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NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR DISABILITY FRIENDLY AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIROMENT IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract:

The study investigated facilities need assessment for disability friendly and inclusive learning environment in tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria. Five research hypotheses were formulated and five null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. A descriptive survey design was adopted; the respondents for the study comprised 50 students with disabilities from tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria. A structured questionnaire titled: Institution Disability Friendly Environment Facility Need Assessment Scale questionnaire was the major instrument for data collection. The instruments were subjected to face validation by three experts in special education, educational psychology and educational measurement all in Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. The reliability of the instruments ranges from 0.76 to 0.86. The data were analyzed using percentage, mean and standard deviation while t-test statistics was used to test the null hypotheses. The findings revealed that facilities such as functional library, instructional facilities, accessible classroom, and support services are highly needed by tertiary students with disabilities. The researcher recommended that the government and other stakeholders should take special considerations and actions in order to accommodate students with disabilities in tertiary learning institutions.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Accessibility, Barrier-free Environment

Introduction

Accessible and friendly learning environment have been considered major in the provision of inclusive and barrier-free environment for learners with disabilities globally. The quotation of John Jefferson, that “nothing is more unequal like treating unequal equal” summarized the justification for the provisions of special needs facilities for persons with disability in schools and in the society at large. Inclusive education has though become global pursuit, its full implementation is limited in Nigeria due to the

issue of access to all facilities that could make learning easy and effective for students with disabilities especially in higher institution of learning. Therefore, if inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher institution of learning will be effective, all needs must be provided and the learning environment must be disability friendly.

Accessibility is a basic requirement for full inclusion of persons with disabilities at any educational level. This is very pivotal in the inclusive education policy as explained in the inclusion statement that schools and societies should ensure barrier free environment for all learners especially those with special educational needs (UNESCO, 2014). So inclusive education practice should provide the best opportunity and adequate facilities for the majority of learners with special educational needs. This behoves academic institutions to take into cognizance the provision of physical and human facilities that will enhance disability friendly and supportive learning environment.

People with disabilities comprise approximately 10% of the world's population, 75% of who live in developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that there are approximately 19 million people with disability in Nigeria (equivalent to 20% of the country's total population (Department for International Development (DFID), 2008). This explains why attention on the facility needs of students with disabilities should be at the focus of managements of higher institutions of learning in Nigeria. The access of persons with disability to higher education cannot be overemphasized in order for them to contribute their own quota to national development.

Losinsky, et al. (2003) found that, in most developing countries like Nigeria, there is high level of difficulty in accessing educational institutions by students with disabilities. Unfriendly learning environment limits the chances of students with disabilities in developing their academic potential and, consequently, their power for a better life in the future. Therefore, academic institutions need to provide for the facilities including well-structured building, social infrastructure, human and material facilities. That will make the learning environment of all categories of students easy including those with disabilities.

An inclusive school environment should make provision for accessible and functional library, instructional materials, lecture room, mobility and support services/facilities. There should be at strategic places ramps, broad corridors, flat terrain, and spacious instructional space for navigation, comfortable seating furniture and toilets, good lighting and instructional facilities that will meet the needs of providing equal opportunities for all learners, their ability or disabilities notwithstanding (Ozaji, 2006). Functional library has been considered a paramount need in higher institutions, especially for students with visual impairment who cannot read print materials that dominate most libraries of our higher institutions. The blind cannot read thousands of books on the library shelves of higher institutions of learning, so they need braille books and perhaps electronic books with audio facilities. The virtual library is a better option for the blind. The low vision will require enlarged print books for effective

reading. The deaf, on the other hand, will require computer facilities in the library with videos of lectures in sign language. Without these facilities, learning opportunities cannot be equalized for students with disabilities in higher institutions.

There are a number of basic instructional facilities that are very important for students with disabilities without which learning could be said to be segregated against students with disabilities (Dada, 2020). For instance, the braille machine, style and stylus, braille paper and large print books are needed by students who are blind or partially-sighted. The deaf or students with mild hearing loss need hearing aids, smart board and projector for the display of teachers' lectures on screen and, perhaps, speech-to-text translator so that all verbal explanations can be received in text messages. The provision of all these instructional aids makes the school friendly and accommodative of students with disabilities.

The lecture halls of most public higher institutions are always overcrowded. Students with disabilities cannot cope with the competition involved in the rush to secure seats. This demands that the entrance, seats and space in lecture halls needed to be reserved and disability-friendly if appropriate inclusion of students with disability is a priority. This is the experience overseas, where reservation is made in the bus, public buildings, roads and, more importantly, in schools' facilities for people with disabilities. This is done to provide equal opportunity for them.

