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BARRIERS TO THE USE OF ICT SERVICES BY PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED PERSONS IN AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY: A CASE STUDY OF THE FOURAH BAY COLLEGE LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

ICT services in libraries of developing countries have greatly enhanced users' access to the most current and up-to-date information. The use of ICT Services is for all users regardless of their abilities. The Libraries and Information centres must consider this when setting up their Library Information centres. The increase in ICT equipment in the library environment has implications for staff managing them and their potential users. In an Academic library, services such as talking books, brails and clocks for the blind, the building of ramps for the physically challenged, use of sign language communication for the deaf and personalised assistance for those with mental ailments and suitable furniture and air conditioner for albinos must be taking into consideration.

This article is a documentary analysis backed by the experienced of the researcher who has worked in the academic library for over two decades. The article describes services offered by academic libraries in using ICT to enable persons with disability benefit from their services using Fourah Bay College as a case study. Citing reference from the experiences of FBC Library, the paper discusses diverse ways adopted to bridge the gap between access to information to all regardless of their state or form and procurement of ICT services. This paper identifies the barriers to the use of ICT Services by physically challenged persons and their right to access information through the use of ICT. The paper concludes that the University authorities take prudent measures in tackling all the barriers involved in the use of ICT to help persons with disability issues benefit from the wealth of information from ICT services.

KEYWORDS: Barriers, Physically Challenged Persons, ICT Services, Academic Library, FBC library

INTRODUCTION

According to Fry (2007) posits that the application of ICTs to the library has revolutionised the way libraries acquire, store and disseminate information. ICT service has changed the work of academic libraries and has expanded clientele access to current and up-to-date. Alemna (2009) observed that libraries in developing countries have not been able to meet all the required services to enable persons with disability issues to make use of library facilities that aid their studies. This is due to both economic and infrastructural challenges.

Technology is advancing so also are documentation centres. We must expect, therefore, to see very rapid growth in the use of computers in libraries and the services provided. This advancement in technology has created a negative impact on the lives of persons with disabilities it has created a divide between those that are able and also afford it and those that are disabled. The internet has made information access and retrieval both simple and complex (Adeoti, 2010). With the developments and application of ICT, the whole scenario of libraries has changed. There is a shift from traditional libraries to hybrid libraries. To remain relevant any institution including one as established as libraries must evaluate its place in a world increasingly lived online. The good news is that many library professionals recognise this need and are moving in that direction to make access to information open to all regardless of a person's status (Anyakoha, 2011).

In Sierra Leone society, persons with disability issues are now crying out with loud voices that disability is not an inability and that they should be treated equally. They should be given equal access to information and other related opportunities (Annan, 2008). Saravanan (2005) maintained that some ICT services remain unsuitable and unused by a person with disabilities. For example, different people with disabilities experience different barriers to access when using web pages; blind persons may require that all non-text items such as pictures, charts and graphic elements have text alternatives. It is thus a good design to remove barriers on websites. This benefits all

users such as those with low-end technology. Persons with disability issues use ICT services in the same way as 'able persons' in terms of leisure, shopping, information and banking to name but a few.

Fourah Bay College, an academic library has erected a ramp at the entrance of the main library for easy access by persons with disability. Also, air conditioners are now installed on all floors so that albinos will study with ease. The elevator has been renovated to enable users to move up and down the stairs with less energy. A trolling in and out of materials has been created. These gestures by the BADEA project provided the library with the opportunity to improve its services to persons with disability issues through the use of modern technology. The Fourah Bay College Library has an eVBAB learning centre computer lab & multi-media room. This was an initiative of the government of India. It is situated on the third floor of the building(UNDP, 2005). Persons that are physically challenged will have difficulty in reaching the services offered and so they will be classified as deprived. Although this technology has opened new opportunities for persons with disability issues as well as for staff at the FBC Library yet it also comes with challenges to the staff at FBC Library and the administration. In line with current changes, the administration of the university of Sierra Leone has intensified its effort at developing all sectors at its constituent colleges.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Physically Challenged Person: The Free-encyclopedia (2022) defined it as a person who is handicapped and disabled. For this research, it is an individual who has a physical impairment, including impaired sensory, manual, or speaking abilities, results in a functional limitation in gaining access to and using a building, facility or structure.

