

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Winter 12-7-2021

Library Services for Students with Disabilities: Barriers and Way Forward.

Tania Farooq

University of Kashmir, India, beightania@gmail.com

Shazia Manzoor

University of Kashmir, India, shaaz18@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Farooq, Tania and Manzoor, Shazia, "Library Services for Students with Disabilities: Barriers and Way Forward." (2021). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 6720.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/6720>

Library Services for Students with Disabilities: Barriers and Way Forward.

Tania Farooq¹

Shazia Manzoor²

Abstract:

Libraries form an integral part of any society and provide an impetus for the academic and intellectual growth of the society. They are considered as the repositories of knowledge and should provide information to all without any discrimination on any grounds. Yet, students with disabilities form a vulnerable group who face discrimination and restrictions while accessing the library services. In this paper we have focused on some of the barriers that students with disabilities face while accessing the library services. These have been identified as a) Inaccessible Formats, Materials and Web-Pages b) Inaccessible Libraries c) Lack of Trained Staff in the Libraries. This has been followed by a set of recommendations to make libraries inclusive and accessible for all.

Keywords: Libraries, Inaccessible Formats, Students with disabilities, Barriers.

¹ Ph.D (Social Work), Dept of Social Work, University of Kashmir

² Associate Professor, (Corresponding Author), Dept. of Social Work, University of Kashmir email id: shaaz18@gmail.com

Acknowledgment: The authors would like to thank Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for supporting this work.

Introduction:

'Libraries have always had a pivotal role in the storage, processing, and dissemination of information' (Gul & Khan, 2008). Libraries have long been known as the repositories of knowledge and form an important part of disseminating information at a mass level. The libraries have always played a role in shaping the future of students; be it at the primary, secondary or college level. Kuh and Gonyea (2003, p. 256), as cited in (Soria, 2013) argue that 'the library is the physical manifestation of the core values and activities of academic life'. Soria (2013) also validly puts that not many people would question the important and 'symbiotic relationship' that the academic libraries have with the campuses where they reside. Even in the era where everything is available online, libraries still hold an important place and are an important indicator of academic prosperity. They have been regarded as the vital component in the process of furthering research in the universities (Rasul & Singh, 2010). Libraries occupy a position in the production and distribution of knowledge that is socially and culturally determined by the institution with which the library is associated (Plum, 1994) p.496. Libraries are being used by academicians, students at different levels and scholars with the aim of widening their knowledge horizons. Among them a category of students who form a vulnerable group are the students with disabilities who can equally get benefitted by accessing library services. But, contrary to the popular notion, this group of students is not able to benefit completely from the libraries and their services. Students with disabilities can include students with physical, visual, sensory or learning disabilities. Disabled persons form a marginalized group and in a cultural milieu like India their problems increase manifold. Disability is a 'phenomenon' that is linked with the discrimination of people having sensory, physical and cognitive impairments (Goodley et al., 2019; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Goodley (2017) points that 'disability becomes recognized when impairments interact with their environment'. Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) defines 'Persons with disabilities as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in the society on an equal basis with others'. It is a part of human condition. Nearly everybody will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some points in their life and the people who survive to old age will experience increased difficulties in functioning (WHO,2011). There can be health conditions that are 'invisible, temporary, long term, painful or degenerating'

(WHO,2011). They face discrimination and marginalization, and face challenges due to the restricted access to services, and oppressive societal attitudes (Cheng,2009). Similarly, students with disabilities face a number of problems while accessing services for higher education. Palan (2021) argues that students with disabilities have unequal access to education.

Review of Literature:

A study has been conducted by Ekwelem (2013) to assess the use of electronic media by disabled library users in South-east Nigeria. The participants of the study were 184 disabled library users in which 101 were having visual impairment and 93 were having physical impairment. The findings reveal that the taped books and online public access catalogue (OPAC) were the only electronic resources available to the library users with visual impairments. The participants of this study have perceived that the libraries were established to cater to the needs of non-disabled users. The findings have also revealed that there is limited knowledge of the needs of persons with disabilities.

Oswal (2017) in his work has tried to analyze the impact of accessibility barriers of libraries on disabled students' ability to succeed. The author has particularly focused on the accessibility challenges faced by users with visual and hand-motor disabilities who have frequently been excluded by the policy makers, library planners and software developers. This work has provided a glimpse regarding the accessibility issues and their impact on various dimensions of disabled persons lives like employability, the accessibility barriers embedded in research data bases and e-books. The author has stressed on the importance of engaging the actual stake- holders i.e., the disabled users in both the design and development stages of the platforms, user interfaces and content presentation schemas.