Mobility of students with disability can be a serious frustration if not consciously designed to accommodate the students. Most schools have open gutters, road diversions without appropriate road signs. There are no specific walkways for pedestrians let alone people with visual impairment. There are many storey buildings without lift machines or ramps. Poor architectural designs of school buildings make the school environment difficult to access for those on the wheel chair or with good sight. These difficulties can be very life-threatening and discouraging.

Students with disabilities cannot find the schools interesting and comfortable without some supportive human facilities. For instance, the deaf cannot cope in the class without a sign language interpreter. Most lecturers cannot use sign language and, even if a lecturer is able to use sign language, the class may look stupid to the general class because, no matter how good the lecturer is, teaching and signing in the class will look like a dance of shame. So, for effectiveness, a sign language interpreter is needed in regular lecture room. In a similar vein, a brailist is needed for the blind in the school just as writer is needed for those with dysgraphia.

Therefore, from this backdrop, higher institutions of learning are expected to provide certain basic needs for students with disabilities in the school. There are three state higher institutions in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State, with disability students. If all needed facilities are provided in higher institutions for students with disabilities, the learning environment will be enhanced, and learning will be at optimal level for all students including those with disabilities. Experience, however, shows that students with disabilities suffer due to lack of basic needs in the higher institution in Rivers State. It is against this personal experience that the researcher was motivated to

assess the basic needs of students with disabilities for better policies and provision of facilities in higher institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

The National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria implementation guideline stated categorically the expected standard for schools at all levels to be inclusive. Emphasis was on the facilities that are least restrictive and that engenders student-friendly learning environment. The experience in our higher institutions of learning was, however, absolutely opposite the expected standard. Students with disabilities do not find the school environment conducive in terms accessibility of the physical, material and human facilities. Most often, students with disability are restricted by the course to take, where to go and whom they have access to see. These restrictions and limitations deny them of many opportunities and reduce the chance of optimizing their potential. The frustration in learning and the difficulty in moving around the school environment is very obvious on them.

Interactions with students with disabilities reflect that, the sharp barriers and poor environmental facilities have grave consequences on the academic and social development of students with disabilities in our higher institutions. Students with disability blamed their poor academic performance on poor school and learning environment. They reported how difficulties in the learning environment have limited them from flying higher in academics. They complained that social interaction is zero. They receive pity from the academic community instead of support, though not because the community is unwilling to support but there is lack of facilities that could enhance the support. It is against this backdrop that the study assesses the facility needs of students with disabilities for a friendly and inclusive tertiary institutions in Rivers State.

Research questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

1. To what extent are functional library facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?
2. How are instructional facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?
3. How accessible are lecture room facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?
4. To what extent are mobility facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?
5. How are support service facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

Research Method

This study employed a descriptive survey design to collect data on the needs of students with disabilities for disability friendly and inclusive learning environment in tertiary institutions in Rivers State. According to Maduabum (2007), descriptive research design is a method directed towards determining the nature of situation as it exists at the time of the study. The survey design is considered most suitable for the study because it allows the collection of original data from the respondents themselves and describes the present conditions as they exist in their natural school settings, and allows only a representative of the population to be sampled.

The target population of the study were the three tertiary institutions owned by the Rivers State Government, so there was no sampling. Meanwhile there were 50 students with disabilities in the schools as at the time of the study in the year 2021.

The instrument for data collection was a 35-item self-structured inventory titled: Institution Disability Friendly Environment Facilities Needs Assessment Inventory (IDFEFNAI). The inventory consists of two sections. Section A and Section B. Section A comprised information regarding the personal data of students with disability such as gender, school type and disability type. Section B contains 30 items in 5 subscales of the sub-variables including library, instructional, lecture room, mobility facilities as well as support services. The response options for the inventory are: highly needed (coded as 1), needed (coded as 2) and not needed (coded as 3).

The instrument was validated by experts in special education, educational psychology and educational measurement. The purpose, research question and hypotheses of the study were presented to the experts with the draft of the instrument after a brief presentation of the problem and significance of the study were made known to them. The experts scrutinized the items, made corrections and the researcher-supervisor reviewed the final draft as a valid instrument for the study.

The reliability of the instrument was determined through a test-re-test method. Copies of the instrument were administered to a randomly drawn sample of ten (10) students. The instrument was re-administered to the same respondents after two weeks in one of the schools that was not used for study. The reliability coefficient of .86, .76, .80, .80 and .86 was obtained for library, instructional, lecture room, mobility and supportive service facilities respectively.

