

Visually Impaired University Students Quest for Information and the Challenges Faced in a Rural University Context

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ABSTRACT Most of the institutions in South Africa, especially, a rural-based university like the University of Limpopo, admit students from diverse background and health conditions - some of which are visually impaired - into various programs. Despite the social and economic importance of educating the visually impaired and the positive influence they have on the society, library management practices in rural-based South African universities have been less favourable to their plight. This study examined the quest by visually impaired university students to access information and the challenges they face in a rural university context. The study used a semi-structured questionnaire to examine the quest by disabled university students to access information and the challenges they face in a rural university context. The findings revealed that the neglect to meet the information needs of visually impaired students has negative consequences at improving their academic performance as well as the future development and benefit of a rural based society. The study suggested that librarians, as well as university administrators, should consider investing more resources in information sources to meet the needs of the visually impaired and other disabled students so as to lessen their dependence on society for survival.

INTRODUCTION

This study recognised the importance of information to academic performances of the disabled university students, more especially, those within a rural university context. Indeed, visually impaired students experience varying degrees of sight loss that may necessitate diversity in the level of their information needs and type of library resources required to cater for them. In managing their work load, this set of students often experience difficulties in accessing information to suit their needs in a rural university library. Most often, accessing information from library sources by these students is time-consuming and requires specialised equipment and skills to access required information that is relevant to their specific needs (Holloway 2001). Further, visually impaired students find it stressful to read materials given to other students, especially in specialised courses like Accounting and Mathematics (Williams and Irving 2012). As such, they require specialised materials to

help in accessing and seeking relevant and useful information (Hill 2013). This means that extra time is required for information processing and transcription from information sources (Case and Davidson 2011). It may become difficult or impossible for such students to find materials in the library without specialised assistance. Taking lecture notes, further, may take longer than usual for these students, thereby, making them to miss out on important points during a lecture (Bishop and Rhind 2011). In any event, these students experience delays during tests and examinations because of the extra time required for reading.

Although, many researchers have shown interest in studying the information needs of various library patrons, however, a cursory search of literature reveals the absence of a comprehensive study of the challenges faced by visually impaired students in a rural-based university like the University of Limpopo. Islam and Ikeda (2014) viewed that, understanding the information needs of various patron groups is essential in the planning, implementation and operation of information system and services in work settings. Meanwhile, if academic librarians are to serve the academic community realistically, they need to recognise the changing needs and variations in information gathering

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of these patrons to be able to provide services that would be most useful to their needs (Luo 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Most of the institutions in South Africa, especially, a rural-based university like the University of Limpopo, admit students from diverse background and health conditions - some of which are visually impaired - into various programmes. Although, disability is a general term for the physically challenged, however, in relation to information needs and seeking behaviour, they encounter more challenges than any other student on campus. These challenges are even made more complex for this set of students, especially, the visually impaired students in a rural-based university (Bishop and Rhind 2011; Chen and Lin 2011). It has become necessary to attend to the information need of the visually impaired students who face different experiences in comparison with their counterparts from urban-based universities. Despite the social and economic importance of educating the visually impaired and the positive influence they have on the society, library management practices in rural-based South African universities, like the University of Limpopo, have never been less favourable to their plight. Further, given the importance and increasing information need of the visually impaired to perform and excel academically and ethically, the library management in a rural-based university has a vital role to play in improving the quality of library resource planning, control and decision making for the survival and advancement of this set of students to fulfil their academic dreams.

Objectives of Study

This study examined the quest by visually impaired university students to access information and the challenges they face in a rural university context. In achieving this objective, the study sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- ♦ What are the impediments to accessing information sources by the visually impaired students at the University of Limpopo in relation to their information-seeking behaviour?

- ♦ What is the implication of the inability by visually impaired students to access required information needs at the University of Limpopo on their academic performance?
- ♦ How can the visually impaired students at the University of Limpopo improve their information-seeking behaviour and academic performance within a rural university context?

Literature Review

The Role of Information in Student Academic Performance

Indeed, information played a vital role in many students' lives and the 21st century has been described as the era of information revolution; with the presence of information-bearing materials in diverse formats (Ortlieb 2014). Accordingly, accessing information is a vital resource needed by students to perform well in their academic pursuit (Katz 2013). Given the current techno-savvy generation, libraries should not only be equipped with materials in print format but also in electronic format, thus, offering users with different selection to choose from since the library is known as the academic heart of the university (Chan and Wong 2013; Hyman et al. 2014). In this context, the rule of supply and demand is necessitated by information needs. The information need is a state or process when one perceived that there is a gap between the information and knowledge available to solve a problem and the actual solution of the problem. Further, it is a gap in a person's knowledge of not knowing where and how to obtain relevant and accurate information to satisfy their informational needs (Case 2008). The need for information is often understood as evolving from vague awareness of something missing and as culminating in locating information that contributes to understanding and meaning (Kuhlthau 1993; Baby and Kumaravel 2011).

