
EVALUATING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR USERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In today's academic landscape, libraries face increasing pressure to provide equitable services to diverse user groups, including those with special needs. The shift towards inclusive practices has become crucial for academic libraries to fulfill their role in supporting student success. To address these changes, libraries must be supported by adaptive strategies and technologies that cater to users with varying abilities. Users with special needs are a vital component of academic libraries' mission; their engagement and satisfaction are integral to the libraries' overall impact. A library that prioritizes inclusive practices fosters a welcoming environment, enhances user experience, and promotes academic achievement. This paper aims to examine the current state of inclusive practices for users with special needs in academic libraries. Specifically, the research will assess physical accessibility, the availability and effectiveness of assistive technology, and programs designed to support users with disabilities. Ultimately, the research aims to create a welcoming environment that enables all students, regardless of their abilities, to fully participate in the library's resources and services. The methodology employed is based on secondary data, reviewing existing literature on accessibility, adaptive technologies, and user-centered services. Key findings include: academic libraries are increasingly adopting universal design principles to enhance accessibility; adaptive technologies play a critical role in supporting users with special needs; and librarians' training in inclusive practices is essential for effective service delivery. Recommendations include integrating accessibility assessments into library services, investing in adaptive technologies, and providing ongoing training for library staff on inclusive practices.

KEYWORDS: Evaluating, Inclusive Practices, Users, Special Needs, Academic Library.

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries are essential institutions that play a pivotal role in fostering students' academic success and intellectual growth. These libraries serve as vibrant centers of knowledge, providing access to a wide range of resources and services that cater to diverse learning needs. However, despite their importance, students with disabilities often face significant barriers when attempting to access library resources and services. These barriers range from physical accessibility to inadequate assistive technology, ultimately hindering their ability to fully participate in academic life. Recognizing these challenges, academic libraries has demonstrated a commitment to promoting inclusivity and addressing the barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing library resources and services. By adopting inclusive practices, academic libraries can ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to the resources and services that support their academic pursuits. Inclusive practices are not only a moral imperative but also essential for fostering a culture of diversity, equality, and academic excellence. Despite its commitment to inclusivity, academic libraries face challenges in providing equitable access to its resources and services for users with disabilities. The current level of inclusivity, physical accessibility, assistive technology, and staff training programs at the library is unclear, making it difficult to ascertain whether the library is meeting the diverse needs of its users. This ambiguity underscores the need for a comprehensive evaluation of the library's inclusive practices, which is the primary objective of this study.

This study aims to evaluate the inclusive practices of the academic libraries, assessing its resources, facilities, and services to determine the level of inclusion for users with disabilities. Specifically, the study will address physical accessibility, the availability and effectiveness of assistive technology, and staff training programs designed to support users with disabilities. By highlighting the library's strengths and weaknesses in these areas, this study will contribute to developing recommendations for improving accessibility, providing alternative formats for materials, supplying assistive technology, and enhancing staff training programs. Ultimately, this research seeks to promote equal participation for all students and create a welcoming environment that enables users with disabilities to fully engage with the library's resources and services. In doing so, the academic libraries affirm its commitment to inclusivity and academic excellence, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential.

Statement of problem

People with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing information essential for their education, health, employment, and social participation. These barriers are often exacerbated by institutional shortcomings, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient resources, and a lack of awareness of the needs of people with disabilities. Despite growing recognition of the importance of inclusive practices, many institutions, including academic libraries, struggle to provide equitable access to resources and services for users with disabilities.

The academic libraries are not exception. The library's current level of inclusion, physical accessibility, assistive technology, and staff training programs are inadequate, hindering efforts to create a welcoming environment for users with disabilities. This lack of clarity and inclusivity has led to a significant gap in meeting the information needs of people with disabilities, including access to educational materials adapted to their abilities, clear and understandable information on health and medical issues, knowledge of their legal rights and entitlements, guidance on vocational training, independent living, social skills development, information on assistive technologies and tools, and opportunities for socialization and recreation. Similarly, individuals with intellectual disabilities may require simplified information and adaptive technologies to navigate library services. The absence of inclusive practices and accessible information has far-reaching consequences, including limiting the independence, participation, and informed decision-making of people with disabilities.