ICT Services: Wikipedia (2021) defined it as a form of technology that is used to transmit, process, store, create, display, share or exchange information by electronic means. This research connotes services provided by ICT systems to share information with one or more internal or external users.

Academic Library: IGI Global(2021) defined it as a library which serves an institution of higher learning such as a college or a university. For this research, an academic library is a library that is attached to a higher education institution and serves two

complementary purposes: to support the curriculum and the research of the university faculty and students. Fourah Bay College library is not an exception.

THE STRUCTURE AND ICT SERVICES AT FOURAH BAY COLLEGE LIBRARY

One of the first special libraries in Sierra Leone was the Obadiah Johnson Memorial Library founded in 1872 by the Church Missionary society (CMS)(Jusu-Sheriff, 1974). During the Second World War, this library was exiled to Mabang in the new Moyamba district.

After the war, the college was relocated at Mount Aureol. The current building was opened in 1965 as a three-storey building and was renamed Micheal Jolief building has become very small for its clientele. The actual building plan which is showcased at the lower ground floor, has it's extension that is closed to the building that housed the health department. The basement by then housed the binding section, a store and a micro fiche room. The staff room was converted to house the Sierra Leone Collection and the UN Collection, the ground floor housing the Librarian's office, the Admin office, Cataloging Department, and the American shelves. The first floor housed the Periodicals Department, the second floor, Textbook Collection and part of the lending section from 000-499. The third floor housed the rest of the lending collection (500-999).

Fourah Bay College Library can be regarded as an Academic Library, yet it doubles as a special Library by catering for staff, lecturers, students in and out of the college and researchers alike.

A computer programmer who was contacted to computerise the Library stock recommended that more than half of the Library stock should be withdrawn and the Library be rebranded. Library staff were left with no alternative but to weed outdated and mutilated books from the library stock (Harding, 2020). The rebranding of the library in 2021 has seen a slight shift of some departments relocating and in addition, a Library Café being added. In addition, a private photocopying, scanning and computerised section were created on the ground floor which minimised the old problem of pilfering. Before, clientele used to take materials out of the library for photocopying. Now clientele

are allowed to take snapshots of interesting areas from the materials requested. Staffs are supplied desktop in replacement of our traditional typewriters.

However, the current structure and services of FBC library are highlighted below:

Librarian's office and acquisition department

It controls all the sections and also discharges administrative duties. This office is responsible for selecting library materials (books, journals) and electronic materials. It encourages lecturers to make a selection for their use (Harding, 2020). The Librarian's Office is located on the upper ground floor with Cataloguing Section and Issue desk. This section encourages the physically challenged to have access to a special ICT service that the physically abled users do not have.

Cataloguing department

This section classifies library materials according to the subject areas. This section assigns numerical and alphabetical symbols to each book for easy arrangement on shelves. The rationale for this set of patterns is to facilitate easy retrieval from shelves.

Issue Desk

This section is responsible for circulating classified library materials to the different parts of the FBC library (Lahai, 2018). It ensures that these classified materials(books) are on shelves for preservation. This section is responsible for charging and discharging loan materials to the users. This section offers online registration to the physically challenged (the blind) users. It provides internet facilities to the blind to have access to online materials(books) instead of going up to the other floors which may cause difficulty for them.

Reference Section

This section holds all reference materials such as encyclopedias, atlases, and dictionaries and is under the supervision of the Issue Desk staff. It is an open-access collection as users can retrieve the materials on the shelf for use.

American Shelf

This section is on the first floor of the FBC library. This section houses collections on subject areas such as history, literature, education, health, economics, management, business, culture and law of the United States of America. It holds materials from books, magazines, journals and other programming materials about the United States of America (Harding, 2020). This section organises a sensitisation programme on relevant issues to society. The programme covers discussion areas on black history month, democracy, human rights, the girl child, HIV/AIDS, EBOLA, and COVID 19.

