Equity and inclusivity in library services for people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic : Case of Kaimosi Friends University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate the level of preparedness of Kaimosi Friends University (KAFU) library in service provision to People With Disabilities (PWDs) during the COVID-19 pandemic with a view to providing strategies aimed at ensuring equity and inclusivity in service provision. The specific objectives of the study were: to investigate the level of preparedness of the library in providing services to PWDs; to explore the types of services available for PWDs; to establish the opportunities and challenges PWDs encounter in accessing services; provide strategies to mitigate against these challenges and enhance equity and inclusivity in service provision. The study was informed by the social model of disability. The research adopted qualitative research design. The study population included users with physical challenges, visual and hearing impairment and service providers. Purposive sampling technique was employed targeting information rich sources. Data was obtained through face-to-face interviews complemented by the observation method. Data was analyzed thematically and aligned to the objectives of the study. The findings of the study indicated that the library was inadequately prepared to provide services for the PWDs. It lacked the requisite physical facilities, equipment, amenities, alternative formats of resources and specialized staff to cater for needs of PWDs. The study recommended advocacy for a sound legal and policy framework aimed at ensuring requisite infrastructure is in place.

*(**Key words**: People with disabilities, Remote Services, Assistive technologies, Virtual Services, COVID-19 Pandemic, New normal)*

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of the library in providing conducive study spaces, resources and services to all users equitably cannot be underscored. This was the case until the COVID-19 pandemic set in. Teaching, learning and research were transferred to the virtual platform completely thereby necessitating the library to rethink its position by providing all its services in the virtual platform until normalcy resumed. Decker (2021) opines those modifications to academic library service models takes place gradually, systematically, in response to dynamic patron priorities, paradigm shift in education and information landscapes, and novel technologies. The library environment did not have the luxury of time when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world and imminent closure of the library buildings was inevitable.

These unanticipated changes provided a unique opportunity for the library to reevaluate and re-imagine existing service models towards enhanced users experience through streamlined processes and modifications to the library environment. Planning on

how this would be executed was done without careful consideration of the specialized group of users who are the people living with disabilities.

The term disability has myriad definitions but this paper adopted the definition advanced by the GSDRC (2015) which defines persons living with disabilities (PWDs) to include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Although there are various types of disabilities as classified by WHO (2019), this study focused on three of these, most specifically the physical, visual and hearing impairments. The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS] (2020) indicated that the population of people with physical disabilities in Kenya stood at 0.4 million, visual impairment at 0.3 million and hearing-impairment at 0.2 million, respectively. Each specific form of disability has its own unique needs which needed to be addressed to enhance equity and inclusivity during library services design. Accuracy of the PWDs statistics may be

in question due to the stigma associated with acknowledging disability which may have prevented accurate reporting and hence impacted the 2019 census as indicated in the status of disability report. Lack of knowledge on the need to register with the Kenya National Council for Persons with Disabilities, may also have had a bearing on the accuracy of the statistics.

Statement of the Problem

The sudden and unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a paradigm shift which presented unique and unprecedented challenges for institutions of learning and the library in terms of service provision. This led to the closure of all learning institutions and the decision spilled over to the library. The lockdown occasioned by the pandemic led to the closure of educational institutions, disrupted learning and the education calendar which impacted on all learners. However, the vulnerable and marginalized learners, that is PWDs bore the brunt of this misfortune (UNESCO, 2023). The pandemic further laid bare the inequalities in our world. PWDs have been in the past, and continue to be, the most vulnerable and marginalized individuals in the society (World Bank, 2020). These inequalities are further escalated to the libraries.

Transition of learning to the e-platform prompted quick responses from the library of providing real-time services to users in the virtual platform remotely. This transition brought about myriad challenges of accessibility due to the digital divide and lack of accessible reading materials (ARM) for this group thus further widening the gap towards ensuring equity and inclusivity during the pandemic. Ali and Gatiti (2020) assert that in every crisis, a need for information exists. Based on this premise, librarians needed to be nimble and proactive in a bid to address this need.

Disability is a complex, diverse and growing global concern, whose unique needs require addressing it in tandem with the mission of the library of offering equity of access to resources and services to all its patrons. From the information service perspective, research shows, the PWDs were least likely to benefit from the remote library solutions rolled out to ensure continued accessibility to resources during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. Breslin (2020) observes that prior to the pandemic, there was neither the luxury of time, impetus nor support to make changes to library services.

