



## **DIGITIZING INFORMATION SOURCES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES FOR INFORMATION NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIA: BASIS FOR INCLUSIVENESS AND ACCESS**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper expresses the imperative for academic libraries in Nigeria to undergo transformation in order to ensure inclusive access for learners with special needs. Drawing upon best practices and visions, the paper highlights key challenges faced by individual learners with special needs in accessing library resources and services. More so, it offers a multi-faceted approach to transformation, incorporating physical infrastructure modifications, technical advancements, staff training, and community engagement creativities. It stresses that through practical recommendations, the paper aims to provide a bases or outline for Nigerian academic libraries to become truly inclusive spaces, catering to the diverse needs of all categories of users irrespective of physical challenge, thereby nurturing equitable access to information and learning opportunities in an inclusive environment. The paper concluded that ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness in providing library information services for adult learners with special needs means more than building ramps and accessible restrooms, rather; it calls for a change in basic attitudes by academic library personnel in providing services. As part of recommendation, the paper recommends among other things: Libraries' collection should be expanded to include materials in various formats such as braille, large print, and audio formats to cater for different learning preferences and disabilities.*

**Keywords:** Academic Libraries, Accessibility, Adult learners, Inclusivity, Special Needs, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Everyone has the right to information appropriate for his or her needs. Such information needs are channelled through education with the support of the library. Academic libraries to be precise stand as pillars of knowledge and learning, fostering intellectual growth and academic

excellence. However, amid the pursuit of knowledge, there exists a fraction of the population whose needs are often disregarded or most times face with daunting barriers to access information through formal education. These groups of individuals as commonly known are learners with special needs. The term special needs can be found in various perspectives and

have a different meaning which by definition encompasses physical, emotional, intellectual, and sensory impairments (Rigby, 2022). Similarly, Obialor (2020) described a person with special needs as someone who has a sensory impairment (such as vision or hearing), someone with a mobility impairment, or someone who requires support to succeed in an educational environment. The author further explained that learners with special needs also include learners with impairments in communication, behaviour, self-care (sometimes referred to as activities of daily living), social interaction, and cognition.

As the global discussion on inclusivity gains impetus, it is imperative to address the accessibility and challenges faced by this demographic within the academic realm. Re-modelling academic libraries to accommodate individuals with special needs not only aligns with principles of equality and social justice but also enriches the learning experience for all. Nigeria, as a nation known for its cultural multiplicity and rich heritage, is home to a diverse range of individuals with varying abilities and needs. Yet, the accessibility landscape within academic libraries remains uneven, presenting obstacles to information and hindering the full participation of those with disabilities. Whether physical, sensory, or cognitive challenges, the traditional layout and resources of many academic libraries often fall short in meeting the diverse needs of adult learners with one form of physical challenges or the other. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the pressing need for transforming the academic libraries in Nigeria to create spaces that are

inclusive, welcoming, and accessible to individuals with special needs. By examining current challenges and best practices in inclusive design, waves can be paved for a more equitable and empowering educational environment. Through collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to accessibility, academic libraries can become beacons of inclusion, ensuring that every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the academic community

### **The Concept of Learners with Special Needs**

Learners with special needs are regarded as the physically challenged or learners with disabilities or impairment. Recently, prisoners have been included as learners who have special needs because of the condition they find themselves in which may affect their psychology. In addressing this, Obialor (2020), opined that the terms, impairment, physically challenged, handicapped, disabled, and special needs learners are used interchangeably. They are learners that are in a state that restricts their ability to function physically, mentally or socially. Aina (2019) identified those with physical challenges to include those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others, hence, their need for special attention. The common disabilities include blindness, deafness, deformity, loss of limbs, mental illness, mental-retardation, muscular nervous and sensory disorders among most notable disabilities.

Adult learners with special needs are broadly categorized into four, namely: physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment and mental retardation. However, they have latent abilities, aspirations, visions and dreams that can be harnessed if proper attention is given to them (Aina, 2019). The United Nations Organization (UNO) advocates that this category of adult learners also have right to independent living in order to make meaningful contributions to their individual lives and to the society at large. In the higher education sector, the University Grants Commission (UGC) lends its support for special education activities that will empower learners with different forms of challenges or disabilities. This scheme is known as Higher Education for Learners with Special Needs (Rigby, 2022). Learners with special needs are also in need of library and information services for various purposes. These include education, information, research, entertainment or recreational, etc. They are seen as special users of the library. A special user or patron according to Rothwell (2020) is an individual who cannot make use of information resources in the library without adaptive equipment (augmented or assisting equipment or resources). It is also a situation where there is inability to do what is considered 'normal' to a non-disabled person. The term 'special needs' in the context of library services as identified by Lawal-Solarin (2022) is connected to the needs of learners who cannot make use of conventional libraries, library materials and services. They need assistance to navigate through the information materials available

in databases and new technologies in libraries which has increased access to communication and information globally. They are regarded as special because library services are provided to them with special materials, activities, equipment and care.

