library users. At the same time, some of the library school students did not feel there was much attention given to services for blind users, such as talking books, in the curriculum. In addition, many librarians are not trained in the needs of patrons who are blind or otherwise disabled.

### **Library and Information Services Available To the Blind and Visually Impaired**

Libraries and information centers around the world have developed specialized information services to meet the library and information needs of their visually impaired clientele (Babalola & Haliso, 2011). These include:

- (1) Braille books- Braille is a system of reading and writing whereby raised dots are used to represent letters which are read by touch. Braille books are appropriate for users who have both visual and hearing impairment.
- (2) Talking books- these are audio versions of books that could be recorded on cassettes, CD-ROM, DVD and on the internet as e-books. Talking books are preferred by majority of the visually impaired.
- (3) Talking newspapers- audio recordings of news articles in the dailies.
- (4) Large printed materials- these are documents printed in large fonts for use by partially sighted users.

Libraries are also taking advantage of advances in information and communication technology (ICT) to increase information access for the visually impaired. A broad range of ICT otherwise called adaptive or assistive technologies are now available to provide access to information in electronic databases and on the internet, giving blind users equal opportunity as the sighted. These innovative technologies include:

- (1) Screen magnifier- this is a software that allows text or graphics on computer screen to be magnified up to sixteen the original.
- (2) Screen reader: a software that reads out the content of a document to the reader.
- (3) Voice recognition software: this allows the user to input data into the computer by voice.

### **Library and Information Services to the Blind and Visually Impaired in Nigerian**

Libraries, as the providers of information should be at the forefront of removing the barriers hindering access to information. They play an important role as instrument of formal and informal education. Academic libraries are explicitly established to support students' and staffs' drive for research, self-development and lifelong learning in the academic environment. They help to preserve all individual's right to information by providing easy access to a collection that is wide enough to accommodate the interests of their heterogeneous users.

Unfortunately, library and information services to the visually impaired are almost non-existent in developing countries (Babalola & Haliso, 2011). Atinmo, (2007) stated that in Nigeria, library and information services to the visually impaired are largely undertaken by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Government intervention on the other hand is very minimal and focuses more on establishment of special education schools where teachers of physically handicapped children are trained rather than in provision of library materials for the visually impaired. These Non-Governmental Organizations are highly committed to the education and empowerment of the visually impaired students. The Non-Governmental Organizations produce textbooks in written in braille and sell them to blind secondary school students at cost price of the printed copies. In spite of their efforts, the Non-Governmental Organizations are unable to meet the growing demand for braille books due to inadequate funding, most of them depend on donations from foreign countries and the importation and

clearing of these books are expensive due to the inflation of the foreign currency. Braille production is cost intensive, requiring about three times the cost of conventional print.

Atinmo (2000)'s survey of Braille reading facilities available in the special schools also revealed that the library and information needs of the students cannot be adequately met with the few facilities available there.

In a study carried out on library and information services available to the visually impaired in academic libraries in Nigeria by Babalola & Haliso, (2011), revealed that none of the libraries surveyed has Braille book, talking books, talking newspaper and assistive technologies. The only materials that were available were audio books which according to the librarians were not acquired to serve the visually impaired. Their survey was also revealed that most of the audio materials came with textbooks and encyclopedia that the libraries acquired. In essence, the academic libraries lack most of the materials that can be accessed by impaired users. The reason for this was that the libraries have never had to face the challenge of serving their blind users. Apparently, there is an urgent need to improve the current level of library and information services available to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

In order to ascertain the current level of library and information services available presently to the visually impaired in academic libraries in Nigeria, the researcher conducted a telephone interview of some librarians in some Nigerian universities. Only the librarians who were willing to give out the information needed could be accessed and were included in the study. On the whole, a total of six librarians from both public and private universities were included in the survey. All the academic libraries in Nigeria would have been more appropriate but for constraints of time, funding and the COVID-19 pandemic in the country that restricted



movement of people. Below is the list of the names of the universities whose librarians were interviewed.

- (1) Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
- (2) ‘Nimbe Adedipe Library, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta
- (3) Tai Solarin University of Education Library.
- (4) National Open University of Nigeria Library.
- (5) Kaduna State University Library.
- (6) Mountain Top University Library.

Table 1: Library and Information Services Available to the Visually Impaired in Academic Libraries in Nigeria.