A study conducted by Bodaghi & Zainab (2013) has explored the views of architects and library users with physical disabilities regarding the accessibility to library buildings and equipment's in Iran. The sample for the study was 150 among which 142 responses were considered usable. The age of the participants was between 15 and 40 years. 49.6 % of the participants were wheel-chair users, 46.4% used canes or crutches and 4 % did not indicate their use of equipment. The educational level of respondents, varied from completing high school to university education. 14 libraries which consisted of seven public and seven university libraries in Zanjan Province were chosen for the study. A total of 13 architects were requested to observe and evaluate the selected libraries. The results of the study

conclude that the accessibility of the libraries was not rated as 'good' neither by the disabled users nor the architects. The disabled users have also highlighted the related issues like availability of parking spaces, ramps and exclusive spaces as posing difficulties for them in accessing library services. Additionally, the interior layout and public space of the libraries were regarded as less challenging.

Phukubje & Ngoepe (2016) have done a study in South Africa to assess the convenience and accessibility of library services for students with disabilities at University of Limpopo. The study has also examined the other aspects like services offered, physical access and availability of study material for students with disabilities. They have found that the students with disabilities were not satisfied with the library services, majorly because only a few library materials were transcribed into accessible formats. The other problems reported by the participants of this study included the inadequate training in how to use the library, restricted library opening hours and inaccessible formats.

Carter (2004) in her work has discussed three areas where librarians can focus so as to meet the needs of students with disabilities. These have been presented as bibliographic instruction, web pages and staff training. The author has examined the possibilities of providing enhanced services to students with disabilities. The paper has also stressed on evaluating library services periodically as new technologies keep on emerging. The author has also explored the possibility of 'adapting a multisensory teaching style that uses a variety of visual, aural, and tactile techniques meets the needs of every kind of learner'.

Methodology: This paper uses secondary sources of data to analyze the barriers that students with disabilities face while accessing library services. The sources used were journal articles, books and different policy documents like UNCRPD, 2006 to assess the barriers faced by them. They have been presented as a separate section, which has been sub-categorized into three main areas. A discussion on these areas has been done followed by a separate section on recommendations.

Barriers to Accessing the Library Services: It has been argued that academic libraries should perform functions that will yield better results and have wider applicability and acceptance (Mufeed & Mir, 2017). They also argue that the libraries have an important responsibility of meeting the expectations of academicians, coping with the changing environment and creating innovations to meet the standards of libraries at global level (Mufeed & Mir, 2017). Yet, we note that students with disabilities face various barriers in

accessing the library services. We have categorized them into three areas which have been depicted in Fig 1 below:

These are:

