Equity on Information Access of Library Services to Students with Sensory Disabilities at Selected University Libraries in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examines equity of information access for students with sensory disabilities relating to visual and hearing impairments at university libraries in Harare, Zimbabwe, identifying barriers and opportunities for inclusive library services. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating surveys, interviews and observational assessments across three major university libraries: University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Open University, and Midlands State University (Harare Campus). The study involved 35 students with sensory disabilities, 15 library staff members and accessibility audits of physical and digital library environments. Findings reveal significant inequities in information access, with physical inaccessibility of libraries, lack of infrastructure to support assistive technologies, and inadequately trained staff being primary barriers. Digital accessibility gaps were particularly pronounced, with navigation difficulties, incompatibility with access tools and inadequate labelling of links preventing effective use of online resources. Correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between assistive technology availability and staff knowledge ($r = .65$, $p < .01$), and strong negative correlations between accessibility improvements and academic challenges ($r = –.60$, $p < .01$). The study provides actionable recommendations for university administrators and librarians to improve accessibility and ensure equitable information access. This is the first comprehensive study examining sensory disability accessibility across multiple university libraries in Zimbabwe, contributing to limited African literature on this topic.

Keywords: Information equity, sensory disabilities, university libraries, accessibility, Zimbabwe, inclusive education

Introduction

Access to information is a fundamental human right that forms the foundation of academic achievement in higher education institutions. Students with sensory disabilities, including those with visual impairments, hearing impairments, or dual sensory losses, often face substantial obstacles when accessing library services and information resources (Burke & Mears, 2021). Sensory disabilities create disparities in environmental information access, particularly visual and auditory signals, necessitating attention to facilitate equal opportunities for all students. Worldwide, approximately 1.3 billion people experience substantial disabilities, with 400 million residing in developing nations and 80 million in Africa (Chawner & Oliver, 2013). This places significant medical and social strain on communities and institutions. The projected figure is expected to increase annually due to demographic and epidemiological factors, with growing numbers of students with disabilities enrolling at higher education institutions (Eneya & Adesina, 2025).

Zaid (2018) contends that integrating students with visual disabilities into conventional academic environments does not inherently ensure access to library services, nor does it guarantee inclusion. Visually disabled students without access to library services for study and research activities experience exclusion, irrespective of physical campus accessibility

(Matingwina, 2022). In Zimbabwe, where higher education enrolment has expanded significantly over the past two decades, providing equal access to library services for students with disabilities remains a major challenge. Although the Zimbabwe National Disability Policy (2021) emphasises inclusive education, its implementation at the institutional level shows significant variations. University libraries serve as central hubs of academic life, significantly influencing whether students with sensory disabilities achieve academic success.

This study examines the current state of information access equity for students with sensory disabilities at selected university libraries in Harare, the capital and home for several prominent educational institutions. By investigating physical accessibility, digital resource availability, staff preparedness and institutional policies, this research identifies gaps in service provision and develops recommendations for enhancing inclusive library services.

Despite growing focus on inclusive learning, students with sensory disabilities at selected university libraries in Harare still encounter substantial obstacles in accessing information and library resources. Students with disabilities face difficulties including insufficient assistive technologies, limited accessible learning materials (for example, Braille books, audio resources and sign language interpreters) and inadequate staff training in disability-inclusive services. This unequal access impedes academic performance, research capabilities and overall involvement in higher education. Although universities claim to promote inclusivity, they lack comprehensive policies and infrastructure guaranteeing that library services are fully accessible to students with sensory disabilities.

The primary objective was to assess equity of information access for students with sensory disabilities at selected university libraries in Harare, Zimbabwe. Specific objectives include:

- To evaluate physical accessibility of library facilities for students with sensory disabilities
- To examine staff knowledge, attitudes and training regarding services for students with sensory disabilities
- To investigate institutional policies and practices related to disability inclusion in library services
- To propose recommendations for improving inclusive library services

This research informs recommendations for enhancing inclusive library services and guaranteeing equal academic opportunities for students with sensory disabilities within Zimbabwean higher education systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on multiple theoretical frameworks that converge to offer comprehensive understanding of information access equity for students with sensory disabilities.

Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability, first introduced by Oliver (1983) and expanded upon by Shakespeare (2006), suggests that disability stems from societal obstacles rather than personal impairments. This foundational model has been extensively examined in disability studies literature, shedding light on its implications and evolving perspectives. This perspective is particularly relevant to library accessibility, as it shifts focus from student limitations to institutional obstacles inhibiting equitable information access.

Oliver's (1983) Social Model, as further developed by Shakespeare (2006), views disability based on societal and environmental obstacles rather than personal impairments. When

examining library accessibility for students with sensory disabilities, it is essential to focus on institutional shortcomings—including inaccessible facilities, insufficient assistive technologies and unprepared library staff—rather than individual limitations. Studies by Manchin (2024) and Matingwina (2022) found that students with visual and hearing impairments frequently encounter difficulties accessing digital materials or participating in library programmes due to systemic problems.

Despite increasing awareness, inconsistent implementation of inclusion persists in many universities, particularly in Zimbabwe. Research highlights the significance of implementing practical improvements, including sign language support, screen reader-compatible software, and accessible learning settings (Chawner & Oliver, 2013). Mugumbate and Nyoni (2021) observe that numerous institutions remain without enforceable disability inclusion policies. The social model provides a critical framework for understanding and addressing structural inequalities, advocating for comprehensive reforms ensuring equitable access for all students in academic libraries.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Rose and Meyer's (2002) Universal Design for Learning framework emphasises creating educational environments accessible to all learners from the outset. In library contexts, UDL principles guide development of services, resources and environments accommodating diverse learning needs without requiring specialised accommodations. The UDL framework provides strategies for creating inclusive educational environments catering to diverse learners, particularly visually impaired students in university libraries. Application of UDL principles emphasises accessibility and personalised learning experiences supporting all students' needs (Pilgrim & Ward, 2017; Burgstahler & Cory, 2010). The UDL framework helps minimise barriers and enhance learning opportunities for visually impaired students through intentional instructional design and appropriate resource allocation.

Information Equity Theory

Jaeger's (2007) information equity theory provides a framework for understanding how information access disparities affect marginalised populations. This theory emphasises that equitable access extends beyond mere availability to include usability, relevance and capacity to effectively utilise information resources. Informational justice emphasises equitable distribution of information access, ensuring all individuals can seek, source and utilise information effectively (Mathiesen, 2015). The digital divide highlights multifaceted disparities in information access, critical to understanding challenges faced by marginalised communities, especially the visually impaired (Yu, 2011). In university library settings, learners may require special collections of library resources suiting their needs.

Global perspectives on library accessibility for students with sensory disabilities

International research documents highlight persistent challenges in providing equitable library services to students with sensory disabilities. Library accessibility for sensory disabled students is a pressing global concern, with various studies highlighting existing barriers and potential improvements. Studies collectively emphasise challenges faced by sensory disabled students in library settings, perceptions of library professionals and the crucial need for better training and resources. Seven Ghanaian public university libraries lacked disability policies, resulting in limited physical library accessibility and inadequate assistive technologies, highlighting similar challenges across developing nations.

Recent studies in developed countries reveal ongoing accessibility gaps despite legislative mandates. Students with disabilities require detailed information about sensory aspects of libraries, including quiet spaces, lighting and available furniture, suggesting that accessibility extends beyond basic compliance to comprehensive environmental considerations. Major findings from a study by Bala (2025) revealed that students with visual disabilities encounter significant obstacles in library access due to inadequate resources and infrastructure. Specifically, many libraries lack sufficient Braille materials and audiobooks necessary for visually impaired users. Furthermore, physical accessibility features such as ramps and handrails are often absent, hindering movement and access within library facilities. Respondents emphasised the necessity of providing specialised resources and improving infrastructure to promote equal access and inclusive library services for visually impaired students.

