CHALLENGES OF ACCESSING LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Despite the availability of library and information services in University libraries, the services are not accessible and optimally utilized and benefited by persons with disabilities (PWDs). This is because the typical library favors the able-bodied patrons more. Therefore, this study sought to find out challenges that Persons with Disabilities in University libraries in Meru County faced in accessing library and information services and to present practical solutions that were appropriate to the situation. The researcher adopted descriptive survey design. The study targeted four (4) University Libraries in Meru County. The study population comprised of all professionally trained librarians from the selected universities and all library users with disabilities with biasness towards the visually impaired, the hearing impaired and the mobility impaired. A purposive sampling technique was employed and the sample size was fifty five (55) respondents composing of thirty one (31) librarians, six (6) visually impaired library users, sixteen (16) mobility impaired library users and two (2) hard hearing users. Data was collected using questionnaires and interview schedule. Data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics. The results were presented by use of percentages, frequency tables, bar graphs and pie-charts. The evidence emanating from the study strongly indicated that provision of library and information services in the four libraries to students with disabilities was largely characterized structural inadequacies, unskilled staff , and absence of internally formulated policy frameworks. In particular, the study revealed that the libraries had no sufficient facilities, resources and equipment such as the lifts, spacious ramps, Braille materials, hearing aids required by students with disabilities. Thus, the study concluded that the libraries do not have the needs of students with disabilities at heart. The study makes several recommendations for considerations to the research community, library decision makers, staff at the various library sections and to students with disabilities themselves.

Keywords: Accessibility, library and information services, persons with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

According to statistics carried out by the Kenya National Survey for Persons with Disabilities (KNSPWD), around 4.6% of the population, or 1.7 million Kenyans, have various types of disabilities(National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development & Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2008).Of this, the largest proportion is physical impairment (413,698) followed by visual impairment (331,594). According to the Task Force Report on Special Education, only 1.5 – 2% of PWD's within Kenya attend school and PWDs constitute only 1% of undergraduate students in higher education (National Disability Authority, 2004).

The accessibility of the immediate surroundings plays an important role in PWDs' participation in various activities (KNSPWD, 2007).

Education is an important investment that a country can make and enhancing accessibility to educational services is significant in the development of a nation (World Bank, 1993). Rumsey (2002) states that many persons with disabilities still encounter problems accessing library services because the typical library still works best for able-bodied patrons.Public transport laws do not facilitate modification of Public Service Vehicles and they are inaccessible to persons with physical impairments (Ingstad,2007). Pivik, (2002) indicated that the major problem experienced by PWDs, especially those with mobility problem are barriers in the physical environment which includes the surroundings of the school library, the entrance, stairs, elevators or ramp etc.

A study carried out by Anambo(2007) at Kenyatta Memorial Library (JKML) of the University of Nairobi indicated that provision of library within JKML to students with disabilities is largely characterized by a combination of structural inadequacies, staff incapacity, and absence of internally formulated compliance with national and international policy frameworks. In particular, the study revealed that the library had no facilities, resources and equipment such as the lifts, spacious ramps, Braille materials, hearing aids required by students with disabilities. The attitude of staff towards students with disabilities was also found to be unfavorable (Anambo, 2007)

Muya's 1990 seminar presentation (as cited in Ochoggia, 2003) reveals that the state of library and information services for visually handicapped people in Kenya was regarded "as a sad story due to inadequate funding" (p. 311). Similarly, Ochoggia's 2003 case study on the provision of library services to visually handicapped students in Kenyatta University (as cited in Ochoggia, 2003) found that the university relied on inadequate Braille materials, a few recorded books, and staff who lacked the specialized skills needed to adequately serve visually handicapped students

Statement of the Problem

In spite the availability of library and information services in University libraries, the services are not accessible and optimally utilized and benefited by PWDs. This is because the typical library still works best for able-bodied patrons. Many persons with disabilities still encounter problems (Rumsey, 2002).

This study intends to examine the challenges that PWDs face in accessing Library and information services in selected university libraries in Meru County. It will provide the basis for improving planning for PWDs in terms of Library services, training, and assistive devices. In this way PWDs will be assisted and enabled to access library and information services effectively and with dignity as full members of the Universities.

Objectives

1. To find out the availability of library and information services offered to PWDs in University Libraries in Meru County.
2. To identify the Assistive technologies requirements of PWDs in University Libraries in Meru County.
3. To find out if University libraries in Meru County have service personnel with appropriates skills to serve PWDs.
4. To identify the physical environment requirements of PWDs in University Libraries in Meru County.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employed a descriptive survey research design.. The principal aim in employing descriptive research in this study was to describe the nature of a situation as it exists at the time of the study and to explore the causes of the situation.

The study was conducted in selected universities in Meru County.The study targeted librarians and PWDs from the selected universities. Librarians were selected because they interact directly with PWDs during service provision.while PWDs were selected as they are the subject under study.

The researcher used purposive sampling to select sample respondents. Due to the small number of PWDs and librarians, the entire population represented the sample. The study utilized two main instruments to collect data: questionnaires and interviews. Self-administered Questionnaires were used for mobility impaired users, hard hearing users and visually impaired users. Questionnaires in large print were administered to partially blind users and a brailed one for the totally blind users. Questionnaires helped maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted to librarians. Open-ended questions allowed the interviewer, to probe deeper into the initial responses of the respondent to gain a more detailed answer to the questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic information

The total response rate for PWDs was 83% and was considered adequate enough. 48% of the respondents were male while 52% were female hence fair representation in the field.

Data collected showed that most librarians, 52% had attained their Bachelor's degree, 38% had Diplomas, 7% were in the certificate level and only 3% of the library staff had attained their Master's degree.

Most PWDs (60%) described themselves as mobility impaired, 15% partially blind,15% totally blind and 10% hard of hearing. The finding above confirms Bradley (2006) that all PWDs are not the same. So different solutions to the barriers they faced are needed.

Library and information service rating

90%- 100% of the PWDs indicated the Lending, book retrieving, reprographic services, C.A.S, internet services and Reservation services as the most sort library and information services. These services were also rated as Very good at 75-100%. Personal reader, Text enlargement and Interlibrary lending services were the least sort library and information services and were rated as poor. The inference drawn from the above data shows that accessibility to information sources available to respondents in the various libraries under study are poor. The respondents are not adequately catered for. Thus, the conclusion drawn is that normal students are at greater advantage over the physically challenged. Though the library services provided in the four universities are useful for their studies, the respondents could not make use of them because of their challenges.

Hence, the data collaborates the view of Popoola (2001) that information availability does not mean accessibility and use. Iyoro (2004) affirms accessibility as one of the pre-requisites of information use. Seth and Parida (2006), Ugwu (2008), Nnadozie et.al (2008) cautioned that availability of information resources and service does not automatically translate to information accessibility and use. Also, Ugah (2008) opined that the more accessible information sources are, the more likely they are to be used.

Wright (2002) says that libraries should think on how they can modify their programmes and services to serve the physically challenged, such library services, according to Zaki (1990) will help to re-orientate the thinking of the disabled and make them live better lives. This can help them overcome the educational cultural and economic deficiencies in their lives.
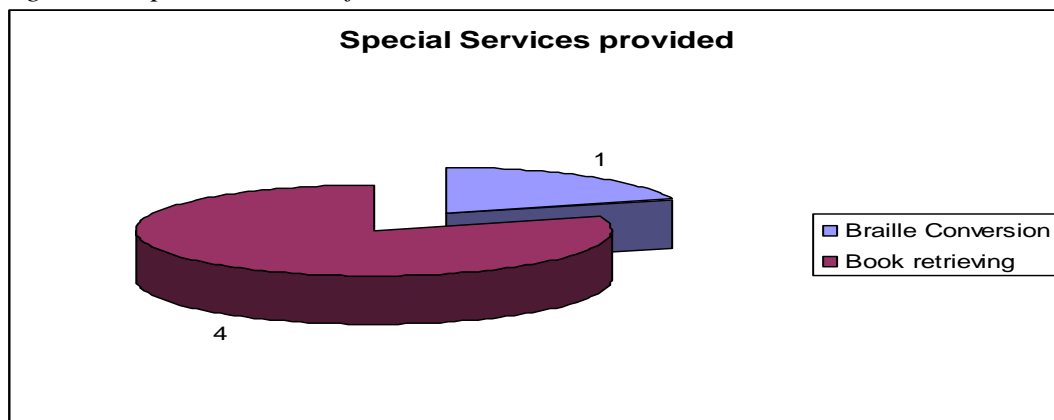
Table 1: Library and information service rating

Information Source		Very Good		Good		Fair		Poor	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Book retrieving	18	15	83	3	17				
Personal reader	6							6	100
Text enlargement	3							3	100
Braille conversion	4			1	25	3	75		
IL	10							10	100
Lending	20	20	100						
Reprographic Service	20	20	100						
Current Awareness	20			10	50	10	50		
Internet Services	20			14	70			6	30
References	20	10	50	7	35	3	15		
Reservation	4	3	75	1	15				

Special services for persons with disabilities

Data indicated that libraries lacked sufficient special library and information services to PWDs .Only 2 special services were available to PWDs. All the four libraries indicated that they had the book retrieving service and only 1 library had the Braille conversion services. Special services such as home delivery services according to Craddock (2006) will ensure that PWDs have the same access to materials and information services as those who are able to visit the library themselves. This study agrees to Jos (1977) assertions that without establishing libraries and providing information resources for the PWDs, no quality education can be provided for this special group.

Figure a: Special services for PWDs

Assistive technology requirements for PWDs

100% of the PWDs respondents reported that they required Assistive Technologies to access library and information services. Data collected indicated that 47% of the PWDs required wheelchairs, 29% required Text to speech soft wares such as Braille, 14% needed Magnifying glasses and 10% required TTY/TDD. Data gathered from librarians showed that of all the ATs required by PWDs, only Text to Speech software was available in one of the libraries. Most of the PWDs lacked the assistive technologies they required in order for them to access library and information services. This therefore meant that despite the availability of the services, they were not fully accessed by PWDs for lack of the ATs. The provision of a range of equipment is recommended to improve physical access to library facilities and services. Budgetary restrictions will often dictate the level of provision, but it is important to be aware of the extent of available aids, ranging from the simple, magnifying glass, to the more complex, closed-circuit television (ALA, 2009).

Figure b: AT requirements of PWDs
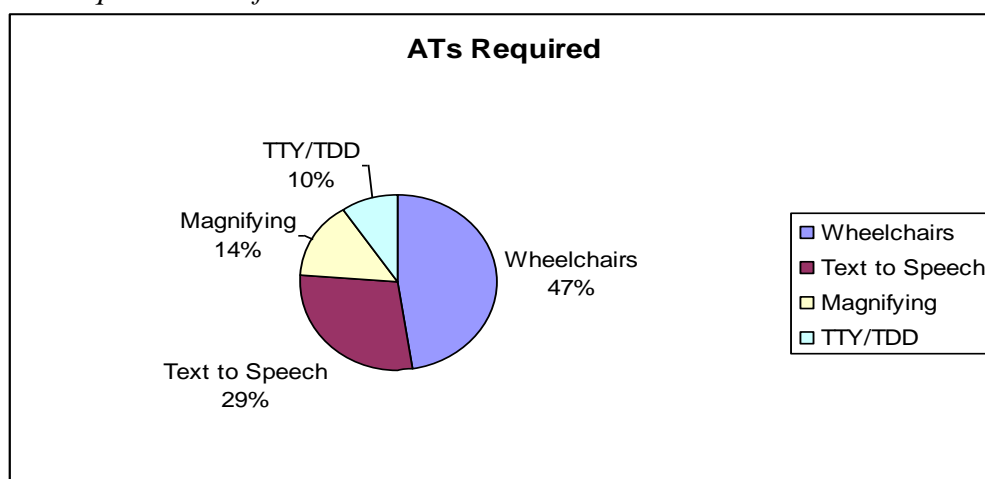
Service personnel