February is Black History month in the United States of America. The American Shelf at the FBC Library celebrates Black History month every 28th of February. The American Shelve has WIFI-internet connectivity which allows users(physically and non-physically challenged) to access online materials through various academic databases, including, but not limited to www.research4life.org., www.pdfdrive.com, www.googlescholar.com.

Periodicals Section

This section is also called the serial/Journal section. It is located on the first floor of the library. The journals are published quarterly, annually, and semi-annually. These journals come in several volumes and parts, joint authors contributed in the writing of such articles. At the end of every year, back issues are compiled and sent to the Bindery Section to be bound. The journals have distinct titles(Lahai, 2018). This collection also has an electronic cataloguing system to ease the retrieval of library materials. This collection also benefits from the WIFI-internet connectivity that allows users (both physically and able person) access to online journals via www.research4life.org, www.pdfdrive.com, www.googlescholar.com

Sierra Leone Collection

This section is located on the second floor of the FBC library. This section houses library materials about Sierra Leone and the neighbouring countries on history, Art in Africa, culture, autobiography, democracy, politics, geography, and geology. The collection holds materials from books, magazines, newspapers etc. It is a close-access

collection. This collection has a computer that offers an electronic cataloguing system to all users, especially the physically challenged. Electronic materials are preserved for the physically challenged to make quick access to online books on Sierra Leone.

General Collection

This section is located on the second floor with Sierra Leone Collection. It is an open-access collection under the supervision of the Sierra Leone Collection staff. It houses materials on various subjects offered at Fourah Bay College, ranging from 000-999.

Textbook Collection

This section is located on the third floor of the FBC library building. This is the most used collection by users because it houses materials on theories on various modules offered in the college (Lahai, 2018). This collection is unique as it houses textbooks, past dissertation, pamphlets, past examination question papers compiled by dedicated and experienced staff, Encyclopeadia, short loan materials for leisure, a resource centre for resource governance dealing with natural resource governance supported by GIZ Resource Governance West Africa Project on behalf of Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. This section offers ICT services such as an electronic cataloguing system that allows the physically challenged to get quick access to FBC library materials.

Computer Laboratory

This section is a new section sharing the same floor with Textbook Collection to offer online services to staff and students (Harding, 2020). This section delivers online registration services. This section does the maintenance of computers that are used in the various department at the FBC library to disseminate information to users.

Bindery Section

It is located on the lower ground floor of the FBC library building. This section is an economic nerve centre of the library(Lahai, 2018). This means that the bindery provides

income for the library by binding dissertations, theses, and books received from customers. The materials damaged in the listed sections are taken to the bindery for repair. This section offers ICT services to the user including the physically challenged by printing and photocopying services.

FBC Library Food Cafeteria Section

This is an open café which caters for all and sundry. It has comfortable chairs and tables with musical and television set for entertainment purpose. The function of this section is to sell variety of food and chilled drinks. It is a place where people met to have a "tete a tete" over food. An adage says "an empty bag cannot stand" This means the Cafetaria feeds the brain by feeding the stomach (Lahai, 2018). The various library sections seize this opportunity to display new library materials and services. The section mentioned earlier feeds the brains or minds of readers as they interact with books, journals and other reading materials. The cafeteria feeds the stomach by providing food and drinks at reasonable prices.

RELEVANCE OF ICT SERVICE FOR THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED AT FBC LIBRARY

Academic libraries play a pivotal role in enhancing the acquisition of knowledge for their clientele. This relevance can be reached with the aid of ICT Services (Shllobe, 2007). ICT permeates all aspects of life, providing newer, better, and quicker ways for people to interact, network, seek help, gain access to information and learn. Libraries need aggressive orientation towards the distribution of information rather than the traditional attention to the retention of books (Gourlay, 2010). Some academic libraries have electronic resources for visually impaired people. These facilities include but are not limited to: screen reader, electronic text, large print, taped books, tactile graphics, online public access catalogue, larger screen video with tele-text and sub-title facility, screen enlargement software, speech synthesize with speech output, and text enlargement software(Ekwelem, 2013). These facilities are very essential for the physically challenged in academic libraries but Fourah Bay College library is without them, which creates a barrier for the physically challenged to access the ICT services.