Myriad studies have been conducted on PWDs and library services during the pandemic. Decker (2021) study alluded on reaching academic library users during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ayres (2020) focused on

mechanisms of addressing broadband inequity and digital poverty through leveraging information technology in libraries. Ayoung et al. (2020) studied access to the library services and facilities by persons with disability. Walsh and Rana (2020) investigated on the continuity of academic library services during the pandemic while Monda (2018) researched on the role of librarians in meeting the information needs of the visually and hearing-impaired students. Kiambati (2015) focused on the challenges faced by visually impaired students in accessing library resources. This paper therefore aims to build on from these previous studies and add to the body of knowledge in ensuring the new university libraries are adequately prepared in addressing the needs of PWDs in order to achieve equity and inclusivity in library services provision.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of the library as a place and space is to provide equitable library services to its clientele, their ability status notwithstanding. Information providers were striving to achieve this objective of inclusivity despite the myriad challenges experienced in their quest to attain this, until the major setback in the form of COVID -19 pandemic set in, which disrupted the university almanac globally. However, the setback occasioned by the new normal, reactive building closures and the unexpected reductions in budgetary allocation had far reaching ramifications to the libraries disproportionally compared to the other cost centers on campus.

This study is guided by the social model of disability which addresses the barriers inherent in the environment that limits patrons with disability. The model lays emphasis on inclusivity, eliminates stigma and inspires creative design. This model addresses environmental factors such as access to information, building design, fear, attitude, inaccessible transport, lack of parking space, lack of access loop steps or interpreters, isolation and exclusion (Carson, 2009).

COVID-19 pandemic prompted a paradigm shift on course delivery from classroom instruction onto the virtual platform to alleviate total disarray of the university activities. This prompted the libraries to follow suit and enhance the virtual library to complement teaching and learning on the e-platform since they closed their doors to physical use. Ma (2020) reiterated that the pandemic presented a unique opportunity for prompting the academic librarians to rethink their key roles and core values in supporting teaching and learning in their institutions. Jones (2020) opined that this crisis presented an opportunity for the library to regroup and reconsider reallocating of funds and limited resources to resonate

with the dynamic user needs in the academic library setting.

Mehta and Wang (2020) alluded to the fact that the advent and prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic prompted university libraries, as a matter of necessity, to shift focus from the print resources which supported classroom-based instruction and lay more emphasis on electronic resources and services to support e-learning and distance learning in a bid to ensure continued accessibility of the library in tandem with limited physical or face-to-face university activities. Ayre and Craner (2020) posited that libraries should develop solutions to facilitate provision of services on the virtual platform as well as enhance working remotely during closure of library buildings.

Breslin (2020 opined that the pandemic ignited the digital switch to ensure the libraries remained relevant and continued to provide services during the new normal. Fletcher and Griffiths (2020) and Pokorná et al., (2020) concurred by observing that the new normal had bestowed to the digital libraries their space as pathways to remote resources and services to alleviate disruption of services. However, the pros and cons towards realizing the transformation to complete virtualization of library services necessitated a fundamental rethink and futuristic strategies as the library gears its efforts towards adopting emerging technologies.

However, research shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to "new normal" no utmost consideration or if any little consideration was given to the PWDs. The redesign of library services took little consideration to PWD which further marginalized them from ease of accessing library resources and services. This was reiterated by Pionke (2020) who asserted that the manifestation of the COVID-19 pandemic created new tech savvy information needs thus posing challenges of limited access to technology. To alleviate these challenges, myriad academic institutions and libraries strived to provide hotspots and laptops without utmost consideration for the needs of the patrons with disabilities. This further widened the digital divide between the mainstream users and the PWDs. The absence of assistive technologies/equipment to facilitate access to electronic resources, assistive reading materials places them at a high risk of being left behind (Ito et al., 2020; World Bank, 2020). In the Kenyan context new universities such as Alupe, Turkana University College, Kaimosi Friends University, Koitalel Samoei University College and Tom Mboya University College have the opportunity to factor these assistive technologies and PWDs friendly designs during the construction of libraries in their institutions in order to achieve equity and inclusivity in service provision to PWDs.

The literature surveyed decried the fact that although university libraries provided services to the PWDs, the objective of attaining equity and inclusivity was still far from being achieved. These findings were in concurrence with previous studies conducted by Phukubje and Ngoepe (2017) whose findings indicated that students with disability in majority of the institutions were not content with the library services provided. Tudzi (2017) and Carson (2009) opined that barriers in the external and internal environment of buildings render the environment hostile and unfriendly to PWDs. From the surveys conducted annually by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD) in Kenya, the new universities can use the data obtained to address the areas of concern of the PWDs to ensure they are content with the services provided. Additionally, the special facilities and amenities can be prioritized during construction of the new library buildings, given most of them inherited library spaces from their predecessor institutions..

