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Information Behaviour of Students Living With Visual Impairments in University Libraries: A Review of Related Literature

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ABSTRACT

Reviews related empirical and theoretical literature on the information behaviour of students living with visual impairments in university libraries. The literature reviewed show that students living with visual impairments in University libraries need information for writing assignments, tests, examinations, research and more like their counterparts without visual impairments. In addition, the sources of information preferred by students living with visual impairments include library staff, classmates, friends, readers employed by disability units to assist them to read, OPAC and databases. Furthermore, their preferred sources of information should be appropriately packaged in print and electronic formats. The literature further reveals that assistive technologies can effectively be used to facilitate access to information by students living with visual impairments in University libraries. It was revealed that shortage of information resources in Braille and large print, inaccessible library buildings and lack of assistive technologies are the major challenges affecting access to and use of information by students living with visual impairments.

Therefore necessary policy and practical interventions where they do not exist should be promulgated so that assistive technologies, infrastructure (e.g. building layout) and resources are made available to alleviate these challenges facing students living with visual impairments in the universities.

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INTRODUCTION

The term visual impairment is used in this paper to refer to anyone who has difficulty in reading an ordinary font size on paper or on screen (Kinnell, Yu, & Creaser, 2000: 5). Universities the world over, are increasingly admitting students living with various disabilities including those with visual impairments. Consequently, universities have the responsibility of equipping individuals including those with visual impairments with the knowledge and skills they require to assume key positions in government, business, industry and other professional practice. For universities to realise these goals, they must understand the information behaviour of their users including those with visual impairments in order to meet their information needs through their libraries. Rugeyasila (2013) adds that understanding information behaviour of students living with visual impairments is very important in order to provide accurate, relevant and complete information to these students. Similarly, Msuya (2002) acknowledges that, the importance of understanding information seeking behaviour of library users including those with visual impairments cannot be overemphasised.

Understanding the users' behaviour has implication to the kind of library policies, rules and regulations that need to be put in place. Whereas proper behaviour facilitates access to information, improper ones can lead to misuse and abuse of the information services.

Information behaviour is the totality of human behaviour in relation to access, sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use (Wilson, 2000: 49). Information behaviour focuses on people's information needs; on how they seek, manage, give, and use information (Fisher & Julien, n.d.). Information-seeking behaviour is closely related to information behaviour but refers to a process through which a person identifies, accesses and uses information to satisfy a need (Kiondo, 1998). This paper looks at both information behaviour and information seeking behaviour of students living with visual impairments in the universities. Understanding information needs and information seeking behaviour of student living with visual impairments is prerequisite for developing libraries and information units, services and facilities to meet their information needs (Rugeyasila, 2013).

Access to information is both a legitimate and fundamental human right. The concept of legitimate right is commonly used to infer legal and moral rights – i.e. valid claims by individuals on society to protect them from being denied the fundamentals of human well-being on grounds of their utility through the force of law, or through education

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(Mill, 1969). Majinge and Stilwell (2013) on one hand and Bagandanshwa (2006a) on the other concur that access to information is a fundamental human right which all persons must enjoy regardless of their societal or physical status. Similarly, Howell and Lazarus (2003) are of the view that increasing access to information and participation in higher education for students living with disability is essential. Yoon and Kim (2011) and Todaro (2005) observed that access to information for all persons is necessary for them to play an active role in society. Consequently, the information society dispensation expects every human being without distinction to have unfettered access to information. University libraries must therefore strive to offer the whole range of information services equitably to all students without discrimination. For this to happen, University libraries must take appropriate policy, practical and infrastructure measures to accommodate the full range of learning needs among the potential and existing student population.

Moreover, all University libraries without distinction must exist as social facilities that actively support persons of all persuasions (Yoon & Kim, 2012). To guarantee students living with disabilities opportunities for utilization of information, lifelong education, and cultural enjoyment, various information services should be provided (Yoon & Kim, 2012: 141). The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA) of South Africa states that students with disabilities, including those with visual impairments, should have equal access to further education and the resources these institutions provide (Harris & Oppenheim, 2003: 243). The issue of access to information by students living with visual impairments in Universities the world over should not only be seen as a legitimate and fundamental right but also as a legal and moral right issue (Hart, 1994) because it involves freedom, access/accessibility and intellectual property and copyright.