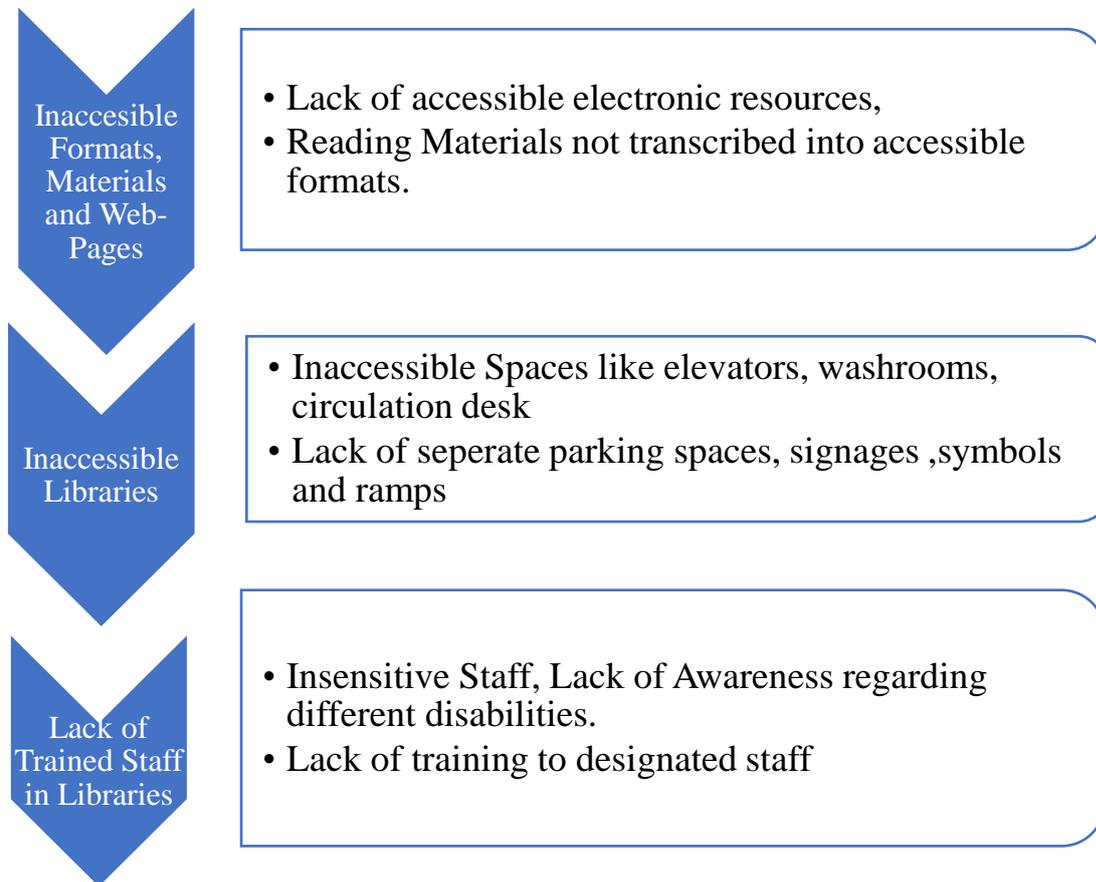


Fig 1: Barriers that students with disabilities face while accessing library services.

1. Inaccessible Formats, Materials and Web-Pages: The UNCRDP, 2006 emphasizes on the need of ensuring access of information for persons with disabilities along with the need to promote their access for to new information and communications technologies (ICT) and systems, including the Internet. It also notes to promote the ‘design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost’. However, Phukubje & Ngoepe (2016) note that among the barriers that restrict the usage of library services by students with disabilities are the inaccessible media formats. These may be books that have not been transcribed into talking books, ‘books not transcribed into talking books, large print books, easy-to-read books, braille books, video/DVD with subtitles and/or

sign language, e-books and tactile picture books'. Similarly, Carter (2004) has argued that libraries are always in process of updating their electronic resources which may include journal, periodicals, full-text newspapers and multimedia reference publications such as encyclopaedias and dictionaries. These resources always prove beneficial to students, yet students with disabilities may not be able to fully benefit from these resources. The libraries are shifting from the conventional style of using print books to using electronic resources like e-books and data bases. If libraries have to some extent managed to address the issue of physical barriers, yet the identification and removal of barriers to electronic resources poses a big challenge to academic libraries (Riley, 2002; Saumure & Given, 2004; Dermody & Majekodunmi,2011). This is true for students who use screen readers as they also face barriers in accessing the information because of the graphical interfaces and complex web designs of proprietary online databases (Horwath, 2002; Dermody & Majekodunmi,2011). As, Jaeger (2012) argues that unless the technological design and implementation focus on inclusion the internet may become a means of marginalization for students with disabilities. Here, Phukubje & Ngoepe (2016) also put a valid point by arguing that how media format barrier can result in dearth of academic books in alternative formats as well as delays in students receiving study- and examination-related materials.

2.Inaccessible Libraries: Accessibility is a recognized as a human right, yet it has not been recognized by the institutions. The UNCRPD 2006 stresses on the importance of making places accessible for persons with disabilities. Article 9, reads that “States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas” (UNCRPD,2006). Regarding the education of students with disabilities, the UNCRPD (2006) notes that the State Parties shall facilitate the a) “learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community c) Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development”.

However, the libraries continue to be mostly inaccessible. In most of the cases, even if the library is accessible but reaching to the library itself becomes a hectic task. There are various barriers which poses limitations for students with disabilities in accessing the library services. These barriers may include the accessibility barriers like the ‘surroundings of the library, the entrance, restrooms, stairs and elevators that are not conducive to helping people with disabilities’ (Phukubje & Ngoepe,2016). The basic structures have always been made for the ‘normal’ population and thus students with disabilities don’t get recognized. In cases, where ramps are present, there are no accessible spaces inside the libraries. This may be exemplified here, there are no accessible toilets, chairs in the libraries. Another example here can be of inaccessible lifts that are present inside the libraries. This prompts students with disabilities to ask for guidance and help, which in turn makes them dependent. Students with disabilities then have to turn towards their family members, teachers or friends to get the needed guidance and assistance (Awais & Ameen, 2017). Similarly, Carter (2004) has argued that as the number of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities continue to increase, as such the issues of accessibility must be at the forefront of library services. The academic institutions are not inclusive and as such the issue of accessibility discourages students with disabilities to move forward and pursue a career of their choice.