Fourah Bay College Library has basic ICT services provided by the administration for persons living with disability issues. Some services include the building of ramps for the physically challenged, air conditioner for albinos, and personal assistance by library staff to mainstream sites rather than disability-related sites. However, there are other ICT services that FBC is still challenged with the provision. These include a table and keyboard tray that is adjustable. A specially fitted lift to move the person inside, photoelectrode vices that can sense and track the movement of the users, a lift for wheelchairs to all the floors, and an automatic, lift with several disabled-friendly features such as additional button position for someone in a wheelchair and digital handrail on steps(Kenniston, 2003). These mobility enhancements are very pivotal in discharging library services in academic libraries, for which Fourah Bay College is not an exception.

FACTORS AFFECTING ACCESS TO ICT SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITY ISSUES

ICT has affected every aspect of our life same goes for persons with disability issues and nothing is immune. ICT is revolutionising. Thus, certain factors are highlighted to below that affect the access to ICT services for physically challenged persons.

Lack of Funding and High Cost of Garget – There is little or less funding available to persons with disability issues to go the extra mile in achieving their goals with the aid of ICT services. This is a great barrier as they cannot afford the cost involved however minimal it may seem to appear.

Lack of Awareness on the Part of Persons with Disability- Most persons leaving with disability lack awareness of what is available in terms of library services. They depend on what is hear saying than finding time to explore the services available to them.

Lack of Trained and Qualified Staff to Deal with Persons with Disability Issues- Librarians at FBC library are not specialized in the area of dealing with persons with disability issues, thus leaving persons with such issues to shy away from the library. Thus, library staff provides services to the disabled from sympathies rather than as their

equal rights and would only consider serving them after serving normal users(Ekwelem, 2013)

Lack of Strong Formal Policies- The absence of strong written policies to support the development of Fourah Bay College in the area of procurement of ICT facilities to cater for the needs of persons suffering from disability issues(Harding, 2021).

The complexity of Certain ICT Software- Certain ICT software is difficult to learn and use.

Poor Connectivity- Being in a third-world country where connectivity is slower and power supply is irregular it is difficult to access current information.

Poor Storage and Conservation Facility for ICT Equipment- There is a problem with storing, preservation and conservation of this equipment.

WAY FORWARD

For any challenges, there must be a way forward to tackling them.

- Proper planning prevents poor performance as administrators should think fast and plan way ahead rather than waiting for any disaster to happen. ICT has assisted library and information science professionals to provide value-added services.
- University authorities should include the person with a disability when drafting formal ICT service policies in the library.
- The ICT department at FBC should be commissioned to design various software which would enable disabled users to access the internet and other available technology with little or no difficulty.
- The existing library facilities should be redesigned and modified with new technologies to enable mobility-challenged users to effectively and efficiently use library resources.
- Library staff and librarians should be oriented to ensure that no one is discriminated against in terms of provision of access to all library resources.

- Universal accessibility should be made an integral component of the overall service development plan.
- Staff too has a role to play as a front-liner in libraries they must be able to notice persons with disability issues and be of help to them either by reading to the blind or by sign languages to the deaf.
- Adequate funding must be available to meet the needs of persons associated with disability issues
- Training sessions, seminars and workshops can be conducted for staff dealing with persons with disability

CONCLUSION

The rate at which ICT is trending is a concern for both administrators and users. The 21st-century Information professionals must be outstanding by providing current and appropriate technology tools and also delivering the best services to their clientele regardless of their inabilities. The clientele must be able to find and use the information at ease. Information is the key raw material but a zero resource if there are no access points to it and also if they are in a chaotic order. In that light more emphasis must be placed on publicity, acquiring funding for the right ICT equipment, and acquiring skills and policy framework to combat barriers to the use of ICT services in an Academic library. Collaborative efforts of all concerned will make the dream work a reality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research adopted one of the internationally approved Plymouth Marjon University research ethics policies and code of conduct version 5.0: Page 2 of 24 documents.

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