Furthermore, the lack of inclusive practices perpetuates stigma, marginalization, and exclusion, undermining the principles of equity and social justice. The inability of the academic libraries to provide inclusive services not only impacts the academic performance of students with disabilities but also hinders their overall well-being and quality of life. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of inclusive practices in academic libraries, the academic libraries, faces challenges in providing equitable access to resources and services for users with disabilities. The current level of inclusion, physical accessibility, assistive technology, and staff training programs at the library is unclear, impeding efforts to create a welcoming environment for users with disabilities. This study aims to assess the library's inclusive practices to identify areas for improvement and develop recommendations to enhance accessibility and promote equal participation for all students. By addressing these gaps, the library can become a model for inclusive practices, fostering a culture of acceptance, understanding, and support for people with disabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a traditional literature review approach to study the topic under consideration. The review is based on a comprehensive examination of relevant literature, including primary and secondary materials such as books, journals, conference and seminar proceedings, and other documentary sources, published and unpublished, prints and electronics, available online and in libraries. According to Harsadlomat, as quoted by Ahmed (2020), “a literature review is the documentation of a comprehensive review of published and unpublished works from secondary sources of data in areas of particular interest to the researcher.”

Related Literature Review

The Concept of People with Social Needs

People with disabilities represent a diverse population group comprising individuals with physical, intellectual, sensory, and emotional impairments (World Health Organization, 2011). This group includes, but is not limited to, individuals with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, visual impairment, hearing impairment, and mental health conditions (United Nations, 2006).

Despite increasing awareness and efforts to promote inclusion, people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers in various aspects of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and social participation (World Health Organization, 2011). These barriers often stem from societal attitudes, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of accessible services, which can lead to social isolation, stigma, and exclusion (UNICEF, 2013). Constructive engagement with this population is essential for building a just and inclusive society (World Health Organization, 2011). This can be achieved by promoting accessibility, providing inclusive education and employment opportunities, and ensuring access to healthcare and social services (United Nations, 2006). Furthermore, raising awareness and challenging stereotypes and stigmas associated with disability can help foster a culture of acceptance and inclusion (UNICEF, 2013).

Social needs are a fundamental aspect of human well-being, encompassing individuals' requirements for full and meaningful participation in society (Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, social needs are the third level of human needs, following physiological and safety needs, and include the need for love, belonging, and acceptance (Maslow, 1943). Research has shown that social needs are essential for psychological development, emotional stability, and overall well-being (Galtung, 1979; Jasper, 1996). These needs include the need for communication, community participation, social support networks,

appreciation, and respect. These needs are not limited to specific age groups or populations; rather, they are universal and essential for human flourishing (Betina Mahlert, 2025).

Studies have highlighted the importance of addressing social needs in diverse contexts, including community development, healthcare, and social policy (Schott, 2000; Jarkovic, 2011). The basic needs theory, proposed by Schott (2000), emphasizes the importance of prioritizing basic needs, including social needs, to improve quality of life and promote community development. People with disabilities, older persons, and marginalized communities often face unique challenges in meeting their social needs, including accessibility difficulties, social isolation, and social stigma (Disability Rights, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving individuals, communities, and governments.

Understanding Special Needs

The term “special needs” encompasses a wide range of conditions that affect an individual’s ability to participate in daily life, including learning, communication, and social interaction (United Nations, 2006). This broad spectrum of needs can be attributed to various factors, including congenital conditions, injuries, illnesses, or environmental factors, and can manifest in diverse ways, requiring tailored support and accommodations (World Health Organization, 2011).

People with disabilities are individuals who require assistance or accommodations due to physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or developmental conditions that affect their daily functioning (International Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2004). These individuals may face challenges in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and social services, highlighting the need for inclusive and accessible environments (United Nations, 2006).

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example, individuals with autism spectrum disorder may require accommodations to facilitate social interaction and communication, while those with physical disabilities may need accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies (IDEA, 2004).