III.   METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design which was exploratory in nature and it sought to elicit depth and complexity as opposed to generalizations.

The population sample was drawn from the PWDs as subjects of the study, service providers, who included the lecturers, Dean of Students, disability mainstreaming committee (DMC), students governing council (SGC) and librarians. The institution does not currently have completely visually impaired users. Therefore, the partial visually impaired users stood in the gap. This was informed by the fact that two of the three visually impaired respondents, had one eye that was completely impaired and one of them could barely see without his spectacles which had very thick lenses.

The researcher employed purposive sampling technique to select respondents, targeting the information rich sources (Silverman, 2018; Campbell, 2020). Due to the small number of PWDs at KAFU, the entire population represented the sample.

The study utilized face to face interviews as the primary technique of data collection. Open-ended questions permitted the researcher to probe deeper into the initial responses provided and this provoked further details to the phenomenon under study as echoed by Creswell and Creswell, (2018) and Silverman (2018).

This was complemented by the observation method which elicited other unspoken responses that augmented the spoken word. Oltmann (2016) and Morgan (2016) opined that observation method provided additional

information participants may be unwilling to divulge or unaware of and it equally permitted examination of contextual factors. The research subjects were observed in their natural environment through disguised naturalistic observation. The researcher observed the way the subjects under study interacted with the resources and other users, the way they navigated through the library spaces, accessed the library building and the circulation counter, etc.

Piloting of the research instruments was done prior to the actual data collection exercise to eliminate any ambiguities and enhance their reliability and validity, thereby ensuring elicitation of the desired results.

Ethical considerations adhered to included, the provision of sufficient information to the participants regarding the purpose of the study to enable them make informed consent on the decision to voluntarily participate without coercion. Adequate level of confidentiality of the information provided by the respondents was strictly adhered to. Prior consent was sought from the participants before any photo session. Objectivity in reporting the research findings was also adhered to. Sources consulted during the study were duly acknowledged and cited.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study were aligned to the objectives of the study. The study categorized the respondents into two, that is the persons targeted by the study, and the service providers who interact with these specialized users. These respondents are tabulated in table 1 and 2.

Demography of the respondents

Table 1[1] presents the details of the specialized users. These including the five (5) physically challenged and the three (3) visually impaired users. The respondents were students and staff including three (3) diploma level students, one (1) undergraduate level student, three (3) postgraduate level students and one (1) academic staff. The hearing-impaired users were not available when the at the time of the study but some questions were posed to the service providers guided by the IFLA checklist to facilitate adequate planning for posterityc

Table 2[2] presents respondents providing services to the PWDs and they include ten (10) lecturers, one (1) dean of students, two (2) members of the student governing council, two (2) members of the disability mainstreaming

committee and five (5) librarians, two (2) of these at management level and three (3) at operational level.

The response rate was 100% due to the primary data collection method employed which was face to face interviews complimented by the observation method. The study findings were aligned to the objectives guiding the study as discussed below.

The level of preparedness of the library in providing services to PWDs

The study sought to investigate the level of preparedness of the library in providing services to PWDs with regard to infrastructure, physical facilities, the availability of assistive devices and technologies to facilitate accessibility to resources and services. The population sampled included the mobility challenged users. The study utilized the IFLA Standing Committee Checklist Model for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons as the yardstick in gauging the level of preparedness. The respondents were provided with the opportunity to provide suggestions that would improve their experience in accessing services and resources. The Table 3 summarize the responses elicited from the interview.

It can be deduced from Table 3[3], that based on the IFLA (2015), that the library was inadequately prepared to cater for these specialized users. The facility lacked ramps or a lift to facilitate the accessibility of mobility challenged users to the upper floor.

The Positive attributes in terms of physical access included the fact that the entrance to the library was spacious and facilitated the turning of a wheel chair. The space within the facility was spacious for a wheel chair user to navigate around the library with ease. However, they cited challenges of movement during peak periods when the library was filled to capacity. The carrels were user-friendly for users with disabilities. However, the chairs were not very comfortable for users with hunchbacks.

