

AN EVALUATION OF LIBRARY SERVICES FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED USERS IN SELECTED ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges and effectiveness of library service delivery to visually impaired users in university libraries in North Central Nigeria. Employing a descriptive survey research design, data were collected from 350 library staff and support staff using a structured questionnaire. The study focused on assessing the availability, accessibility, and quality of information resources and services for visually impaired users. Findings revealed significant gaps in service provision, such as a lack of Braille materials, insufficient assistive technologies, and inadequate staff training. Additionally, issues like limited funding and outdated resources were identified as major barriers to effective service delivery. The study recommends improvements in infrastructure, staff training, and the integration of assistive technologies to enhance library services for visually impaired students. These changes are essential for promoting inclusivity and accessibility in academic libraries.

Keywords: Visually impaired, library services, academic libraries, assistive technologies, accessibility

Introduction

Academic libraries serve as vital support systems for learning and research, and are expected to be inclusive spaces that accommodate all students. For visually impaired students, access to these libraries is not merely convenient but a fundamental requirement for academic success and social inclusion. As Appels and Petegem (2023) note, equity in education begins with access to adaptable learning resources, a principle that academic libraries are uniquely positioned to uphold.

In Nigeria, however, a significant gap persists between this ideal and the reality in many institutions. Despite national commitments like the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and the global Sustainable Development Goals emphasizing inclusive education (Saini et al., 2022), the specific needs of visually impaired library users remain under-addressed (Miyauchi & Paul, 2020). Empirical studies document persistent barriers, including a critical absence of assistive technologies, inaccessible physical layouts, and a widespread lack of staff trained in disability services (Horsefall & Opara, 2023; Ibenne &

Durodolu, 2024). Research confirms that while basic services exist, specialised provisions such as Braille materials, tailored orientation, or extended loan periods are inconsistently available and often reliant on informal initiatives rather than systematic policy (Osadebe et al., 2019; Abdussalam et al., 2023).

A closer analysis of the literature reveals a targeted geographical and strategic gap. Existing studies provide valuable broad overviews or focus on other regions, but there is a notable lack of focused, empirical evidence on the North Central region of Nigeria. It remains unclear to what extent libraries in this region have moved beyond ad-hoc support such as permitting personal assistive devices or assigning casual staff assistance toward structured, integrated service models backed by institutional policy and strategic planning (Abdussalam et al., 2023). This lack of regional data limits the ability to design effective, context-specific interventions.

This study directly addresses this gap by evaluating the preparedness and service delivery of academic libraries for visually impaired students in Nigeria's North Central region. It investigates the availability and functionality of assistive technologies, the accessibility of physical and digital infrastructure, the competency of library staff, and crucially, the degree to which services are guided by formal institutional policies. The findings are intended to guide library administrators, university management, and policymakers in developing sustainable, inclusive service frameworks, thereby contributing concretely to the goals of equitable education and social inclusion in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the provision of library services to visually impaired users in selected academic libraries in North Central Nigeria, with a view to understanding current practices and the challenges affecting effective service delivery.

- i. To examine the existing library services delivered to visually impaired users in

selected university libraries in North Central Nigeria.

- ii. To identify the challenges affecting the delivery of library services to visually impaired users in selected university libraries in North Central Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What library services are currently being delivered to visually impaired users in selected university libraries in North Central Nigeria?
2. What are the challenges affecting the delivery of library services to visually impaired users in selected university libraries in North Central Nigeria?

Literature Review

Inclusive Library Services and Standards

The foundation of accessible library services is built on the principles of inclusion and universal design. Internationally, organizations like the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) define inclusive library services as those that proactively address the unique needs of users with disabilities, ensuring equitable access to materials, physical spaces, technologies, and support (IFLA, 2012). For visually impaired users, this entails providing resources in accessible formats such as Braille, audio, and large print, alongside screen reader-compatible digital platforms and tactile wayfinding systems. This aligns with the concept of universal design, which advocates for services and environments usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation (Mates, 2011).

True accessibility, however, extends beyond physical and technological provisions. As Akinyemi and Edewor (2018) argue, it involves cultivating a supportive environment and an inclusive service culture among library staff. This includes developing policies sensitive to the specific learning needs of visually impaired users, offering tailored reference assistance, and

ensuring staff possess both the technical skills and the empathetic communication style necessary for effective support (Bodaghi, Cheong, & Zainab, 2016). The ultimate goal is to empower users, fostering a sense of belonging and enabling meaningful engagement with information (Bodaghi & Zainab, 2013).