Furthermore, individuals with disabilities often face stigma, marginalization, and exclusion, underscoring the importance of promoting awareness, acceptance, and inclusion (United Nations, 2006). By recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of people with disabilities, we can work towards creating a more equitable and supportive society that values diversity and promotes human rights (WHO, 2011).

Creating an adaptive environment that fosters dignity, equality, and independence is essential to supporting people with disabilities (UN, 2006). This includes designing accessible, flexible, and responsive physical spaces, services, and programs that meet the diverse needs of people with disabilities. For example, integrating inclusive design principles into architecture and product design can facilitate equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and social services (WHO, 2011).

Recognizing and supporting the development of individual strengths is fundamental to empowerment (WHO, 2011). This requires a shift from a disability-based to a strengths-based approach, focusing on the abilities and potential of people with disabilities. By identifying and nurturing their talents, skills, and interests, people with disabilities can develop self-worth, confidence, and independence (IDEA, 2004).

This includes creating accessible environments, understanding individual differences, and implementing appropriate modifications or interventions to help individuals succeed (IDEA, 2004). For example, providing assistive technology, such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, and communication devices, can facilitate equal access to education and employment. In addition, providing individualized support, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or counseling, can help individuals with disabilities overcome specific challenges and achieve their goals (World Health Organization, 2011).

Promoting inclusive education, employment, and social participation is also crucial for fostering a culture of acceptance, understanding, and support (United Nations, 2006). By creating opportunities for individuals with disabilities to interact with their peers, their communities, and society at large, we can break down barriers, challenge stereotypes, and promote social inclusion (International Disability Law, 2004).

Inclusive Library Services for Users with Disabilities

The library and information science community has adopted a wide range of standards to facilitate the exchange of library data, promote the interoperability of library systems, and support national and international library networks (International Organization for Standardization, 2020). Adherence to these standards plays a vital role in improving access to information resources in library collections, cultural institutions, and the World Wide Web (WWW) (World Wide Web Consortium, 2019). However, despite these efforts, access to libraries for users with disabilities remains a challenge in many countries (United Nations, 2018).

To provide equal opportunities for all library users, it is essential to assess the physical condition of library buildings, services, and programs from the perspective of users with disabilities (American Library Association, 2019). Many improvements can be implemented at minimal or no cost (National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Disabled, 2020). The solution often lies in changing staff attitudes and thinking in new ways (Disability Rights Education and Advocacy Fund, 2019).

We recommend involving representatives from disability groups and support organizations in the evaluation process (Inclusive London, 2019). Their input, along with the results of the checklist, will provide valuable information for immediate improvement measures and future planning (Library of Congress, 2020). Because libraries and buildings vary globally, quantitative measurements are not included in this checklist (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2018). Instead, library staff should apply relevant laws and regulations in each country or test them with disadvantaged clients (African Union, 2018).

Change may happen slowly, but the focus must be on the most important issue now (World Health Organization, 2019). Ensuring equal access for all people, regardless of disability, is the essential guiding principle when evaluating existing buildings and services or planning new ones (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2018). Ultimately, it is the library's responsibility to make people with disabilities feel welcome and valued (Library and Information Association of South Africa, 2019).

Types of information services required by people with special needs to support their academic, personal, and social development.

People with disabilities need a range of information services to support their academic, personal, and social development. These services are essential for promoting inclusive education and ensuring equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

1. Academic Support Services: Academic support services are essential for students with disabilities, enabling them to access and interact with educational content. These services include:

i- **Assistive Technology:** Tools such as screen readers, text-to-speech software, and Braille displays facilitate access to digital information. Assistive technology ranges from simple solutions like magnifying glasses and adaptive pens to sophisticated solutions like electronic Braille displays and speech generators. For example, screen readers such as JAWS and Voiceover can help students with visual impairments access digital textbooks and online resources (Kumar, 2024).

ii- **Adaptive Learning Materials:** Customized learning materials, such as large-print books or Braille books, support students with visual impairments. Adaptive learning materials can also include digital materials such as eBooks, audio books, and interactive multimedia resources. For example, the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Disabled provides Braille and audio books for individuals with visual impairments (Schneider et al., 2018).