The importance of university libraries ensuring equitable provision of information services to all including the students living with visual impairments need not be overemphasised. Seyama (2009: 26) reminds us that educational goals for students living with visual impairments are essentially the same as those for all other students without impairments. Restrictive copyright laws that curtail access to information for all people including those living with disabilities must be reviewed (Yoon & Kim, 2012). For example copyright laws generally do not allow transcription or conversion of information resource into Braille for users with visual impairments. Koulikourdi (2008: 203) declares that in order to provide equal services and effective facilities to students living with disabilities including those living with visual impairments, librarians must identify them, understand their needs, their information seeking behaviour and the problems they encounter in the library environment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: GLOBAL CONTEXT OF STUDENTS LIVING WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

The UN estimates that there are over 650 million persons living with disabilities (including the visually impaired) worldwide, 80 per cent of whom live in developing countries (Kett, Lang, & Trani, 2009: 650). Despite the big number of people living with disabilities worldwide, little attention is paid to this group of people with regard to their access to information. For example, key global development initiatives such as the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2011) do not make any reference to people living with disabilities though they do in general terms refer to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Ghai (2009: 280) affirms that disability issues were not included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as targets or indicators. MDGs represent a concerted effort to address global poverty (United Nations, 2011: 1). Ghai further argued that unless the needs and rights of people living with disabilities were addressed, the MDGs could not be attained. Most development agencies acknowledge that MDGs cannot be achieved without addressing the needs and rights of people living with disabilities (Thomas, 2005: 7).

The Millennium Declaration Summit was soon to be followed three years later by the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005 in Geneva and Tunis respectively (Lor, n.d.: 31). During the Geneva phase of the summit the broad themes concerning the Information Society were discussed and two documents, a declaration of principles and a plan of action, were prepared and adopted (Lor, n.d.: 32). WSIS acknowledged that special attention should be given to the needs of elderly people and people living with disabilities. In this regard attention needed to be directed to education, use of ICT in education; universal design of equipment and assistive technology in order to increase employment for people living with disabilities; and create content that is pertinent to people living with disabilities and, inculcate required abilities for the use of ICT by people living with disabilities.

The constant neglect of people living with disabilities seems pervasive as evidenced by United Nations core human rights treaties, which in practice rarely assert or even recognise people living with disabilities (Stein & Lord, 2008: 33). The 2010 MDG report underscored the inextricable link between disability and marginalization in education noting that despite overall increase in school participation over the past decade around the world, children with disabilities continue to be left behind (Wapling, 2012: 5).

METHODS

This article is based on review of theoretical and empirical literature found largely in LIS field and to a certain extent in education, policy and development. The literature covered is in journal articles, books, technical reports, theses and dissertations in both print and electronic formats. Geographically the literature reviewed covers a global perspective on the following themes: information needs of students living with visual impairments in University libraries; ways students living with visual impairments seek, access and use information; preferred sources and formats of information for students living with visual impairments; tools used by students living with visual impairments to search for information; use of ICT to facilitate access to information for students living with visual impairments; challenges affecting access to information by students living with visual impairments; and strategies for ameliorating challenges facing students living with visual impairments in universities. These themes were isolated from the Oliver's (1990) social model of disability and Wilson (2000) model of information behaviour respectively. The two models were used to guide the subject matter discussed in this paper.

THEORY

To understand and illuminate the information behaviour of students living with visual impairments in university libraries the subject matter of this article as already pointed out is underpinned by the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and Wilson's (2000) model of information behaviour. The Oliver's social model of disability is grounded in the principles of the United Kingdom's (UK) Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). These principles were promulgated in the mid-1970s. The social model of disability posits that people are disabled by social barriers that may be of physical, attitudinal or behavioural nature (Robertson, 2001). The social model of disability further outlines all the things that impose restrictions on people living with disabilities which include: individual prejudice, institutional discrimination, inaccessible public buildings, unusable transport systems, segregated education and excluded work arrangements among others (Oliver, 1996: 33).

The focus of the social model of disability is to change the negative attitude of society, towards people living with disabilities to a positive attitude and create an environment which simplifies life for them and allows participation in all aspects of the community's activities (Majinge, 2014). Shava (2008: 17) claims that the solution to the problem of disability lies in changing society. This can be achieved through

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