3. Lack of Trained Staff in The Libraries:

Phukubje & Ngoepe (2016) have argued that the librarians and the associated staff work very hard to provide services and access to non-disabled students, but the same approach is not seen as far as students with disabilities is concerned. A major area of concern for students with disabilities is the insensitive nature of concerned authorities and officials at the work place. Students with disabilities form a vulnerable group as they face discrimination, barriers to access and are excluded from the mainstream society. They are as such at a disadvantage and are thus not able to utilize their capabilities and potential. People in general are apathetic towards the persons with disabilities. Their needs and rights have not yet been fully recognized, particularly in the developing nations. Most of the libraries are not inclusive, so the students with disabilities have to consult the library staff for assistance. There are no special trainings or induction done for the recruited staff to cater to the needs of students with disabilities. The need for training staff for providing better services for students with disabilities have been reported by authors like (Singleton,1999; Tinklin & Hall,1999). If the staff is not trained, it can lead to discriminatory practices against students with disabilities. Carter (2004) has exemplified the need of training staff by discussing that a simulation

practice for a library patron in a wheel chair should be done in which they should navigate the physical areas of library, including the elevator, washroom, try to reach the upper and lower shelves. These ways are effective in making the staff members conscious of the difficulties that students with disabilities might face.

Recommendations:

The recommendations provided here are been drafted with an aim to ensure that students with disabilities are able to live a life of dignity and are able to exercise their rights as their counterparts do. These recommendations are given to minimize the basic curbs and barriers that students with disabilities face on day-to-day basis. Some of the recommendations are.

1) **Ensuring Accessibility:** Accessibility as a right has been seldom seen in ableist societies. Impairments always get transformed into disabilities because of the inaccessible spaces. It is very important to understand the importance of having accessible spaces and how they can impact the lives of persons with disabilities. As far as accessibility within libraries is considered various measures can be adopted to ensure accessibility. Some of them include having

- Wider entrances to ensure the wheel chair users are able to enter freely without any assistance.
- Accessible elevators with push buttons are kept at a reachable level.
- The parking spaces are made accessible.
- Wherever possible the distance from the parking space to library should be minimized accessible parking spaces are available.
- Parking spots should be designated for students with disabilities.
- Ensuring railing at the ramps.
- It also important to ensure that all the new architectures and buildings are made disabled friendly

2) **Modifications in Existing Structures:** Along with ensuring accessibility, it is of equal importance to make the existing libraries accessible. Accessibility audits must be conducted and the required modifications should be done. Like for example Ramp My city is an organization in India trying to make public places accessible by making ramps. Such a start-up can be encouraged to ensure that accessibility in libraries is achieved.

3) **Symbols and signages:** should be used at all the important places in the libraries as well as outside them. Inside, the libraries circulation desks should be made in an accessible

manner. Additionally, signs in braille and synthetic speech should be used to ensure accessibility for students with sensory impairments.

- 4) **Training of Staff:** The training of staff should be made mandatory as it can have a positive impact on students with disabilities. Induction and refresher trainings should be provided to the library staff. These trainings should focus on understanding inclusion, different types of disabilities and regarding sign language.
- 5) **Accessible material and formats:** Information that is available in libraries in the form of books, journals, reference materials or encyclopaedias needs to be converted into accessible formats. This will ensure that students with disabilities are able to benefit from libraries. The web content should be made into accessible format.
- 6) **Understanding diverse needs and different disabilities:** It is of great importance to understand that all disabilities should not be clubbed as one. Recognizing different disabilities is important to understand different disabilities, and thus provide facilities accordingly. Awareness about diverse needs of students will help librarians provide inclusion and help students with disabilities.
- 7) **Separate spaces for students with disabilities:** A separate help desk for students with disabilities should be kept in every library. The libraries should also include separate reading spaces, accessible shelves, provision of rest rooms and accessible toilets. It is also important to consider the height of chairs and tables.
- 8) **Adopting the UNCRPD guidelines:** The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006 is an international treaty that aims to secure the rights of persons with disabilities. There are 50 articles in the convention that focus on improving the quality of life for persons with disabilities. Article 9 focuses on accessibility and similarly Article 24 focuses on education of persons with disabilities. If the Articles of the Convention are followed duly, then all spaces for students with disabilities will become accessible and disabled friendly including the libraires worldwide.

