INFORMATION PRACTICES OF STUDENTS WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES TO ACCESS AND UTILISE DIGITAL INFORMATION RESOURCES IN KYAMBOGO AND MAKERERE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Patience Aagabirwe

ABSTRACT

Access and utilisation of digital information resources provided by university libraries are vital for all University students, including those with visual disabilities. Despite the availability of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and the implementation of assistive technologies in university libraries, students with visual disabilities continue to struggle to access and utilise digital information resources for their studies. This study explored the information practices of students with visual disabilities to access and utilise digital information resources in their academic studies and make recommendations for improving access and utilisation of digital information resources in Kyambogo and Makerere University libraries. The study specifically sought to identify and describe the specific accessibility features of digital information resources, related access systems, and facilities offered to students with visual disabilities at Kyambogo and Makerere University libraries; explore the specific inaccessible spaces and environment and institutional constraints that students with visual disabilities experience in accessing and utilising digital information resources at Kyambogo and Makerere University Libraries; and document and analyse the information practices students with visual disabilities adapt to effectively navigate constraints of inaccessible spaces and environment and institutional to access and utilise digital information resources in the two University libraries. I used a qualitative research approach and the exploratory case study design, the social model of disability, and practice theories. I used purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling techniques to select participants. I conducted semi-structured interviews on 28 participants and 08 observations. I observed the libraries' disability designated spaces, including activities and status of ICTs for students with visual disabilities. I also reviewed documents, and conducted accessibility tests of the two University Library Websites, Institutional Repositories, and Library Databases the libraries subscribed to. I analysed data on accessibility tests of library websites using WCAG and WAVE metrics. I analysed accessibility results of Institutional Repositories and Databases using the checklist I operationalised from WCAG and Universal Design in Learning. Data from interviews, observations, and documents was analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti version 7.5.7. Findings showed that several accessible features for students with visual disabilities were unavailable on the library websites and institutional repositories. Notably, Kyambogo University Library Website offered relatively more accessible features compared to Makerere University. Library databases fairly embedded accessible features. Both libraries designated spaces for students with disabilities but with limited assistive technologies for students with visual disabilities. The findings further revealed that students with visual disabilities encounter many challenges, such as poor website design, inadequate ICT skills and information literacy skills to access and utilise digital information resources. Due to their unpleasant experiences with the insufficient support and exclusionary University library provision, students with visual disabilities adapted information practices to access and utilise digital information resources for academic studies. The practices include: peer to peer support, other social support, use of alternative access and utilisation spaces and assistive technologies, use of alternative digital information resources and alternative training to gain access and utilisation competencies. Conclusively, despite the initiatives provided by the University Libraries, students with visual disabilities are not optimally accessing and utilising digital information resources due to ineffective University library management control, reflecting a broader insensitivity to the needs of these students. The adaptive practices do not adequately address the problem. The study recommends a comprehensive framework, AUDSU, stipulating what stakeholders should follow to enhance access and utilisation of digital information resources to students with visual disabilities in the two University libraries.