Data collected indicated that most librarians (97%) of the librarians had no special training on library and information service delivery to PWDs. 3% indicated to have undergone training on JAWs**.** Despite the availability of library and information services, majority of the librarians did not have any training on how to deliver these services. PWDs therefore did not access the services due to the fact that the librarians lacked knowledge of library and information service delivery to PWDs. Findings of this study agree with sentiments of Ukoye (2010) that psychological barriers which hinder PWDs from accessing library and information services are based on the lack of librarians' knowledge and experiences in the characteristics of disabilities and the needs of disabled people. A new demand is being made on librarians in terms of staff training and education, which should be the most important issue in the integration of disabled people into mainstream library services. In the library sector in many countries it is also

recognized that staff training is most crucial in the process of inclusion of disabled clients. IFLA also emphasizes the importance of training by stating that library schools should provide training in the provision of services for disabled people as a normal part of their basic curriculum to prepare librarians for their professional qualifications. (IFLA, 2009)
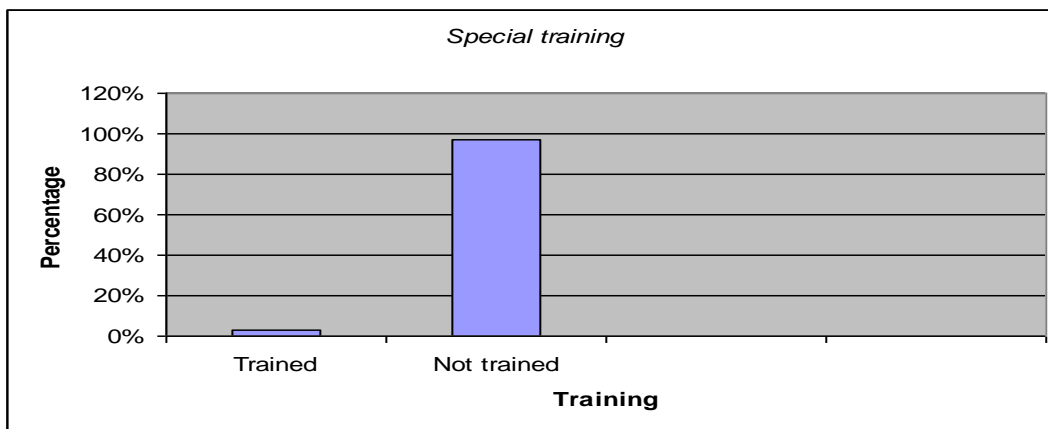

Figure c: Specially Trained staff

Physical requirements for PWDs

The researcher sought to find the physical accessibility of outside and entrance to the library. Most of the PWDS, 84% stated that the parking areas, pathways and entrances to the library building were not accessible. 10% felt that they were somehow accessible and the minority, only 6% said they were accessible.

The researcher also sought to find if the library aisles were kept wide and clear for wheelchair users and safety of users who are visually impaired. Data collected showed that they were not. 83% of the PWDs said the library aisles were not safe for users on wheelchairs and the V.I.Ps.

It was further noted that no library had elevators or access ramps in place of stairs yet the libraries were housed on more than one building floor. 100% of the PWDs noted this. 100% of the PWDs also agreed that there were no wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available in or near the library.