Conclusion:

Libraries form a central part of any society. They are the backbone that provide students, academicians, scholars a space to explore their intellect and explore their capabilities. No university or any academic institution can do without having an academic library. Almost all schools, colleges and universities have libraries and cannot function effectively without them. Similarly, public libraries are considered of being equal importance. There is a worldwide consensus on the fact that libraries should provide services to all without discrimination on

any ground. However, students with disabilities form a vulnerable group who are not able to access library services because of some barriers. They face various issues while accessing library services and, in this paper, we focused on some of these barriers which include the issues of accessibility, inaccessible formats, web-pages and lack of trained staff. These barriers hinder the participation of students with disabilities in accessing the library services. Students with disabilities have an equal right to access the library services without having to face any discrimination on any grounds. It is of equal importance to understand that students with disabilities attending schools will see an increase. Thus, inclusion of students with disabilities should be seen as a priority. Making libraries accessible should be kept as a priority, which can include earmarking separate funds for making libraries inclusive. In all the libraries architectural barriers should be removed and the technology should be made accessible. In this paper, we have also followed with a set of recommendations which can help in removing these barriers and in turn provide for a more accessible way to use the services of libraries.

References:

- Awais, S., & Ameen, K. (2017). Information accessibility for students with disabilities: An exploratory study of Pakistan. *Malaysian Journal of library & information science*, 20(2).
- Bodaghi, N. B., & Zainab, A. N. (2013). Accessibility and facilities for the disabled in public and university library buildings in Iran. *Information development*, 29(3), 241-250.
- Carter, C. J. (2004). Providing services for students with disabilities in an academic library. *Education Libraries*, 27(2), 13-18.
- Cheng, R. P. (2009). Sociological theories of disability, gender, and sexuality: A review of the literature. *Journal of human behavior in the social environment*, 19(1), 112-122.
- Dermody, K., & Majekodunmi, N. (2011). Online databases and the research experience for university students with print disabilities. *Library Hi Tech*, 29 (1), 149-160. <https://doi.org/10.1108/07378831111116976>
- Ekwelem, V. O. (2013). Library services to disabled students in the digital era: challenges for outcome assessment. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 4.
- Goodley, D. (2017). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed). Los Angeles, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Liddiard, K., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2019). Provocations for critical disability studies. *Disability & Society*, 34(6), 972-997.

- Gul, S., & Khan, S. (2008). Growth and development of Oriental libraries in India. *Library philosophy and practice*, 8.
- Horwath, J. (2002), "Evaluating opportunities for expanded information access: a study of the accessibility of four online databases", *Library Hi Tech*, 20 (2),199-206.
- Jaeger, P. T. (2012). *Disability and the Internet: Confronting a digital divide*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Kuh, G. D., & Gonyea, R. M. (2003). The role of the academic library in promoting student engagement in learning. *College and Research Libraries*, 64(4), 256–282.
- Mufeed, U., & Mir, A. A. (2017). Relationship of Leadership and Learning Organizations: An empirical study in Select Academic Libraries of J&K. *Trends in Information Management*, 11(1).
- Oliver, M., & Barnes, C. (2012). *The new politics of disablement*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oswal, S. K. (2017). Institutional, Legal, and Attitudinal Barriers to the Accessibility of University Digital Libraries: Implications for Retention of Disabled Students. In H. Alphin, Jr., J. Lavine, & R. Chan (Eds.), *Disability and Equity in Higher Education Accessibility* (pp. 223-241). IGI Global. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-2665-0.ch010>
- Palan, R. (2021). "I seriously wanted to opt for science, but they said no": visual impairment and higher education in India. *Disability & Society*, 36(2), 202-225.
- Phukubje, J., & Ngoepe, M. (2017). Convenience and accessibility of library services to students with disabilities at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 49(2), 180–190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000616654959>
- Plum, T. (1994). Academic Libraries and the Rituals of Knowledge. *RQ*, 33(4), 496–508. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20862529>
- Rasul, A., & Singh, D. (2010). The role of academic libraries in facilitating postgraduate students' research. *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 15(3), 75–84. Retrieved from <https://mjlis.um.edu.my/index.php/MJLIS/article/view/6943>
- Riley, C. (2002), "Libraries, aggregator databases, screen readers and clients with disabilities", *Library Hi Tech*, 20 (2),179-87.
- Saumure, K. and Given, L.M. (2004), "Digitally enhanced? An examination of the information behaviors of visually impaired postsecondary students", *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 28 (2), 25-42.
- Singleton, C.H. (1999). *Dyslexia in Higher Education: Policy, Provision and Practice. Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education*. Hull: University of Hull.
- Soria, K. M. (2013). Factors predicting the importance of libraries and research activities for undergraduates. *The Journal of academic librarianship*, 39(6), 464-470.

Tinklin, T., & Hall, J. (1999). Getting round obstacles: Disabled students' experiences in higher education in Scotland. *Studies in Higher education*, 24(2), 183-194.

United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (2006). Article 1-Purpose. Retrieved from Article 1 – Purpose | United Nations Enable

World Health Organization & World Bank. (2011). *World Report on Disability*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization