Review Paper

Information and services provided to wheelchair mobile users in Nigeria: Role of Academic libraries

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Information is important for the survival of any society. In an academic community, information is used for learning, teaching, research and leisure. Government, Libraries, Librarians, and other information centres are to make information accessible to all categories of persons in the society, regardless of disabilities. However, in developing countries like Nigeria, accessibility to information is limited. Using the interview, telephone and e-mail methods; this study attempts to examine the information and services provided the wheelchair mobile users in Nigeria and how the services can be improved. It also looks at the roles of government and academic libraries in ensuring that library materials and information services are accessible to the wheelchair mobile users.

Key words: Wheelchair mobile users, Librarians, Government, Services, Nigeria, Academic Libraries, Information, Accessibility, Social inclusions.

INTRODUCTION

The duty of government, libraries, librarians and information centres, is to make information available to all categories of persons in the society regardless of their gender, age, race, political affiliation or disability. In developing countries like Nigeria, however, some people such as wheelchair mobile users still have limited access to information. A disability is defined as a condition that affects a person's ability to perform the activities of everyday life. Some people are born with disabilities, while others develop them in later life. There are many types of disability, but they are broadly classified as physical and mental. These disabilities vary greatly in causes, degrees and treatment. Common disabilities include blindness, deafness, deformity, loss of limbs, mental illness and retardation, muscular, nervous and sensory disorders (World Book Encyclopaedia 2004, p. 218). The wheelchair mobile users have the right to

information and the right to gain satisfaction in productive activity and personal fulfilment.

They need social and functional interaction with other people and their environment. Therefore, Federal and State government, Libraries and Librarians among other social and professional groups can help to ensure that wheelchair mobile users are able to actualize their aspirations. Government has a duty to ensure that public buildings which serve as offices, schools, and recreation sports satisfy the accessibility needs of all persons in the society; while libraries, librarians, and information centres must ensure that the wheelchair mobile users gain access to and are able to use information resources where they are located. This study therefore attempts to examine the information and services provided the wheelchair mobile users in Nigeria. It also looks at the roles of government and academic libraries in ensuring

that library materials and information services are accessible to the wheelchair mobile users and suggests how such services can be improved.

THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED STUDENTS AND INFORMATION NEEDS

On the issue of coping with disability and the relevance of information needs to the physically disabled, Adesina (2003) identifies their information needs as follows:

1.   Information for educational development: This factor is of paramount importance in an academic environment. Additional information is needed to build on what is taught in the classroom to promote academic excellence.
2.   Information for social and personal development: Information is needed on assistive devices that could aid mobility and government and other programs available to acquire such devices.
3.   Information for recreational purposes: These may include booklists and bibliographies to promote light reading.

THE WHEELCHAIR MOBILE USER: THE SEARCH FOR INFORMATION

Wheelchair mobile students need assistance while in the library. Viney (2006) notes that they encounter limitations to physical access such as inability to retrieve books from the higher reaches of the library shelves. They seek information to promote academic excellence which could be achieved by reading textbooks, periodicals, browsing, consulting abstracting and indexing materials in the library, online bibliographical sources, audio-visual materials etc. Furthermore, wheelchair mobile users like other disabled people could need information on education, health services, employment, politics, economy and other public services. Each of them has his/her individual information needs borne of their unique life experiences. They yearn for achievement and wish to improve their skills. But they suffer social discrimination and cultural bias which have negative impact on their information seeking behaviour. This is because the society generally viewed them as abnormal. Therefore serious efforts must be made by the government, libraries, institutions, as well as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to ensure that their information needs are met because disabled people have fought for long and hard to make their plights known. (Amamgbo, 2009).

SERVICES PROVIDED THE WHEELCHAIR MOBILE USERS IN NIGERIA

In a developing country like Nigeria, accessibility to information is limited for the wheelchair mobile users because they have no access to the numerous public services being provided. Their needs were not incorporated in the architectural designs of buildings. Quite a few studies have been carried out on the wheelchair mobile users. They found out that the wheelchair mobile users have been neglected by the Government of Nigeria and they also suffer isolation, rejection, and maltreatment from members of the society.