The Role of Assistive Technologies

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) serves as a transformative enabler for inclusive library services. Assistive technologies—defined as any product, device, or system used to maintain or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities—are critical for bridging the access gap (Tilley, Bruce, & Hallam, 2007). For visually impaired students, tools such as screen readers, magnification software, Braille displays, and accessible e-book platforms are indispensable for independent access to the growing array of electronic resources (Onifade & Babarinde, 2020). Empirical studies, however, highlight a recurring disconnect between the potential of these technologies and their effective implementation. Research in Tanzanian academic libraries found that while ICTs supported information delivery in principle, the actual absence of assistive equipment severely limited the independence of visually impaired users (Majinge & Stilwell, 2014). Similarly, a study in Malawi identified a profound lack of equipment as a primary barrier, underscoring that technological provision is a fundamental, yet often missing, first step (Chaputula & Mapulanga, 2016). This suggests that the mere availability of digital resources is insufficient without the dedicated tools and interfaces required to access them.

Challenges in African Academic Libraries

Across the African continent, academic libraries face systemic challenges in operationalizing inclusive services. A common theme is the insufficiency of specialized staff training. Studies in Malawi and Tanzania report that librarians often lack targeted induction or skills to market and deliver services to disabled users (Chaputula & Mapulanga, 2016; Ndumbaro,

2019). Furthermore, services are frequently hampered by a lack of formal policy frameworks. Ndumbaro's (2019) research in Tanzania, for instance, revealed that even with positive staff attitudes, service delivery remained inadequate due to the absence of clear policies for handling visually impaired users.

Infrastructural and resource limitations are also pervasive. Findings consistently point to inadequate funding, which results in a shortage of both assistive technologies and accessible format materials (Majinge & Stilwell, 2014; Chaputula & Mapulanga, 2016). This creates a cycle of exclusion where increased enrolment of visually impaired students is not met with proportional investment in library support systems.

The Nigerian Context and the Identified Gap

The Nigerian context mirrors these broader African challenges but reveals specific regional knowledge gaps. National studies confirm that visually impaired students in Nigerian universities encounter significant barriers, including a critical lack of assistive technologies, inaccessible physical layouts, and untrained staff (Horsefall & Opara, 2023; Eskay & Chima, 2013). Research indicates that while basic library services are present, specialized provisions like Braille materials, extended loan periods, and structured orientation are inconsistently available and often depend on informal initiatives rather than systematic policy (Osadebe, Onuigbo, & Ewa, 2019; Abdussalam, Aina, Issa, & Fajonyomi, 2023).

Notably, studies such as Akolade et al. (2015) in Kwara State highlight that the exclusion extends to decision-making processes, with visually impaired students rarely consulted on collection development. While these studies provide valuable national and state-level insights, a critical gap remains. There is a conspicuous lack of focused, empirical research investigating the state of services in academic libraries within Nigeria's North Central region. It is unclear whether libraries in this specific geopolitical zone have progressed from ad-hoc, reactive support to integrated, policy-driven service

models. This study seeks to fill that geographical and strategic knowledge gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in the Social Model of Disability. This model, primarily advanced by scholars like Oliver (1990), fundamentally redefines disability by distinguishing between impairment (a person's physical, sensory, or cognitive condition) and disability, which it defines as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization that takes little or no account of people with impairments. In essence, it posits that people are disabled not by their bodies but by societal barriers, including inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and exclusionary institutional policies and practices.

For this research, the Social Model provides a critical lens to shift the analytical focus from the visual impairments of the students to the disabling barriers embedded within academic library systems in Nigeria's North Central region. It directs the investigation towards identifying how specific elements such as the absence of assistive technologies, the inaccessibility of physical infrastructure, the lack of staff training, and the failure to integrate inclusive service provision into strategic policies actively create disability by hindering access and participation. Applying this framework moves

this study beyond cataloging individual challenges to critically analysing how library structures and practices socially construct the exclusion of visually impaired users, thereby framing the problem as one requiring systemic, rather than individual, solutions.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. Six universities, University of Abuja, University of Jos, Federal University of Technology Minna, Kogi State University, Federal University of Lafia, and Nasarawa State University were purposively selected based on their enrolment of visually impaired students. From the total population of 350 library professionals across these universities, total enumeration method was employed. A structured questionnaire was distributed to all the library professionals from which 295 valid responses were received and analyzed, yielding an 84.4% response rate. The questionnaire, refined via a pilot study, employed a four-point Likert scale and was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, mean, standard deviation). Research ethics, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly observed.