The researcher sought the permission of each school through the registrar of the schools after due introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the research. Copies of the assessment scale were personally administered to the respondents since they were all within reach. The respondents were gathered by the help of the Dean of Students' Affairs of each institution. The assessment scale was collected back on the spot by the researcher. The students were at a distance to avoid choice influence.

Simple percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while one-sample t-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

The analysis of the data is presented in two parts: first is in response to the research question and second is in response to the hypotheses. The response options from the data collected are rated as highly needed = 1, needed = 2, and not needed = 3. This interprets that the mean item that is closer to 1.0 indicates the needed facility, while the mean item that is close to 3 indicates facility not needed.

Research question 1: To what extent are functional library facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

Table 2 provides the result of the analysis of data collected with respect to the research question: To what extent are functional library facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State? The table indicates that, for all the library facilities, no respondents indicated that any facility is not needed. This implies that all the facilities are actually needed. Again, comparing the percentage of students who indicated that the facilities are highly needed were more than those who indicated that they just needed. Also, from the item mean, accessible library table and chairs (mean = 1.45); disability friendly shelves in the library (mean = 1.49); library books are available in braille (mean = 1.00); sign language video books (mean = 1.00); digital information system (mean = 1.27) and online catalogue service (mean = 1.10). The results show that the mean value of all the items of the library facility are highly needed because all values are less than 2.00. The weighted mean of all the means of functional library facilities is 1.22 which is also less than 2.00. Therefore, it inferred and interpreted that there is a high extent to which functional library facilities are needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State.

Table 2: Percentage, mean and standard deviation of functional library facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State

S/N	Library facility	Highly Needed		Needed		Not Needed		Mean	SD
		N	%	N	%	N	%		
1	Accessible library table and chairs	27	55.1	22	44.9	-	-	1.45	.503
2	Disability friendly shelves in the library	25	51.0	24	49.0	-	-	1.49	.505
3	Library books are available in Braille	49	100.0	-	-	-	-	1.00	.000
4	Sign language videos books	49	100.0	-	-	-	-	1.00	.000
5	Digital information system	36	73.5	13	26.5	-	-	1.27	.446
6	Online Catalogue Service	44	89.8	5	10.2	-	-	1.10	.306
		Weighted mean = 1.22							

Research question 2: How are instructional facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

Table 3 provides the result of the analysis of data collected with respect to the research question: How are instructional facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

The table indicates that, for all the instructional facilities, only one respondent (2.1%) indicates that smart board facility is not needed. This implies that all the facilities are actually needed. Again, comparing the percentage, students who indicated that the facilities are highly needed are more than those who indicated that they are just needed. Also, from the item mean, smart board for lecture (mean = 1.48); projector for lecture (mean = 1.04); books in large print (mean = 1.22); speech to text translator (mean = 1.27); braille matériel (mean = 1.16) and hearing aids (mean = 1.27). From the results, the mean value of all the items indicates that the instructional facilities are highly needed because all values are less than 2.00. The weighted mean of all the means of instructional facilities is 1.24 which is also less than 2.00. Therefore, it inferred and interpreted that instructional facilities are highly needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State.

Table 3: Percentage, mean and standard deviation of instructional facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State

S/N	Facility	Highly Needed		Needed		Not Needed		Mean	SD
		N	%	N	%	N	%		
1	Smart board for lecture	25	51.0	23	46.9	1	2.1	1.48	.505
2	Projector for lecture	47	95.9	2	4.1	-	-	1.04	.200
3	Books in large print	38	77.6	11	22.4	-	-	1.22	.422
4	Speech to text translator	36	73.5	13	26.5	-	-	1.27	.446
5	Braille materials	41	83.7	8	16.3	-	-	1.16	.373
6	Hearing aids	36	73.5	13	26.5	-	-	1.27	.446
		Weighted mean = 1.24							

Research question 3: How are accessible lecture room facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

Table 4 provides the result of the analysis of data collected with respect to the research question: How are accessible lecture room facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State? The table indicates that, for all the accessible lecture room facilities, only three respondents (6.1%) indicated that wide veranda to lecture room and spacious classrooms are not needed. This implies that all the facilities are actually needed. Again, comparing the percentage, students who indicated that the facilities are highly needed are more than those who indicated that they are just needed. Also, from the item mean, adequate class space (mean = 1.53); wide veranda to lecture room (mean = 1.88); spacious entrance (mean = 1.88); lift on storey building (mean = 1.35); modified seating arrangement (mean = 1.43) and reserved classroom seat space (mean = 1.08). The results show that the mean value of all the items of the accessible lecture room facilities are highly needed because all values are less than 2.00. The weighted mean of all the means of accessible lecture room is 1.53 which is also less than 2.00. Therefore, it inferred and interpreted that accessible lecture room facilities are highly needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State.