Hamzat TK and Dada OO (2005) affirms that wheelchair mobile users in Ibadan, Africa's second largest city can only gain access to 20% of public buildings which have facilities that provide basic services for health, recreation, social, financial, employment, and education needs. Findings reveals that many academic libraries in developing countries such as Nigeria unlike academic libraries in Europe and America, lack wheelchair ramps, elevators, wide doorways, suitable doors, and low library shelves for wheelchair mobile users. Moreover, most of the libraries are not spacious enough to accommodate wheelchair. Shortage of staff hinders the ability of the library to render adequate assistance.

Lawal-Solarin E (2010) in an article titled ''Banks and the physically challenged' noted that the wheelchair mobile Nigerians lack access to the banking halls. This is due to the anti-metal cubicles at the entrances to banks in Nigeria, which have denied this disadvantaged group the opportunities of planning for future investment. Moreover, they have problems of mobility. The public transport available in Nigeria, are not equipped for wheelchair entry.

Adebowale (2009) in a study investigating the nearness of public places like schools, banks, hospitals, recreation sports, offices etc from the residence of the physically challenged, notes that on the average about 40% of the physically challenged are not satisfied with the distance they have to cover.

Okoye (2010) observe that in situations a disabled person is not able to cope; it results in stereotyping, derogatory labelling and depersonalization. The public and policy makers must adopt a human right approach in addressing issues of disability instead of treating disability as a charity or social welfare matter.

RESOURCES NEEDED BY THE WHEELCHAIR MOBILE USERS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Generally, libraries and information centres should have

Table 1. Wheelchair accessibility

Parameters	Accessibility Requirements	Remarks
Height of steps/ Threshold	Maximum of 1/2inch (1.3cm)	Inaccessible if above ½ inch without threshold being bevelled or provision of a ramp
Doorway width	Maximum of 32inches (81.5cm)	Inaccessible if below 32inches (81.5cm)
Grade of ramp i.e. height/length	Maximum 1:12 with slope length less than 9m	Inaccessible if steeper than 1:12 or if slope of 1:12 is longer than 9m.
Width of route	Minimum of 36inches (90.0cm)	Inaccessible if below 36inches (90.0cm)

the following resources available to meet library and information needs of the wheelchair mobile users.

1.   **Wheelchair Ramps**: Should lead to the entrances of libraries. The ramps should be moderate and permanent.

2.   **Doorways**: The doorways should be wide enough to accommodate wheelchair users

3.   **Doors**: Automatic doors are appropriate for wheelchair easy access.

4.   **Space**: Libraries should be spacious enough for wheelchair mobile users to move around.

5.   **Elevators**: Need to ensure that elevator in individual library is always functioning and comfortable enough to accommodate wheelchair.

6.   **Tables and Chairs**: Comfortable chairs and tables are necessary in the library and they should be adjustable to wheelchair height.

7.   **Longer loan periods**: Unlike normal students, they should be given longer loan periods.

8.   **Library staff:** Well trained library staff's, always willing to render assistance to the disabled while in the library are to be employed as library staff.

9.   **Signage**: Signage should be available and visible to all library users.

10.   **Paths**: The accessible entrances are to be linked with paths.

11.   **Toilets**: Toilets should be neat and comfortable.

REQUIRED DIMENSIONS FOR WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY

Hamzat TK, Dada OO (2005) summarized required dimensions for wheelchair Accessibility using an abridged form of the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines as stated in Table 1.

SERVICES PROVIDED WHEELCHAIR MOBILE USERS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

The need to ascertain the level of services provided the wheelchair mobile users in academic libraries in a developing country like Nigeria, spurred the researcher to visit some academic libraries. She also contacted friends and principal librarians through e-mail and by telephone in federal, state and private libraries representing the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Below are the universities:

(1). Abia State University Library (ABI)
(2). Adekunle Alalade Library, Babcock University (ADE)
(3). Afe Babalola University Library (AFE)
(4). Bayero State University Library (BAY)
(5). Bells University of Technology Library (BEL)
(6). Benson Idahosa University Library (BEN)
(7). Bowen University Library (BOW)
(8). Centre For Learning Resources, Covenant University Library (COV)
(9). Delta State University Library (DEL)
(10) Enugu State University of Technology Library (ENU)
(11). Imo State University Library (IMO)
(12). Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan (KEN)
(13). Kogi State University Library (KOG)
(14). Nasarawa State University Library (NAS)
(15). Redeemer University Library (RED)
(16). Rivers State University Library (RIV)
(17). University of Agriculture Library (UAG)
(18). University of Technology Library, Minna (UTM)
(19). University of Technology Library, Yola (UTY)
(20). Usman Dan fodio University Library (USM)

RESULT AND FINDINGS

Table 2. Results and Findings.