Digital accessibility challenges

Increasing digitisation of library resources has created new accessibility challenges for sensory disabled students. Research indicates that students with visual disabilities are frequently excluded from accessing library websites due to navigation difficulties and incompatibility with access tools. These digital barriers are particularly problematic given the essential role of online resources in contemporary academic research.

African context and Zimbabwean perspectives

Limited research exists on library accessibility for students with disabilities in African contexts. Factors influencing library use by students with disabilities in Zimbabwe include physical inaccessibility, lack of infrastructure support and inadequately trained staff. This scarcity of African research underscores the importance of context-specific studies considering local resources, cultural factors and institutional capacity. Research on library accessibility for disabled students in African contexts, particularly Zimbabwe, indicates significant barriers to effective service provision (Ndiweni, Machimbidza & Mutula, 2022). Key factors include physical inaccessibility, inadequate institutional support and lack of trained personnel, all hindering educational experiences of disabled students.

The Zimbabwe Disability Policy (2021) mandates inclusive education but provides limited guidance on practical implementation in higher education institutions. This policy gap creates uncertainty for university administrators and librarians seeking to improve accessibility. Physical inaccessibility remains a major challenge in library services for students with disabilities in Zimbabwe, reflecting broader inclusivity issues in education (Kadodo et al., 2016). Inadequately trained staff and resource absence contribute to ineffective library service provision for individuals with disabilities, underscoring the need for better training and support (Chataika, 2007). Inclusive education policies exist on paper, yet actual implementation is hampered by institutional barriers and lack of political will, affecting library accessibility (Chataika, 2007). Successful models for addressing these barriers could involve collaborative advocacy and better coordination among disability rights organisations to improve library access (Chataika, 2007; Simui & Kasonde-Ngandu, 2018).

Emerging technologies and future directions

AI-powered tools are predicted to provide near ubiquity to digital products, adapting to users' accessibility preferences in real time. These technological advances offer promising opportunities for improving information access for students with sensory disabilities, though implementation challenges remain significant in resource-constrained environments. Integration of AI and innovative technologies in university libraries presents new opportunities

to support visually impaired learners (Chauhan, 2024). This highlights how assistive technologies can enhance educational accessibility and empower students with learning disabilities, signalling promising future directions for these tools in higher education.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine information access equity for students with sensory disabilities. The sequential explanatory design allowed for initial quantitative data collection followed by qualitative exploration to provide deeper understanding of identified patterns and relationships.

The research was conducted at three major university libraries in Harare, Zimbabwe: University of Zimbabwe Main Library (the country's oldest and largest university library), Zimbabwe Open University Harare Regional Library (serving distance learning students), and Midlands State University Harare Campus Library (a newer institution with modern facilities). These institutions were selected to represent different university types, establishment periods and resource levels, providing comprehensive view of library accessibility across Harare's higher education landscape.

The Study Population and Sampling were as follows.

Student Participants: The study population comprised registered students with sensory disabilities (visual, hearing, or dual sensory losses) at the three selected universities. Using purposive sampling, 35 students with sensory disabilities were recruited based on the following criteria: Currently enrolled undergraduate or postgraduate students; documented sensory disability through university disability services; regular library users (minimum once per month); and willingness to participate in interviews and accessibility assessments.

Library Staff Participants: Fifteen library staff members were selected using stratified random sampling (five from each institution), representing different service areas including reference, circulation, technical services and administration. Staff participants had varying experience levels and roles to provide comprehensive perspectives on service provision.

Data Collection Instruments

Student Survey: A structured questionnaire was administered to all 35 student participants, covering demographic information and disability characteristics, library usage patterns and frequency, accessibility experiences and challenges, satisfaction with current services and suggestions for improvement. The survey utilised both Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses, with alternative formats provided (large print, Braille, audio) as needed.