Findings

This section presents the findings from data gathering and analysis in response to the research objectives

Table 1: Existing library services delivery to visually impaired users

	M	S.D	Rank	Decision
Library Service Delivery to Visually Impaired Users				
Current awareness service	2.15	0.93	20 th	Poor
Selective Dissemination of Information	1.99	0.79	22 nd	Poor
Circulation of new arrivals	2.89	0.85	5 th	Moderate
Electronic document delivery	2.01	0.92	21 st	Poor
CD/DVD-based services	2.12	0.91	19 th	Poor
Web/OPAC services	2.47	0.82	13 th	Poor
Information provision on the library website	1.75	0.97	23 rd	Poor
Internet services	3.26	0.72	1 st	Good
Provision of bibliographies of library holdings to users	2.54	0.99	11 th	Moderate
Digitization of local resources	2.75	0.85	6 th	Moderate

Providing platform for research and communication through serials' services.	2.59	1.09	9 th	Moderate
Loan services	2.69	0.73	7 th	Moderate
Interlibrary loan	2.38	0.93	17 th	Poor
Online reference services	2.25	0.78	18 th	Poor
Consortia collaboration	2.38	0.93	16 th	Poor
Indexing and abstracting services	2.47	0.82	14 th	Poor
User education	2.23	0.95	19 th	Poor
Referral services	2.95	0.95	4 th	Good
Reprographic services	3.17	0.75	2 nd	Good
Multimedia services	2.43	0.99	15 th	Poor
Reader's advisory services	2.31	0.73	17 th	Poor
Research assistance and consultation	2.85	0.81	8 th	Moderate
Database search	2.85	0.88	8 th	Moderate

Table 1 shows the extent of library services delivery to visually impaired users in selected university libraries in North Central Nigeria. Only two services, internet access (M=3.26) and reprographic services (M=3.17) are well-provided. A range of services, including referral, circulation, and database search, are moderately provided, with means between 2.54 and 2.95, indicating inconsistent or partial availability. However, the majority of services, 13 out of 23

are poorly provided, with means below 2.50. These include essential services such as Web/OPAC access, user education, and online reference services, with information provision on library websites (M=1.75) being the least available. This indicates that while basic technological and reprographic infrastructure exists, specialised, user-centered, and digitally accessible services for visually impaired users remain largely underdeveloped in these libraries.

Table 2: Challenges of library service delivery to visually impaired users in selected university libraries in North Central, Nigeria

	M	S.D	Rank	Decision
Challenges of library service delivery to visually impaired				
Lack of Braille books and alternative format materials	2.04	1.00	12 th	Minor
Inadequate building facilities and physical infrastructure	3.10	0.89	7 th	Severe
Absence of automatic doors for easier access	2.10	0.94	11 th	Minor
Limited financial and human resources	3.05	0.92	9 th	Severe
Insufficient assistive technology and adaptive equipment.	3.11	0.83	6 th	Severe
Inadequate funding for library services and resources	3.20	0.76	3 rd	Severe
Absence of trained personnel knowledgeable in assistive services	3.00	0.83	10 th	Severe
Availability of outdated resources	3.36	0.85	1 st	Severe
Poor maintenance and erratic power supply	3.15	0.73	4 th	Severe
Inadequate user skills and training for visually impaired students	2.95	0.75	8 th	Moderate
General lack of support resources in libraries	3.11	0.89	5 th	Severe
Low awareness and utilization of available library services and resources	2.39	0.97	9 th	Minor

Table 2 highlights the perceived challenges in delivering services to visually impaired users. The data indicate that severe challenges are pervasive, with seven key issues including the availability of outdated resources (M=3.36), inadequate funding (M=3.20), and insufficient

assistive technology (M=3.11) all rated with mean scores of 3.00 or above. A lack of trained personnel and inadequate user training present as moderate challenges. Notably, several infrastructural and material barriers often cited in literature such as a lack of Braille books