Seeking information is the totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including active and passive information seeking (Wilson 2000; Spink and Cole 2006; Halder et al. 2010). In the quest for information, different kinds of behaviours are manifested as students have different reasons to seek information and have different levels of searching skills (Catalano 2013). In this regard, Cole (2011) affirmed that information seeking involves

personal reasons for seeking information; the kinds of information which are being sought; and the ways and sources with which needed information is being sought. Some information-seeking behaviour may require many strategies with the user calling upon a variety of information sources because the information need is not thoroughly satisfied (Connaway et al. 2011).

Information Needs and Seeking Behaviour of Visually Impaired Students

The visual impairments usually change the way students access information and from specific sources relevant to their needs (Kamei-Hannan et al. 2012). This meant that during normal lecture activities, the visually impaired students require specialised tools like specialised braille computers adapted for the visually impaired to generate required information (Smith and Rosenblum 2013). Indeed, information is indispensable in decision making and key resource for the development of the society (Arduin et al. 2013). As such, the effective and efficient utilisation of information by the visually impaired students is a necessity to improved academic performance of visually impaired students (Alma 2013). At times, many visually impaired students require additional classes to learn specialised skills to catch up with their peers. Given the fact that most information sources are readily available to the sighted because most information infrastructure designed to optimize the freedom, functioning and benefit of sighted people, the visually impaired faces exclusion from information infrastructural network.

Goodall and Pattern (2011) observed that more than half of university students experience problems locating library materials. They noted that the majority of them either located materials through browsing the shelves or sought assistance from library staff, but they did not make full use of the library catalogue. Although, the library catalogue is the most essential library tool in accessing library collections, it was the most avoided and least consulted by the students (Catalano 2013). In addition, most students use a subject disciplinary method in seeking information, which leads them to specific lists of resources on particular subjects (Sugimoto et al. 2011). While this method allowed students to find more specific sources, it limited their knowledge of the fact that work of interest to their subject appeared within the literature of

many other disciplines on how much they get out of the library system (Anderson and May 2010).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study used the qualitative exploratory approach because it is difficult to design a survey questionnaire for this group of respondents. Welman et al. (2005) viewed that, a qualitative research method uses non-numerical data from individuals, groups or communities to resolve research questions in a study. This study used the qualitative research approach because it aimed at getting a better understanding of the research problem through first-hand experience, truthful reporting and quotations of actual conversations. The study used semi-structured interview to examine the quest by disabled university students to access information and the challenges they face in a rural university context. Accordingly, Goddard and Melville (2004) articulated that the purpose of exploratory approach is to gain insight into a situation, person or community. Besides, it allowed the researchers to familiarise them with the problem or concept being researched. The researchers made contact with the administrator of the unit who gave the permission and access to the visually impaired students. The students were informed that their responses shall strictly be used for research purpose only and that their identities shall be kept discreet.

Sampling

In this study, the sample comprised of visually impaired students of the University of Limpopo Turfloop Campus' Disability Students Unit (DSU). This particular study used convenience sampling which is non-representative and is constructed to serve a very specific need. The respondents were selected based on their identification within this group of students. A sample of 10 students of the 35 visually impaired students, which included both males and females with ages ranging between 25 and 30, were contacted for this particular study. The respondents comprised of visually impaired students from different disciplines. The data were collected through a tape recorder and analysed based on the content of their responses.

The University of Limpopo Library and the Visually Impaired Patron

The University of Limpopo library offered students support services for their learning and research needs for both undergraduate and post graduate students. This consisted of the library at the main campus of Turfloop, with two branch libraries, one in Polokwane and the other one in Medunsa. The library introduced effective systems such as the online public access catalogue (OPAC) which offers information services in support of teaching, learning and research as well as community outreach as one of its motto.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the quest by disabled university students to access information and the challenges they face in a rural university context. As explained earlier in the study, an in-depth interview method was used to collect data. This was so because the respondents were visually impaired students who are likely to have problems reading a survey questionnaire. Based on the interactive method of interviewing, the visually impaired students were asked to discuss freely their experiences and challenges, as well as what they thought could be a way out of the identified problems. Severally questions and discussions were engaged in, ranging from whether they have visited the main library and the Disabled Students' Unit on campus; their satisfaction with the services rendered; whether their academic expectations were met by the librarians; to general discussions that were not addressed by the structured questionnaires.