DISCUSSION

The table above shows twenty selected academic libraries in Nigeria, the giant of Africa. The libraries are in federal, states, and private universities, representing the six geo-political zones in Nigeria.

Table 2. Results and Finding.

S/N	Library	Wheelchair Ramp	Upper Floors Without Elevator	Spacious Library	Wide Door Way	Low Shelves	Suitable Chairs/ Tables
1.	ABI	No	-	No	No	No	Yes
2.	ADE	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
3.	AFE	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
4.	BAY	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
5.	BEL	No	-	No	No	No	Yes
6.	BEN	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
7.	BOW	No	-	Yes	No	No	Yes
8.	COV	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
9.	DEL	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
10	ENU	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
11.	IMO	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
12.	KEN	Yes	-	No	Yes	No	No
13.	KOG	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
14.	NAS	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
15.	RED	No	-	No	No	Yes	Yes
16.	RIV	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
17.	UAG	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
18.	USM	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
19	UTM	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
20	UTY	No	No	No	No	No	No

Among the twenty selected academic libraries, only six university libraries, representing (30%) are not storied buildings, while the remaining fourteen libraries (70%) are storied buildings. Just five libraries, representing (35.7%) of the fourteen university libraries that are storied buildings have elevators to link upper floors while the remaining nine libraries, representing (64.29%) are without elevators. Furthermore, only five libraries, representing (25%) of the twenty university libraries have wheelchair ramps at the entrances of their libraries, while the remaining fifteen libraries, accounting for (75%) are without ramps at the entrances of their libraries for wheelchair mobile users. Five libraries, representing (25%) are spacious enough to accommodate movement of wheelchair while fifteen representing (75%) are not spacious enough for wheelchair users. Seventeen libraries, representing (85%) are with narrow doors not suitable for easy accessibility of wheelchair while only three libraries, representing (15%) have wide doors that are wheelchair accessible. Seventeen libraries, representing (85%) are libraries with high shelves while three libraries, representing (15%) are with low doors and only five, representing (25%) are without comfortable chairs and tables.

Physical access is the success and the source of opportunity in Education. This study revealed the great neglect being faced by the wheelchair mobile students. They are not adequately taken care of in the institutions of higher learning. The only adequate provisions available are comfortable chairs and tables and these could only be used if they gain access The Nigerian Government needs to make accessibility to public buildings for the less privileged persons in the society a priority and enact laws as U.S.A. and U.K did, to mandate accessibility. (Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) and Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (2011).

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING INFORMATION AND SERVICES TO THE WHEELCHAIR MOBILE USERS IN NIGERIA

1. The forward looking view of how the wheelchair mobile users can have access to information and services provided in public buildings, such as Banks, Libraries, Hospitals, Schools, Social/ Recreational buildings, Offices etc will take the interest and cooperation of all stakeholders: Librarians, Government (Federal and state), and NGOs among others.
2. **Finance**: Adequate fund to provide better facilities and services to the less privileged in the society.

Government is to ensure that local and state governments are adequately funded and there should be a policy for prudent management of available fund.

3.   **Legislation**: Government must ensure that the UN Conventions are not treated with levity; the same seriousness attached to the country's laws should be extended to the international convention on the rights and dignities of persons with disabilities.

4.   **Architecture**: The architectural design of many public buildings should take   cognisance of the needs of the wheelchair mobile users. The Government should enact laws, which mandate accessibility on public buildings and should ensure that the laws are strictly adhered to. The use of ramps, elevators, wide paths and doorways, or automatic door with card-swipe for access control both in and out of public buildings, would assist the wheelchair mobile users to move around and meet information needs.

5.   **Assistance**:   There would be need for public enlightenment on how the wheelchair mobile users should be treated in the public.

6.   **Signage**: The use of signage for direction within public buildings, especially buildings with upper floors is essential. Signage must be written in bold print and placed at a level that is visible.

11. CONCLUSION

The Federal and State Governments need to articulate policies that seek to remove the barriers faced by the less privileged in the society. UN Conventions are not to be treated lightly but with the same seriousness attached to the country's laws should be extended to the international convention on the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Moreover, Libraries, Schools, Banks and other public institutions must ensure that the wheelchair mobile users gain access to information and services they provide.

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