Books have been placed on ground floor to facilitate access. OPAC workstations for these specialized users placed at a lower level and similarly, the computers for e-resources accessibility set aside. The inadequacies deduced from the study were that the users with upper limb impairments are challenged in utilizing these computers. That outdistancing, the shelves were beyond the reach of some mobility challenged users.

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[1] See following page
[2] See following page

[3] See following page

Table 1: Demography of the Respondents (PWDs) n=08

S/N	GENDER	TYPE OF DISABILITY	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	YEAR OF STUDY	NO.	AGE	%
1.	Male	Partial Visual Impairment	Masters	2nd	01	33	12.5
2.	Male	Physical (Lower limb)	Masters	2nd	01	35	12.5
3.	Female	Physical (upper limb)	Masters	1st	01	28	12.5
4.	Female	Physical (hunchback)	Undergraduate	1st	01	21	12.5
5.	Male	One completely blind eye	Diploma	1st	01	45	12.5
6.	Female	Physical (lower limbs)	Diploma	2nd	01	22	12.5
7.	Male	Physical (Crutches)	Diploma	2nd	01	25	12.5
8.	Female	One complete blind eye	Academic Staff		01	47	12.5
TOTAL Physical and Visual Impairment					08		100%

Table 2: Demography of the Service Providers (n=20)

S/N	GENDER	CADRE OF STAFF	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	NO.	%
1.	Male	Academic Staff	PhD	05	25
2.	Female	Academic Staff	PhD	05	25
3.	Male	Library Management	Degree	02	10
4.	Female	Operational	Diploma	03	15
5.	Male	Disability Mainstreaming Committee	Masters	01	05
6.	Female	Disability Mainstreaming Committee	Degree	01	05
7.	Male	Dean of Students	Masters	01	05
8.	Male	Student Governing Council	Undergraduate	01	05

Table 3: Adequacy of the library in service provision to PWDs (n=5)

S/N	ASSISTIVE DEVICES CURRENTLY IN PLACE	YES	NO (%)	TOTAL
1.	Clear Signage and Pictograms	40%	60%	100%
2.	Accessible service counter	0%	100%	100%
3.	Accessible OPAC	100%	0%	100%
4.	Accessible entrance	80%	20%	100%
5.	Accessibility within the building (lifts, ramps)	0%	100%	100%
6.	Adequate space for the wheel chair movement	50%	50%	100%
7.	Designated parking spaces	80%	20%	100%

S/N	ASSISTIVE DEVICES CURRENTLY IN PLACE	YES	NO (%)	TOTAL
8.	Designated water closets	0%	100%	100%
9.	Cabro pavement for ease to ease uneven pathways	100%	0%	100%
10.	Usability of the Reading Carrels	80%	20%	100%
11.	Comfort of the Chairs	60%	40%	100%
12.	User friendliness of the staff	80%	20%	100%

Preparedness of the library in service provision (visually impaired)

The study also sought to investigate how adequately the library was prepared to provide services to the visually impaired users. The three (3) visually impaired users including one (1) Diploma student, one (1) postgraduate student and one (1) academic staff were interviewed and the responses are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Adequacy of the library in service provision to PWDs (Visually Impaired Users, n=20)

S/N	ASSISTIVE DEVICES	YES	NO	TOTAL
1.	Accessible OPAC	20%	80%	100%
2.	Accessible Shelve guides	20%	80%	100%
3.	Accessible Library web page	20%	80%	100%
4.	Ease of movement within the library	50%	50%	100%
5.	Designated water closets	0%	100%	100%
6,	Clear signages	0%	100%	100%
7.	Alternative formats of resources	0%	100%	100%
8.	Accessible entrance	80%	20%	100%
9.	Cabro pavement for ease of movement with the	100%	0%	100%

The findings of the study brought to the fore the fact that the visually impaired users appreciated the existence of the assistive devices. They further indicated that despite there being accessible assistive devices, the fonts were too small thus inhibiting visibility. The spine labels were too small, the shelve guide fonts were too small, the newspaper fonts were too small to the naked eye, the fonts on the computer were too small including those of the

Preparedness of the library in service provision to the hearing-impaired users

The study investigated the availability of assistive devices for users with hearing impairment. The findings of the study indicated that currently the University does not have these users on board. However, based on the IFLA

library webpage which made it strenuous for them to read. User friendliness of the floor within the library was an issue since the tiles were slippery and could result in accidents. World Bank (2020) report highlights the barriers to full socio-economic inclusion of PWDs as inaccessible physical environments and transportation, unavailability of assistive devices and technologies, gaps in service delivery, discrimination and stigma.