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 student participants to explore experiences in greater depth. Interview topics included specific accessibility barriers encountered, coping strategies and workarounds, staff interactions and support quality, impact on academic performance, and recommendations for improvement.

Staff Interviews: All 15 staff participants completed semi-structured interviews addressing knowledge of disability legislation and policies, training received on disability services, confidence in serving students with sensory disabilities, available resources and equipment, and perceived barriers to service improvement.

Accessibility Audits: Comprehensive accessibility assessments were conducted at each library using standardised checklists based on international accessibility guidelines. Audits examined physical accessibility features (ramps, signage, lighting), technology availability and functionality, collection accessibility (alternative formats, organisation) and policy documentation and implementation.

Quantitative data from surveys were analysed using SPSS version 28, employing descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify significant relationships. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, with coding conducted independently by two researchers to ensure reliability. Accessibility audit results were scored against established criteria and compared across institutions.

Ethical approval was obtained from the three institutions. All participants provided informed consent, with accommodations made for different communication preferences. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participants retained the right to withdraw without penalty throughout the study period.

Results and Discussion

Participant demographics

The study included 35 student participants with sensory disabilities from three selected institutions, distributed as follows: 18 with visual impairments (ranging from low vision to total blindness), 14 with hearing impairments (including deaf and hard-of-hearing students), and three with dual sensory losses. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines, with 62% pursuing undergraduate degrees and 38% enrolled in postgraduate programmes. Ages ranged from 19 to 45 years, with a mean age of 26.3 years.

Physical accessibility assessment

Physical accessibility assessments revealed significant deficiencies across all three libraries. Only 33% of entrance points were fully accessible to students using mobility aids or guide dogs. Students with sensory disabilities face unique inclusion challenges, evident in inadequate environmental design of library spaces. Lighting conditions posed challenges for students with low vision, with 78% of study areas receiving inadequate or inconsistent illumination. Emergency evacuation procedures were not adapted for students with sensory disabilities and tactile guidance systems were absent.

Wayfinding emerged as a critical barrier, with only one library providing tactile maps or audio navigation aids. Signage was predominantly visual, lacking Braille alternatives or high-contrast designs. Students with visual disabilities reported difficulty locating specific resources, with 85% requiring staff assistance for basic navigation tasks.

Assistive technology availability

Assistive technology availability varied dramatically across institutions. Screen reading software was available on only 40% of public computers, with outdated versions limiting functionality. No libraries provided refreshable Braille displays, and magnification software was limited to basic zoom functions. Hearing loop systems were absent from all group study areas and presentation spaces, effectively excluding students with hearing disabilities from collaborative learning activities. Only one library had procured basic assistive listening devices, though staff reported uncertainty about operation.

Alternative format resources were severely limited across all institutions. Less than 2% of collections were available in Braille, large print, or audio formats. Digital resources showed similar accessibility gaps, with many databases and e-books incompatible with screen reading software. Students with visual impairments require all print material in alternative formats, including conversion to audio files, Braille, or image enhancement, highlighting the extent of unmet needs.

Digital Accessibility Analysis
Assessments of web accessibility uncovered notable compliance shortcomings across library websites of selected universities. Frequent challenges identified were absence of alternative text for images, insufficient heading structures and vague link labels. Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) posed specific difficulties, as search functionalities were not compatible with screen readers, and results display often lacked coherent navigation structures. Simply, 23% of student participants were able to independently execute basic catalogue searches.

Electronic resource accessibility
Electronic databases and digital collections showed variable accessibility compliance. While some newer platforms incorporated accessibility features, legacy systems remained largely inaccessible. PDF documents constituted the predominant category of digital resources, with less than 15% offering searchable text or coherent reading sequences for screen readers. Most resources accessed through these universities' sites lacked interactivity.