Special library services are provided to users with challenges or disabilities in whatever form in order to satisfy their information needs. Learners with special needs can easily be identified in the society because they possess certain characteristics. Their condition also places them in certain psychological level. These characteristics and psychology may be as a result of the way they see themselves or the behaviour of other people towards them. Learners with special needs suffer rejection, isolation and maltreatment from other members of the society. They are ridiculed, and seen as those to be pitied. They are viewed as abnormal and denied some public services such as library and information provision. Socially, they are isolated and restricted from interacting fully with their able-bodied counterparts. They are seen as being entirely different from others.

Educationally, they are prevented either by physical or mental defect from receiving normal education or living a normal life hence the need for them to be given special treatment to assist them blend with the society. Understanding special needs in library services involves recognizing and accommodating the diverse requirements of readers who may have physical, cognitive, sensory, or other disabilities. Understanding special needs in library services is crucial for ensuring

inclusiveness and access for all users not minding their challenges.

### **Understanding the Information Needs of Adult Learners with Special Needs**

Information need could be defined as an individual or group's desire to search and get information to satisfy a conscious or unconscious need. Onifade & Babarinde (2022) defined information need as an individual or a group's desire to locate and obtain information to satisfy a conscious or unconscious need. Therefore, information needs of individuals in any society are affected by the intent and its usefulness. The urgency of the information need, determines the approach to satisfying it. Information need of learners with special needs may be categorized according to the purpose and perhaps the nature of the impairment which according to Lawal-Solarin (2022) revolve around the following:

**Comprehensive education and informal learning needs:** – education provides opportunities for learners with special needs to gain a sense of personal achievement and self-respect. It helps to improve a person's ability to communicate, reason, think, to broaden his interests, to introduce him to a wider circle of friends and gradually improve his competence as a person.

**Financial informational needs:** Learners with special needs have the same financial interests and information needs like other free citizens in the larger society as such, they also require knowing what they can do with their lives that will help them make little money or be equipped

economically without leaning on relatives for support.

**Health needs:** There are a lot of health hazards in the environment and they need information on how to adapt to the environment. Information needs span across health and hygiene, prevention, cure and management of ill health.

**Legal needs:** They need information about the law and their rights in order to see how they can get out of incarceration or where they have gone wrong in other not to commit the offence again. They will also get information on punishment for offences committed; in addition, information gathered can be used to seek for redress in court.

**Recreational needs:** They need information that can help them overcome emotional boredom and psychological trauma. This is because, Access to information will help them recreate themselves.

**Religious information needs:** This type of information will lead to their spiritual and character reformation to live better lives and to become better version of themselves.

**Vocational needs:** Information is also needed in vocational education. This will help them acquire skills that they need to be independent. Information materials such as manual can help them acquire knowledge on how to operate or do certain things on their own.

### **Challenges faced by learners with special needs in accessing library resources and services**

As stated by Anaraki (2020), the term special needs encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions, including but not limited to physical disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, cognitive disorders, and neurodevelopmental differences. The author expressed that each of these conditions presents unique obstacles that can hinder an individual's ability to fully engage with library materials and facilities. From physical barriers within library buildings to the lack of accessible library resources, the challenges faced by learners with special needs underscore the pressing need for inclusivity and accommodation within library environments.

Libraries are often referred to as the gatekeepers of knowledge, serving as vital hubs for learning, research, and community engagement. However, for learners with special needs, accessing these invaluable resources and services can present a myriad of challenges. In an age where information is increasingly digital and technology-driven, it is crucial to address the barriers that impede the inclusion and participation of individuals with diverse abilities in the library environment. According to Adalaku (2019), libraries are meant to be inclusive spaces where everyone, regardless of ability, can access resources and services, however, individuals with special needs often encounter unique challenges that hinder their ability to fully utilize library facilities. Prominent amongst these challenges is lack

of physical accessibility. Andreou (2021) posited that some libraries may have physical barriers such as stairs, narrow walkways, or inaccessible restrooms which could create barrier for individuals with mobility impairments to navigate the space. In the same vein, Andreou further posited that many library resources and services have shifted online, but individuals with visual impairments or other disabilities may face barriers in accessing digital contents that are not compatible with screen readers or other assistive technologies. Furthermore, in the work of Rigby (2022), websites, online catalogues, and library databases may not be designed with accessibility features in mind, making it challenging for users with disabilities to navigate and retrieve information. The author further buttressed that libraries may not always have staff trained in sign language or other forms of communication, making it difficult for individuals with hearing impairments to communicate their needs or access assistance.