78 % of the PWDs also reported that service desks, shelves and facilities such as book returns were not accessible. Only 7% felt that they were accessible. The other 15 % felt that they were somehow accessible. All the libraries visited were designed essentially to cater for normal students rather than the challenged. There were no ramps, no elevators, Moreover, all the libraries extended to upper floors. Some had bad railings. In addition, most of the libraries were not spacious for students on wheelchairs to move around.

This study agrees with sentiments of Iyoro (2004) that Accessibility is one of the pre-requisites of information use. Everybody should be able to use the libraries of a country. The surroundings of the library, the entrance, restrooms, stairs, elevators and special rooms should be accessible for persons with different kinds of disabilities. (IFLA, 2009)

The study also conforms to Ivrall (2009) that all parts of the library should be accessible, the space should be logically arranged with clear signs and a floor plan posted close to the entrance.

Figure d: Accessibility of physical environment
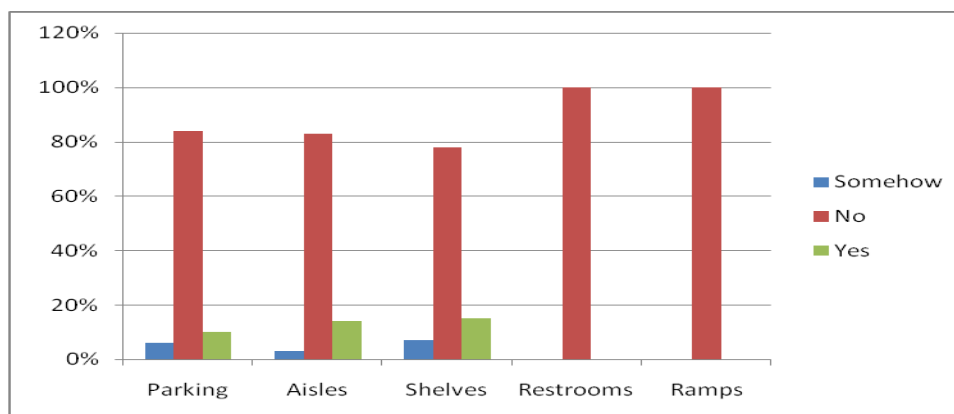
RECOMMENDATIONS

i.   Libraries should be more proactive and anticipate the needs of persons with disabilities then plan on how to meet these needs. A good starting point would be to ensure that services to persons with disabilities are included in the library policies.

ii.   In terms of provision for Assistive Technologies, Libraries should take advantage of the incentives in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2003 (Republic of Kenya, 2004) where there are exemptions from import duty, value added taxes, or port charges on all equipments meant for persons with disabilities and acquire these resources. They should also cooperate with other libraries that have materials for use by persons with disabilities.

iii. Specially trained library staff should be employed to assist and monitor PWDs in the library. The libraries should also cooperate with and involve disability organizations which may in some cases help with the planning of programs and services, training staff on how to serve persons with disabilities e.t.c

iv.   Since mobility impairment emerged as the most common type of disability in the libraries surveyed, at least each library should ensure their buildings are accessible. For those constructing new facilities, universal accessibility should be adhered to in the design. The existing buildings can also be cheaply renovated to include for example access ramps where there are steps or bring down a wall between two toilets to make a larger wheel chair accessible one. The Commission for University Education should be stricter in its assessment

of libraries before awarding institutional charters or accreditations to ensure the libraries meet the basic requirements of universal accessibility.

CONCLUSION

The evidence emanating from the study strongly indicated that provision of library and information services in the four libraries to students with disabilities was largely characterized by a combination of absence of special library and information services, insufficient assistive technologies, staff incapacity, structural inadequacies and absence of internally formulated compliance with national and international policy frameworks. In particular, the study revealed that the library had no facilities, resources and equipment such as the lifts, spacious ramps, Braille materials, hearing aids required by students with disabilities. With regard to the policy environment, the findings indicated that the library neither had its own policies. Thus, the study concluded that PWDs are not adequately taken care of in University Libraries in Meru County

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