Staff Knowledge and Preparedness
Staff interviews indicated absence or limitation of formal training in disability services, with merely 27% having had structured professional development on accessibility issues. Most workers depended on informal learning or short orientation courses, leading to variability in service quality and confidence levels. Familiarity with assistive technologies was notably deficient, as numerous staff members were incapable of operating available equipment or offering fundamental troubleshooting assistance. This deficiency in understanding adversely affected service quality, with students frequently reporting instances of insufficient or unsuitable support.

Attitudes and service philosophy
While staff demonstrated positive attitudes toward inclusive service provision, interviews revealed uncertainty about appropriate interaction methods and accommodation strategies. Many staff members expressed concern about "doing something wrong" when assisting students with sensory disabilities, leading to hesitant or overly cautious service approaches. Absence of standardised service protocols meant that student experiences varied significantly depending on individual staff member knowledge and comfort levels. This inconsistency created uncertainty for students about what level of support they could expect.

Institutional Policies and Support Systems
Policy analysis revealed significant gaps in institutional guidance for accessible library services. While all universities had general disability policies, specific implementation guidelines for library services were absent or vague. This policy vacuum left library administrators without clear directives for resource allocation or service development. Coordination between library services and campus disability support offices was inconsistent, with formal communication protocols existing at only one institution. This lack of coordination resulted in duplicated efforts, missed opportunities for collaboration and fragmented support for students with sensory disabilities.

Resource allocation and budgetary considerations

Financial constraints emerged as significant barriers to accessibility improvements. Library budgets showed minimal allocation for accessibility-related purchases, with assistive technologies competing against traditional resource acquisitions. Staff reported that accessibility needs were often considered "special" requirements rather than integral service components. Grant funding and external support for accessibility improvements were underutilised, with limited knowledge among administrators about available funding sources or application procedures.

Student Experiences and Coping Strategies

Impact on academic performance

Students reported significant impacts on academic performance due to accessibility barriers. Research efficiency was compromised, with students requiring 2-3 times longer to complete basic library tasks compared to non-disabled peers. This time disparity affected study schedules, assignment completion and overall academic satisfaction. Dependency on others for library tasks was a common theme, with 67% of participants relying on friends, family members, or paid assistants for information gathering. This dependency limited spontaneous research activities and created scheduling constraints affecting academic flexibility.

Adaptive strategies and resilience

Despite systemic barriers, students demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity in developing adaptive strategies. Personal technology use was widespread, with students bringing their own screen readers, magnifiers and recording devices to overcome institutional limitations. Peer support networks played crucial roles in information sharing and collaborative problem-solving. Students developed informal mentoring relationships, sharing knowledge about accessible resources and effective navigation strategies with newer students.

Comparative analysis across institutions

Significant variations existed across the three studied institutions, reflecting different resource levels, administrative priorities and historical development patterns. The University of Zimbabwe, despite being the oldest institution, showed moderate accessibility features but suffered from outdated infrastructure. Zimbabwe Open University demonstrated innovative approaches to serving distance learners but faced challenges in physical accessibility. Midlands State University's newer facilities incorporated some modern accessibility features but lacked comprehensive implementation. These institutional differences highlight the importance of context-specific approaches to accessibility improvement, recognising that one-size-fits-all solutions may be inappropriate given varying resource constraints and institutional characteristics.

Correlation analysis of accessibility indicators

Pearson correlation analysis ($N = 45$) revealed several crucial and statistically significant relationships among accessibility variables for students with sensory disabilities. The correlation between physical infrastructure accessibility and assistive technology availability was positive and significant ($r = .61$, $p < .01$). Similarly, positive significant correlations existed with alternative formats ($r = .55$, $p < .01$) and digital access ($r = .49$, $p < .01$). This indicates that organisations focusing on enhancing physical accessibility are likely to also emphasise accessible resources and technologies, reflecting broader dedication to inclusion rather than isolated enhancements. The correlation between policy support and infrastructure was evident ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), indicating that environments characterised by robust institutional backing are likely to offer enhanced physical spaces.