2. Individual Education Plans (IEPs): Individually designed learning plans outline specific goals, teaching strategies, and accommodations for students with disabilities. IEPs are developed in collaboration with teachers, parents, and students to ensure they receive the support they need for academic success. For example, an IEP may include accommodations such as extra time for completing assignments, the use of assistive technology, or curriculum modifications (American Library Association, 2019).

3. Personal Development Services: Personal development services focus on promoting independence, self-defense, and life skills for individuals with disabilities. These services include:

i- **Counseling and Therapy:** Psychological support services address emotional and psychological needs. Counseling and therapy can help individuals with disabilities manage stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy can help individuals with autism spectrum disorder manage anxiety and improve their social skills (Hof & Fasha, 2023).

ii- Life skills training: Programs that teach daily living skills, such as cooking and budgeting, promote independence. Life skills training can also include skills such as time management, organization, and self-care. For example, life skills training programs teach individuals with intellectual disabilities how to manage their finances, cook meals, and maintain personal hygiene (Wachianga, 2010).

iii- Social skills development: Interventions that target social skills, such as communication and relationships, promote social interactions. Social skills development can include programs such as social skills groups, role-playing, and social storytelling. For example, social skills training can help individuals with disabilities build friendships, communicate effectively, and cope with social situations (Ford, 2013).

4. Social development services: aim to promote social inclusion, community participation, and cultural participation among individuals with disabilities. These services include:

i- Recreation and leisure programs: Adaptive recreation programs, such as sports and arts, promote socialization and enjoyment. They can include activities such as swimming, basketball, and music therapy. For example, the Special Olympics offers sports training and competitions for individuals with intellectual disabilities (National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Disabled, 2020).

ii- Social support groups: Peer support groups provide emotional support and social interaction. Social support groups can include groups for individuals with autism, ADHD, or physical disabilities. For example, the Autism Society offers support groups for individuals with autism and their families (London Inclusion Society, 2019).

iii- Community engagement initiatives: Programs that encourage community engagement, such as volunteering, strengthen social bonds. Community engagement initiatives can include programs such as volunteer opportunities, community events, and advocacy campaigns. For example, the Library of Congress offers volunteer opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in community events and advocacy campaigns (Library of Congress, 2020). In conclusion, people with disabilities need a range of information services to support their academic, personal, and social development. These services are essential for promoting inclusive education, independence, and social inclusion.

Level of inclusion of users with disabilities at academic libraries.

Academic libraries play a pivotal role in promoting inclusive education and ensuring equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. However, users with disabilities often face significant barriers to accessing library resources and services.

1. **Physical Accessibility:** Physical accessibility is a major concern for users with disabilities. Many academic libraries lack accessible buildings, have inadequate access ramps, and have insufficient adaptive technologies (Azerikato Ayong et al., 2021; Singh, 2021). A study of law university libraries in India found that only 57.14% of libraries had fully accessible buildings, while 28.57% had partially accessible buildings (Singh, 2021).

2. **Assistive Technologies:** Assistive technologies, such as screen readers and Braille displays, are essential for users with visual impairments. However, many libraries lack these technologies or adequate staff training to support their use (Purnomo and Wikandani, 2024; Alabi and Mutula, 2020). A study of academic libraries in the UK and the USA found that the most widely used screen reader software was Job Access with Speech (JAWS) (Alabi & Mutula, 2020).

3. **Library Services and Staff Training:** Library services and staff training are essential components of inclusive library practices. However, many libraries lack staff training on disability issues, and services are often reactive rather than proactive (Eneya & Adesina, 2024; Ferrara, 2023). A study of academic libraries in Ghana found that library staff lacked sufficient knowledge of disability issues and the right of people with disabilities to access information (Azerikatoa Ayong et al., 2021).

4. **Inclusive Library Practices:** Inclusive library practices require a holistic approach that addresses physical accessibility, assistive technologies, and library services. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) guidelines emphasize inclusive design, assistive technologies, and physical and informational accessibility (IFLA, 2022).