Anaraki (2021) reiterated that written materials, including signage and instructional guides, may not be available in accessible formats such as braille or large print, limiting access for individuals with visual impairments. The researcher added that libraries may not have sufficient adaptive equipment such as screen readers, magnifiers, or specialized software to accommodate the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities and even when adaptive technology equipment is available, it may not be properly maintained or updated to meet evolving accessibility standards. On the other hand, Andreou

(2021) further submitted that individuals with special needs may encounter stigma, prejudice, or lack of awareness from library staff or other users, leading to feelings of exclusion or discomfort.

### **Strategies Academic Libraries can adopt to make their Services and Resources more accessible to Adult Learners with Special Needs**

In contemporary world, academic libraries serve as vital hubs for students' learning, research, and academic success. However, to truly fulfil their mission of inclusiveness and equitable access, libraries must ensure that their services and resources are accessible to all users, including those with special needs. In the words of Routhwell (2023), addressing the unique needs of users with disabilities involves a multifaceted approach that encompasses both physical and digital aspects of library services and resources. Range from ensuring physical spaces are navigable and accommodating to implementing assistive technologies and providing alternative formats for materials, academic libraries are continually evolving to meet the diverse needs of their patrons. Survey through literatures revealed that there many strategies the academic libraries can implement to support adult learners with disabilities and special needs, fostering an environment where every individual can thrive.

For instance, Aina (2019) opined that number one strategy is to conduct needs assessments. The author maintained that before implementing accessibility strategies, academic libraries should conduct

comprehensive needs assessments to understand the specific requirements of learners with special needs which may involve surveys, focus groups, or consultations with disability support services to identify barriers and areas for improvement. The author also reiterated that it should be ensured that library facilities are physically accessible by providing ramps, elevators, and designated parking spaces for students with mobility impairments. Additionally, consideration should be given to adjustable furniture, such as height-adjustable desks and tables, to accommodate students with varying needs. Onifade & Babarinde (2022) asserted that libraries should provide assistive technologies such as screen readers, magnification software, text-to-speech converters and alternative input devices to support students with visual, auditory, or motor impairments, making them readily available and offer training sessions to familiarize students with their usage. They equally stated that it is important to ensure that digital resources, including library websites, catalogues, databases, and online journals, comply with accessibility standards such as web content accessibility guidelines. This may involve providing alternative text for images, captions for videos, and ensuring compatibility with screen readers. Adopt universal design principles to create library spaces, services, and resources that are accessible to all users, regardless of their abilities is another strategy as posited by Anaraki (2021). This involves designing with flexibility and inclusivity in mind, such as providing multiple formats for instructional materials and utilizing clear

signage and way finding cues. Anaraki added that library staff should equally be trained to provide personalized assistance to students with special needs, including navigating library resources, locating accessible materials, and using assistive technologies effectively.

More importantly, establishing accessible help desk or service support point which is managed by knowledgeable personnel can also go long way satisfying information needs of adult learners with special needs. In a similar way, promotion of awareness and sensitivity among library staff and the broader academic community about the needs and challenges faced by students with special needs by offering training sessions, workshops, and resources to cultivate a supportive and inclusive environment is another key factor. Furthermore, libraries should form partnerships with disability support services, academic departments, and student organizations to coordinate efforts in supporting students with special needs. Additionally, collaborative initiatives such as accessible events, workshops, and outreach programmes tailored towards diverse needs of adult learners with special needs.

## **Conclusion**

Digitizing information services in academic libraries to serve adult learners with special needs in Nigeria is not only a matter of gaining access but also of inclusiveness and equity. By implementing inclusive practices, such as providing assistive technologies, creating accessible spaces, and offering specialized services,

academic libraries can ensure that all adult learner individuals, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to information and resources. This not only enriches the educational experience for adult learners with special needs but also fosters a more diverse and inclusive learning environment for all. Therefore, ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness in providing library information services for adult learners with special needs means more than building ramps and accessible restrooms, rather; it calls for a change in basic attitudes by academic library's staff in providing services.

## **Recommendations**

The paper therefore recommends:

- Academic libraries should invest in a range of assistive technologies champion to offer satisfactory information for learners with special needs.
- Academic Libraries should ensure that their physical infrastructure is accessible to individuals with mobility impairments.
- Feedback mechanism should be established to continuously gather input from users with special needs.
- Policies at the institutional and governmental levels that prioritize accessibility and inclusivity in academic libraries for learners with special needs should be advocated.
- Librarians and staff should undergo training and re-training in order to

appraise or understand the needs of learners with special needs.

- Partnerships should be forged with disability services offices to better understand the needs of students with disabilities and tailor library services accordingly.
- Above all, Library's collection should be expanded to include materials in various formats such as braille, large print, and audio formats to cater to different learning preferences and abilities.

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