Assistive technology showed significant positive correlations with various factors, especially alternative format resources ($r = .68$, $p < .01$) and staff knowledge ($r = .65$, $p < .01$). These associations demonstrate that availability of accessible technologies frequently aligns with increased staff preparedness and broader arrays of inclusive resources. Institutions providing robust technology support often demonstrate wider adoption of inclusive practices, probably due to enhanced training, funding and awareness.

Digital access also shared strong positive correlations with alternative formats ($r = .73$, $p < .01$) and staff knowledge ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), indicating that digital accessibility plays crucial roles in fostering more inclusive learning environments. Nonetheless, all access-related variables exhibited negative correlations with academic impact - for instance, digital access ($r = –.60$, $p < .01$) and technology availability ($r = –.59$, $p < .01$) - indicating that as accessibility enhances, students encounter fewer academic challenges and disruptions.

The variable academic impact measured the degree to which students indicated facing challenges influencing their academic performance. The observed negative correlations with infrastructure, technology, digital access and staff knowledge indicate that improved accessibility alleviates academic burdens. This aligns with student feedback suggesting that inadequately adapted environments lead to increased study time and diminished academic satisfaction.

Finally, the correlation between policy support and staff knowledge ($r = .56$, $p < .01$) as well as assistive technology ($r = .51$, $p < .01$) highlights crucial roles of institutional frameworks in fostering preparedness. This aligns with insights gathered from staff interviews, indicating that absence of formal policy frequently resulted in ad hoc and inconsistent support services.

Conclusion

This study reveals significant inequities in information access for students with sensory disabilities at university libraries in Harare, Zimbabwe. Systemic barriers across physical infrastructure, technology resources, staff preparedness and institutional policies combine to create substantial disadvantages for these students. Findings demonstrate that despite policy commitments to inclusive education, implementation gaps persist at institutional levels. Physical accessibility assessments revealed that only 33% of entrance points were fully accessible, with 78% of study areas experiencing inadequate lighting. Assistive technology availability varied dramatically, with screen reading software available on only 40% of public computers and no refreshable Braille displays provided. Digital accessibility showed similar gaps, with only 23% of students able to independently execute basic catalogue searches.

Staff preparedness emerged as a critical challenge, with merely 27% having received structured professional development on accessibility issues. This training deficit contributed to variable service quality and student uncertainty about expected support levels. Policy analysis revealed significant gaps in institutional guidance, with specific implementation guidelines for library services absent or vague at all three universities. Correlation analysis demonstrated strong positive relationships between various accessibility indicators, particularly between assistive technology and staff knowledge ($r = .65$, $p < .01$), while strong negative correlations between accessibility improvements and academic challenges ($r = –.60$, $p < .01$) confirmed that enhanced accessibility alleviates academic burdens.

However, the research also reveals opportunities for meaningful improvement through targeted interventions. Student resilience and adaptive strategies provide models for institutional learning, while emerging technologies offer promising solutions for persistent accessibility

challenges. The varying approaches across institutions suggest that context-specific solutions, rather than standardised models, may be most effective in the Zimbabwean context.

Ensuring equitable information access for all students is not merely a compliance requirement but a fundamental aspect of educational quality and social justice. As Zimbabwe's higher education sector continues to expand and evolve, prioritising accessibility will be essential for realising the full potential of all students, regardless of disability status. Comprehensive staff training programmes covering disability awareness, assistive technology operation and appropriate interaction techniques should be implemented. Investment in modern assistive technologies is essential, including current screen reading software, refreshable Braille displays and hearing loop systems for group spaces. Universities need comprehensive accessibility policies specifically addressing library services, with clear implementation guidelines and accountability mechanisms developed in consultation with disabled students and disability advocacy organisations.

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