(M=2.04) and automatic doors (M=2.10) are viewed as minor challenges in this context, suggesting that more fundamental systemic and resource-related issues are considered the primary obstacles by library staff.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that while some library services are available for visually impaired users in university libraries across North Central Nigeria, significant gaps in service provision persist. Services such as internet access and research assistance were more accessible, aligning with the observations of Osadebe, Onuigbo, and Ewa (2019) and Onifade and Babarinde (2020), who noted the increasing reliance on digital tools and ICT to improve accessibility for visually impaired users. However, specialized services like Braille materials, scribe services, and extended loan periods were largely absent or inconsistently provided, reflecting the challenges highlighted in the work of Abdusalam et al. (2023). Similar barriers were reported by Phukubje and Ngoepe (2016) in South Africa, where students were dissatisfied despite the presence of dedicated service units, mainly due to a lack of accessible materials and adequate staffing. These findings underscore the gap in providing comprehensive, inclusive services for visually impaired students, which is a global issue as highlighted in studies by Selema et al. (2025) and Mrva-Montoya et al. (2025), where inadequate staff competence and low awareness of available services were common barriers.

The study further revealed significant infrastructural and resource-based challenges that hinder effective service delivery. These included the lack of Braille materials, insufficient assistive technologies, and outdated resources, mirroring the findings of Kwafoa (2019) in Ghana and Chaputula and Mapulanga (2016) in Malawi, where the absence of essential equipment created barriers to access. Moreover, the absence of trained personnel in assistive services exacerbated the challenges, as noted by Akolade et al. (2015), who emphasized the need for staff training to effectively serve visually

impaired students. The lack of awareness and underutilization of available services were also prevalent, similar to the issues observed by Ndumbaro (2019) in Tanzania, where poor policy frameworks and staff attitudes hindered service delivery. These challenges reinforce the need for universities in Nigeria to improve infrastructure, invest in specialized training for library staff, and foster a more inclusive library environment, as recommended by Majinge and Stilwell (2016) and Eskay and Chima (2013).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has explored the availability, accessibility, and quality of library services for visually impaired users in selected university libraries in North Central Nigeria. The findings indicate that while some services are available, such as internet access, research assistance, and reference services, there are significant gaps in specialized services such as Braille materials, scribe services, and assistive technologies. Infrastructural challenges, including the absence of disability-friendly facilities and outdated resources, further impede service delivery. Additionally, the lack of trained personnel in assistive services and low awareness of available services contribute to the underutilization of resources by visually impaired students. These challenges are consistent with findings from studies in other parts of the world, where similar issues have been identified, underscoring the need for a more inclusive approach in library service provision.

In light of these findings, several recommendations can be made to improve the delivery of library services to visually impaired users in academic libraries:

1. University libraries should expand and consistently provide specialized services such as Braille materials, audio books, scribe services, and extended loan periods for visually impaired students. This would ensure equal access to information and support their academic needs.

2. Libraries should adopt modern assistive technologies, including screen magnifiers, Braille embossers, and text-to-speech software, to enhance digital resource accessibility for visually impaired students.
3. Universities should prioritize the improvement of library facilities, including the installation of automatic doors, wheelchair ramps, and accessible study areas, to promote ease of access for visually impaired students.
4. Libraries should implement ongoing training for staff on assistive technologies and inclusive service provision to enhance staff competence in supporting visually impaired users effectively.

Implications for academic library services

The study stresses the critical need for university libraries in North Central Nigeria to enhance their services for visually impaired users, revealing gaps in accessibility and specialised support. Academic libraries can improve user satisfaction and inclusivity by investing in Braille materials, assistive technologies, and training staff to cater to the specific needs of visually impaired students. Additionally, upgrading physical infrastructure, such as installing automatic doors and providing adaptive devices like screen readers and magnification software, would significantly improve service delivery. Allocating resources towards the maintenance of up-to-date materials and equipment is equally vital to ensure that visually impaired students have equal access to academic resources. These steps would foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, enabling libraries to fulfil their mission of providing accessible services to all users, regardless of their abilities.

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