The level of inclusion of users with disabilities in academic libraries is often inadequate. Libraries should prioritize physical accessibility, assistive technologies, and staff training to promote inclusive education and equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The Challenges Facing Inclusive Practice for users with Special Needs in Academic Libraries

Students with disabilities face frequent challenges in meeting their information needs, which can hinder their academic performance and overall educational experience. These challenges can be broadly categorized as physical, formal, social, technological, and institutional

barriers. Research highlights the significant impact these barriers have on students' learning experiences, emphasizing the need for barrier-free access to education. Key concerns include lack of funding, physical accessibility, and negative attitudes. Furthermore, studies explore the potential of technology to address these barriers and promote inclusive education, emphasizing the importance of accessible learning environments (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024; Famulu, 2023; Nageswara, 2019).

Format Challenges: Format barriers pose significant challenges for students with disabilities. Inaccessible digital materials, such as PDFs, images, and websites lacking accessibility features, can be difficult or impossible for students to use, limiting their access to essential information. Furthermore, the limited availability of alternative formats can exacerbate this problem, as students may not be able to access materials in formats that meet their needs, such as Braille for tactile reading, large print for visual clarity, or audio formats for auditory learning. This can hinder students' ability to interact with course materials, complete assignments, and fully participate in the learning process.

Social Challenges: Social barriers can also significantly impact students with disabilities, especially when stigma and prejudice are present. Negative attitudes or biases toward students with disabilities can create a hostile learning environment, making it difficult for them to access information and support services. Furthermore, a lack of awareness and understanding among faculty and staff can exacerbate this problem, as they may not be equipped to provide the necessary accommodations or support. This can lead to unintended marginalization, as students with disabilities may feel excluded or unsupported, ultimately hindering their ability to succeed academically. When teachers and staff are unfamiliar with disability issues, they may be unable to provide effective support, further perpetuating the barriers faced by students with disabilities.

Technological Challenges: Technological barriers can also hinder the learning experience for students with disabilities. Digital tools and platforms not designed with accessibility in mind can pose significant barriers when they are incompatible with assistive technologies, such as screen readers, speech-to-text software, or other adaptive tools. This incompatibility can prevent students from accessing essential digital resources, participating in online discussions, or completing assignments. Furthermore, limited technical support can exacerbate these challenges, leaving students without the assistance needed to resolve issues or navigate digital platforms, ultimately hindering their ability to succeed in their studies.

Institutional Challenges: Institutional barriers can significantly impact the learning experience of students with disabilities. A major concern is the lack of appropriate policies

and procedures to support these students, or the ineffective implementation of existing policies, which can lead to inconsistent and insufficient support. Furthermore, resource limitations, including funding and staffing shortages, can hinder institutions' ability to provide essential support services, such as accessible technology, accommodations, and disability support staff. This can lead to a lack of infrastructure and expertise to effectively support students with disabilities, ultimately hindering their ability to access education and achieve academic success.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for academic libraries to prioritize inclusive practices that cater to the needs of users with disabilities. By adopting universal design principles, leveraging adaptive technologies, and enhancing librarians' proficiency in inclusive practices, libraries can significantly improve accessibility and user experience. This multifaceted approach not only improves physical and digital access but also fosters a culture of inclusivity, enabling users with disabilities to fully engage with library resources and services.

As libraries continue to evolve in response to the diverse needs of their users, integrating accessibility assessments and ongoing staff training will be crucial in creating welcoming environments that support the diverse needs of all students. Furthermore, collaboration with disability support services and user feedback mechanisms can enhance and strengthen inclusive practices.

Ultimately, inclusive practices not only enhance academic achievement but also support the core mission of academic libraries as equitable centers of knowledge, ensuring that information is accessible, usable, and useful to all members of the academic community, regardless of their abilities.

Recommendations

To promote inclusive practices for users with disabilities, academic libraries should consider the following strategies:

1. Integrate accessibility assessments into library services to identify and address physical and digital barriers.
2. Invest in assistive technologies, such as screen readers, Braille displays, and accessible databases, to support the diverse needs of users.

3. Provide ongoing training for library staff on inclusive practices, focusing on disability awareness, the use of assistive technologies, and universal design principles.
4. Enhance collaboration with disability support services and involve users with disabilities in library planning to ensure the delivery of effective and responsive services.
5. Regularly review and update library policies to reflect best practices in accessibility and inclusion.

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