room (mean = 1.88); spacious entrance (mean = 1.88); lift on storey building (mean = 1.35); modified seating arrangement (mean = 1.43) and reserved classroom seat space (mean = 1.08). The results show that the mean value of all the items of the accessible lecture room facilities are highly needed because all values are less than 2.00. The weighted mean of all the means of accessible lecture room is 1.53 which is also less than 2.00. Therefore, it inferred and interpreted that accessible lecture room facilities are highly needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State.

Table 4: Percentage, mean and standard deviation of accessible lecture room facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State

S/N	Lecture room facilities	Highly Needed		Needed		Not Needed		Mean	SD
		N	%	N	%	n	%		
1	Adequate class space	23	46.9	26	53.1	-	-	1.53	.504
2	Wide veranda to lecture room	9	18.4	37	75.5	3	6.1	1.88	.484
3	Spacious entrance	8	16.3	38	77.6	3	6.1	1.88	.467
4	Lift on storey building	32	65.3	17	34.7	-	-	1.35	.481
5	Modified seating arrangement	28	57.1	21	42.9	-	-	1.43	.500
6	Reserved classroom seat space	45	91.8	4	8.2	-	-	1.08	.277
		Weighted mean = 1.53							

Research question 4: To what extent are mobility facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

Table 5 provides the result of the analysis of data collected with respect to the research question: To what extent are mobility facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

The table indicates that, for all the mobility facilities, there is no respondent that indicated not needed. This implies that all the facilities are actually needed. Again, comparing the percentage, students who indicated that the facilities are highly needed were more than those who indicated that they are just needed. Also, from the item mean, accessible wide walkways on campus (mean = 1.43); clear and easy to interpret road signs on campus (mean = 1.27); green verge between walkways and motorway (mean = 1.14); comfortable vehicles, that is, disability friendly on campus (mean = 1.33); covered drainage walkways (mean = 1.18) and barrier-free road network (mean = 1.02). The results show that the mean value of all the items of the mobility facilities are highly needed because all values are less than 2.00. The weighted mean of all the means of mobility facilities is 1.23, which is also less than 2.00. Therefore, it inferred and

interpreted that mobility facilities are highly needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State.

Table 5: Percentage, mean and standard deviation of mobility facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State

S/N	Mobility facilities	Highly Needed		Needed		Not Needed		Mean	SD
		n	%	N	%	n	%		
1	Accessible wide walkway on campus	28	57.1	21	42.9	-	-	1.43	.500
2	Clear and easy to interpret road sign on campus	36	73.5	13	26.5	-	-	1.27	.446
3	Green verge between walkways and motorways	42	85.7	7	14.3	-	-	1.14	.354
4	Comfortable vehicles that are disability friendly on campus	33	67.3	16	32.7	-	-	1.33	.474
5	Covered drainage walk ways	40	81.6	9	18.4	-	-	1.18	.391
6	Barrier-free road network	48	98.0	1	2.0	-	-	1.02	.143
		Weighted Mean = 1.23							

Research question 5: How are support service facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

Table 6 provides the result of the analysis of data collected with respect to the research question: How are support service facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State?

The table indicates that, for all the support service facilities, there is no respondent that indicated not needed. This implies that all the facilities are actually needed. Again, comparing the percentage, students who indicated that the facilities are highly needed are more than those who indicated that they are just needed. Also, from the item mean, audiological services (mean = 1.06); sign language interpretation service (mean = 1.08); provision of appropriate accommodation (mean = 1.27); braille services (mean = 1.06); readers services (mean = 1.00) and trained lecturers (mean = 1.18). The results show that the mean value of all the items of the support service facility are highly needed because all values are less than 2.00. The weighted mean of all the means of support service facilities is 1.11, which is also less than 2.00. Therefore, it inferred and interpreted that the support service facilities are highly needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State.