S/N	Name of Library	Library and Information Services				
		Braille Books	Talking Books	Audio Books	Talking Newspapers	Assistive Technologies. eg.Text Aloud( which is text to speech software and Duxbury Braille Translator( which is used in translating program for Microsoft Windows.
1	Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	No	No	Yes	No	No
2	‘Nimbe Adedipe Library, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta	No	No	No	No	No
3	Tai Solarin University of Education Library	Yes	No	No	No	No
4	National Open University of Nigeria Library	No	No	No	No	No
5	Kaduna State University Library.	No	No	No	No	No
6	Mountain Top University Library.	No	No	Yes	No	No

From Table above it shows that only one out of the six libraries surveyed has either Braille book, talking books, talking newspapers while none of the libraries surveyed had any form assisted technologies. Though the libraries that had audio books were just mere coincidence because according to the librarians were not acquired to serve the visually impaired most of the audio materials came with textbooks and encyclopedia that the libraries acquired. Unfortunately,

Nigerian academic libraries still lack most of the materials that can be accessed by visually impaired users. The reason for this was that the libraries have never had to face the challenge of serving blind students. Apparently, there is an urgent need to improve the current level of library and information services available to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

### **Challenges Militating against Library and Information Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired Library Users.**

The following have been identified as some of the challenges militating against library services for the visually impaired:

1. Inadequate trained library personnel to cater for the need of impaired users. Many of the services depend on having competent staff, achieving proper staff development and skills is a challenge (Corrall & Brewerton, 1999).
2. Lack of reliable and authentic figures for the number, age, sex, and educational level of the impaired users to be able to cater for their needs.
3. Inadequate funding and human resources in library services.
4. Lack of production and distribution of facilities for reading materials.
5. Architectural or building barriers, such as unequal access to the library with other counterparts in terms of facilities and services rendered.
6. Inadequate reading materials in the right format for impaired users.

### **Way forward to Improving Library and Information Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired Users in Nigeria.**

Babalola & Haliso (2011) asserted that the challenge of providing equitable library and information services to the impaired users is one that can only be tackled with the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders. Government, State and academic libraries, Non-Governmental Organizations and other agencies serving impaired people must work together on

the following strategies to improve library and information services for the impaired users. These strategies are:

1. Provision of adequate funding for both state and local libraries.
2. Periodical review of policies guiding the implementation of funding for the libraries.
3. Good Professional networking.
4. Human capacity building of staff in order to improve their skills, competencies and services rendered. For impaired service librarians should undergo sensitivity development that does not promote isolation of the disabled community.
5. Production and provision of talking books.
6. Investment in assistive technology for impaired or physically challenged library users for instance, Users on wheelchairs need tables set at a different height in order to access computer stations effectively. Computer monitors should be adjustable to different heights to enable ease.
7. The visually impaired service should follow a resource-based view of human resources management will be followed in order to ensure that staff is well equipped with skills to provide the services needed when dealing with accessibility issues. In accordance with Armstrong's (2012) definition of resource-based view of strategic human resource management, the impaired service department subscribes to the philosophy that investing in the intellectual capital of the firm's key to success. That is a participative management style should be implemented as staff will be more aware of the skills set needed to deal with the community, patrons and other less-trained staff members.

**Recommendations** The study recommends the followings;

1. Those in the practice of special education and stake holders should urgently consider impaired users in the library and information service delivery which will create encouraging environment to perform competitively with their counterparts.
2. Adequate number of librarians should be trained in other to be able to render ideal services to the impaired users.
3. Adequate funding should be provided by the Federal Government for efficient and effective procurement, installation and maintenance of library services.
4. There should be provision of updated equipment to meet with different physical and learning disabilities through adaptive technology.
5. Updating the current collections for impaired users should be undertaken.

### **Conclusion**

Visually impaired individuals have special needs because they are special people. However, they are not to be ignored, separated nor excluded from others and must not be treated differently either. They also have varieties of needs just as other individuals that are not impaired. History of the library and information services delivery for blind and physically challenged has revealed that in developed countries, it has been a normal practice to integrate all people together. But it appears the education system in the developing countries including Nigeria has neither fully embraced nor adopted the technology associated with this special library service. It is necessary for the library profession in Nigeria to give attention to these individuals, make provisions for their needs and welcome them into the regular library community.

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