(2015) checklist model, the library lacked staff equipped with the requisite skills to communicate with the hearing-impaired users or serve the visually impaired users. This is further alluded to by Iroeze et al. (2018) whose research findings indicated the inadequacies in the information resources for the deaf and hard of hearing. Sampling was done in preparation for receipt of such users in the near future.

Preparedness of the library in service provision to PWDs from the service providers' perspective

The study sought to investigate how adequately the library was prepared in providing services to PWDs from the service providers perspective. The respondents included lecturers, dean of students, the students governing council (SGC), disability mainstreaming committee and the librarians. The responses elicited are summarized in Table 5

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S/N	Assistive devices	YES	NO	TOTAL
1.	Clear Signage and Pictograms	50%	50%	100%
2.	Accessible Service Counter	40%	60%	100%
3.	Accessible OPAC	80%	20%	100%
4.	Accessible entrance	80%	20%	100%
5.	Accessibility within the building (lifts, ramps)	60%	40%	100%
6.	Adequate space for ease of movement within the library	80%	20%	100%
7.	Designated parking space	100%	0%	100%
8.	Designated water closets	0%	100%	100%
9.	Cabro pavement for ease of uneven pathways	100%	0%	100%
10.	Usability of the reading carrels	80%	20%	100%
11.	Comfortable Chairs	60%	40%	100%
12.	Accessibility of the Shelve guides	80%	20%	100%
13.	Accessibility of the Library web page	80%	20%	100%

The responses above indicated that the library was inadequately prepared to provide services to PWDs due to the fact that it lacked ramps thus inhibiting the movement of mobility challenged users, social amenities, specialized personnel to provide services to PWDs, inaccessible service counter among other issues discussed in the tables above. Of impetus is the lack of amenities in the facilities for these users who have to seek these outside the library.

The study sought to explore the specialized services available for the PWDs aside from those provided to the mainstream users. The responses elicited are summarized in Figure 1 on the following page
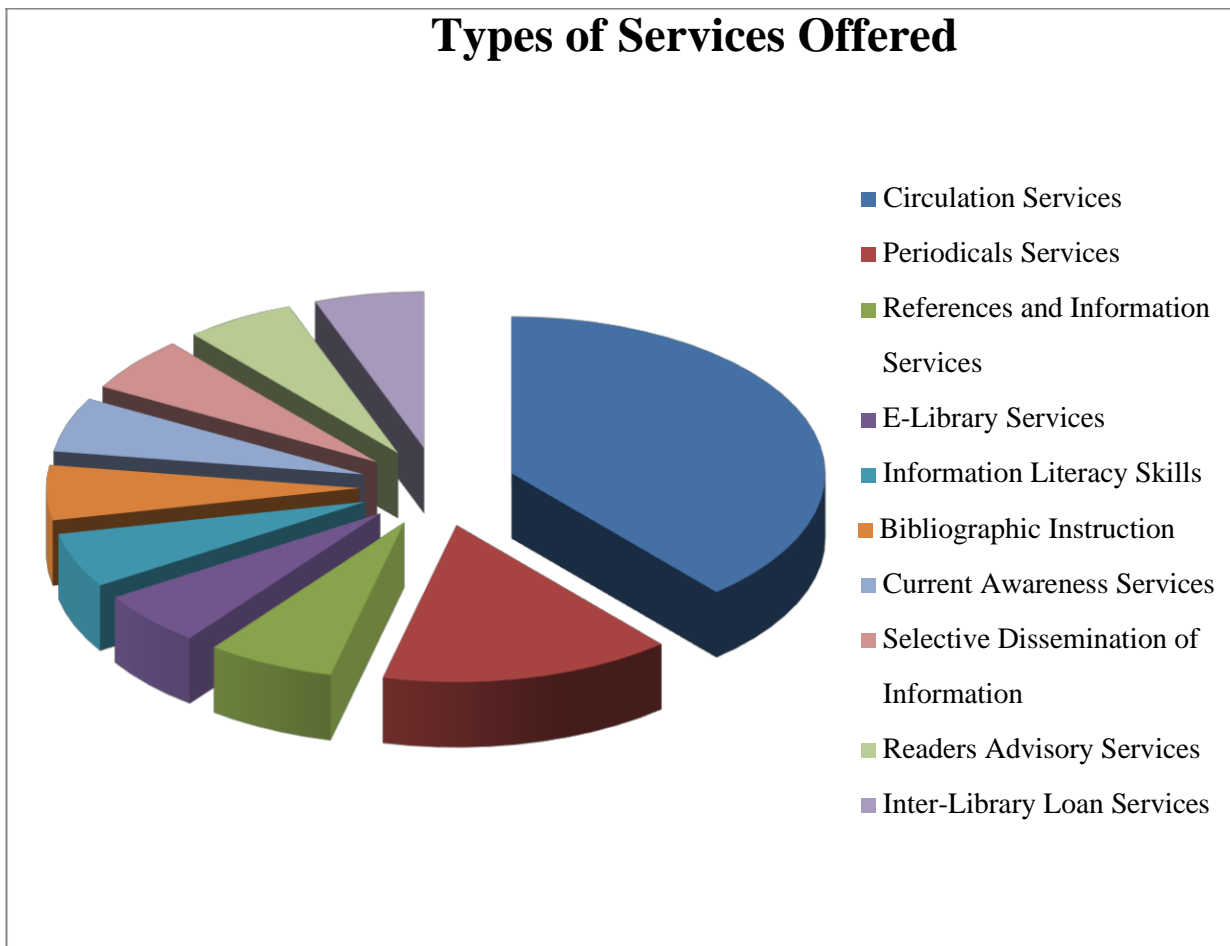
Types of Services Offered