Table 6: Percentage, mean and standard deviation of support service facilities needed by tertiary institution students with disabilities in Rivers State

S/N	Support facilities	Highly Needed		Needed		Not Needed		Mean	SD
		N	%	N	%	N	%		
1	Audiological services	46	93.9	3	6.1	-	-	1.06	.242
2	Sign language interpretation services	45	91.8	4	8.2	-	-	1.08	.277
3	Provision of appropriate accommodation	36	73.5	13	26.5	-	-	1.27	.446
4	Braille services	46	93.9	3	6.1	-	-	1.06	.242
5	Readers services	49	100.0	-	-	-	-	1.00	.000
6	Trained lecturers	40	81.6	9	18.4	-	-	1.18	.391
		Weighted mean = 1.11							

Discussion of Findings

The result of the first finding revealed that functional library facilities for tertiary institution students with disabilities are highly needed. It shows that specialized resources for students with disabilities are scarcely available in the libraries. The finding revealed a lot including absence of library resources. Libraries in tertiary institutions should imbibe the basic principle of inclusion in resource provision without prejudice, to persons with disabilities. Ana (1996); Ismalla & Ajobewe (1998) all opined that provision of library and information resources to all is the key to door of information service which is an essential ingredient of individuals' basic need.

A review of the International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (2005) listed standards to be followed by public, academic, school and special libraries. That the materials, resources and facilities to be acquired and put in place for persons with disabilities include, among others:

Physical access: All parts of the library should be accessible to all. Libraries should remove all architectural barriers, ensure structural modifications to shelves are reachable from wheelchairs, unobstructed space between shelves, visible alarm, braille catalogue, etc.

Media format: Materials should be available in different or appropriate formats for all disabled persons.

Assistive technology: Libraries to include assistive technology, internet resource, computer with adaptive keyboards, reading machine, closed circuit television, braille books, etc.

The second finding of the study showed all state tertiary institutions visited in Rivers State do not have needed instructional facilities for students with disabilities. The tertiary institutions failed to have good instructional facilities to suit the needs of students with disabilities. While the world is now very sensitive to human rights such

as education for all people including persons with disabilities (DFID, 2012), colleges and universities show very little or no sensitivity in establishing and creating institutional learning schemes that will favor students with disabilities.

The finding indicated that instructional facilities are highly needed for teaching and learning in tertiary institutions in Rivers State. The finding is in line with Onyejemezi (2001) who stated that, to optimize the performance of persons with disabilities, there should be adequate and sufficient provision of relevant instructional facilities to meet their needs. But where these facilities are not adequate, effective inclusion of persons with disabilities cannot be proficiently implemented.

The third finding revealed, from the analysis of data in table 4, that students with disabilities agreed to the need for inclusive classroom. These agreement was based on the fact that they should have classroom space, wide veranda, lift on storey building, modified seating arrangement and reserved seat space to fully meet their needs. Therefore, it was evidently clear that there is a high need for accessible classrooms for tertiary institution students with disabilities. Agreeing to this fact, Abang (2003) identified that effective implementation of barrier-free classrooms will give special need children room to improve their worth.

The Fourth finding revealed, from the respondents, that provision of mobility facilities like accessible walkways, clear and easy to interpret signs should be provided on campus. They also agreed strongly that they need vehicles that are disability friendly and a barrier-free road network to enable easy participation in campus activities. Echezona, Osadebe & Asogwa-Eze (2009) also agreed to all these and a lot more. Also, school buildings should be modernized with the needs of the disabled people in mind. Rubin (2001), in his work, recommended that buildings and their environs should have street-level entrance, entrance without steps, among others. Again lifts and doorways should accommodate persons with disabilities; ramps should be provided and floor surface should be non-slip so as not to constitute any navigation problem to persons with disabilities.

The fifth finding revealed that, among all the tertiary institutions, students with disabilities highly need support services. The finding indicates that specialized services for persons with disabilities are hardly available. Online access catalogue, sign language interpreters, Braille services and aetiological services are hardly available. Reynolds (1998) opined that support services are geared towards ensuring that students with disability have full advantage of education.

Conclusion

As a result of the findings of the study, it is hereby concluded that there is need for disability friendly inclusive environment in tertiary institutions. The desire for inclusive education to produce inclusion of persons with disabilities into mainstream school can be achieved when necessary facilities are provided in institutions. The study proves that facilities such as functional library, accessible classrooms, instructional materials,

mobility and support services are highly needed in tertiary institutions in order to meet the goal of "Education for All" (EFA) as stated in the Salamanca Statement of Action. There is need to restructure school facilities and services along inclusive lines to reflect the social model theory and Maslow's theory of needs which this work is anchored on. Tertiary institutions need to design programs and special services geared towards learners with disability in order not to be discriminatory and disabling.

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