The interview involved disabled students from different disciplines that included information studies, accounting, law, economics and the sciences. Even though the disabled students have visited the main library on occasions when they have need, they have mainly been using the DSU library where there is a stationed librarian to help them with their academic needs.

"Only when there is a need but not necessarily to study", responded the student from the information studies department.

"There is no need for me to go to the main library because there is no braille there", commented the law student.

It is the expectation of the university library to meet the academic needs of all its students,

including those with special needs. However, the study revealed that not all of the expectations of the disabled students are met by this university's library.

"Not actually everything (all my information needs), but I had to resort to the internet at the DSU", explained the information studies student.

"The library are stocked with outdated books that do not meet our current information needs", maintained the law student.

"Some of the librarians do not give us relevant information or direction when we ask for specific materials. All they do is to toss us around from one librarian to the other", recalled one of the science students.

"Some of the prescribed books by the lecturers are not available in the library", added the information studies student.

Although, it is the responsibility of the university library to ensure the availability of current and relevant books, both in hard copies and soft copies, this does not appear to be the case in this rural university (Chan and Wong 2013; Hyman et al. 2014).

"If they could buy relevant and updated materials in a format that will suit us; it will be useless to give me a new book that I cannot read since it has to be in the right format for me to read", explained the student from economics.

To improve academic performance of this set of students, university libraries ensured that all relevant materials are available (Alma 2013). But the study indicated that this set of students struggle with their assignments and sometimes when preparing for tests and examinations.

"The library does not meet all my academic expectations, not at all. There are not enough relevant materials to motivate academic excellence that I desired", fussed a student from the economics.

One student from accounting explained that:

"The library contains outdated accounting textbooks whereas I need current textbooks because financial accounting and taxation rules are constantly changing. Sometimes, I get to borrow from my lecturer because she understands my situation. In fact, I can say that there are not enough relevant and current accounting textbooks in the library. This has made me to fail my first semester financial accounting module."

As a patron to the library, efficient services are expected from the librarians. Conversely, in this university, the disabled students are deprived of the services they require (Goodall and Pattern 2011).

“Catastrophic services I must say. They do not meet the minimum standard to help a visually impaired student. There is no specified librarian at the main library to assist us when accessing information. One day last semester, I went to the library but could not find the books I needed on time for my test. I needed a new criminal law textbook which the library does not have. I had to go off campus to buy the textbook which I had to scan in order to be able to read electronically at the DSU. I believe to help us, the library need to stock current and relevant textbooks that can be accessed both in hard and soft copies”, fumed the student from law.

The student from accounting had this comment:

“I never got the services I require from the main library. For instance, if you need an accounting textbook, checking for the location at the university’s main library is difficult because the font on the computer at the front desk is too small for me to read. Moreover, even if one locates the book section, there is no designated librarian at the section to help you.”

Despite all of the challenges faced by this set of students, they do require specific urgent attention from the librarians to help them improve their study (Arduin et al. 2013).

“I need a magnifying glass when I go to the library to help me access information better. I also need it for my tests and examinations especially when it is an open-book examination like financial accounting and taxation. This is necessary because accounting textbooks used during open-book test and examinations like the IFRS have very small fonts”, explained the accounting student.

“It would be better if I have access to a calculator with large fonts because, economics is a course that require the use of formulas and equations”, commented the economics student.

Further, the necessity to have an adequate number of librarians to service this set of students cannot be overemphasised. Library services should also extend beyond week days to ensure that students are well catered for during weekends to avoid unexpected vices.

“We need an assistant for our librarian at the DSU especially after hours and weekends because that is when we really need their services to complete assignments and to study. Unfortunately, the only librarian we have at the DSU is not always available after hours. At times the computers are too slow during peak hours and we need someone to help with this. In fact, since this is an institution of higher learning, library services should be available 24 hours every day”, explained one of the students.

Thus, both library management and university management need to collaborate to ensure that the visually impaired students receive adequate library services and support that will help this set of students achieve improved academic performance (Katz 2013).

CONCLUSION

Meeting the information needs of visually impaired students is fundamental to improving their academic performance as well as the future development and benefit of a rural-based society. Neglecting to attend to the needs of visually impaired students will result in under performance which can undermine their contribution to the society. Since the development of the human resources of a nation, whether rural based or urban based, will ensure economic growth and development, it is essential for administrators like librarians to help in developing the disabled among the society. Such developments will help them become useful not only to themselves but to the society as well, especially, in a rural context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the challenges that visually impaired students face in a rural university context, this study suggested that librarians, as well as university administrators, invest more in information sources to meet the needs of the visually impaired and other disabled students so as to lessen their dependence on other members of society for survival. Further, more researches into the plight of visually impaired students in a rural based university’s lecture-rooms context is recommended.

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