Legend:
- Circulation Services
- Periodicals Services
- References and Information Services
- E-Library Services
- Information Literacy Skills
- Bibliographic Instruction
- Current Awareness Services
- Selective Dissemination of Information
- Readers Advisory Services
- Inter-Library Loan Services

Figure 1: Services available for PWDs

It can be deduced from Figure 1 that there were no specialized services nor information resources provided to the PWDs. The services were offered across the board to the subjects under study and the mainstream patrons.

Opportunities and challenges encountered by the PWDs in accessing library services

The study sought to establish the opportunities available for the PWDs as well as the challenges encountered in their quest to access resources and services available in the library.

Opportunities available to PWDs in accessing library services

The study sampled responses from the users under study and the service providers to establish the opportunities available for these specialized users.

The findings of the study established that the following opportunities were available to the PWDs as they accessed library services

i)   The newly elected leaders should be held to account on the pledge they made to the electorate during the campaign period to support this noble course in order to leave a legacy, thus giving them mileage and assurance of a second term in office during the next elections.

ii) In tandem with the appointment to government positions already taking place, the University should ensure slots were available for PWDs on the Students Governing Council (SGC) to enable them champion their rights.

iii) Sensitization and awareness campaigns were being intensified in various departments and service providers within the university to empower them with the knowledge and skills of serving these specialized users.

iv) The Ultra-Modern Library building currently under construction would bring on board equipment in terms of associated works therefore providing an opportunity for inclusion of some of the assistive technologies.

v) One of the deliverables of the Ultra-modern library was a vehicle dedicated to the library, this will be utilized to transport these specialized users.

These issues above were in tandem with Tudzi et al. (2017) who indicated that the physical barriers in the library environment can be eliminated by deploying adaptive technologies such as installing elevators or constructing ramps for physical disabilities and fixing of rails for the visually impaired users.

Challenges encountered by PWDs in accessing services

The study sought to determine the challenges encountered by the PWDs in their quest to access library services and it was established that in the context of Covid-19 pandemic the PWDs encountered the following challenges: -

i) Susceptibility to high-risk exposure rates of contracting Covid-19 due to heavily relying on service providers to assist them navigate through the library.
ii) They were in constant touch with the "high touch" surface areas (assistive devices) as they move around the library due to their vulnerability.
iii) Lack of assistive technologies prompted by inadequate funding to the universities which has a ripple effect to the library.
iv) Lack of specialized personnel to assist these users access library services.
v) Lack of specialized furniture to cater for their specific needs.
vi) Lack of alternative and diverse formats of resources for each specific group of impairment.
vii) Inadequate space for these users to navigate the library spaces and services especially during peak periods.
viii) Discrimination, inequality and non-inclusivity displayed by the people around the PWDs as underscored by reiterated by Kenya National Survey for Persons with Disabilities (KNSPWD) report (GoK, 2021).
ix) Communication challenges, that is, lip-reading and facial expressions obscured during sign language usage inhibited due to wearing masks. Lefrak (2020) concurred by observing that these safety measure directives occasioned by the pandemic posed challenges for the hearing-impaired users.
x) Inaccessible online catalogues (OPACs) and library websites due to the small fonts utilized

The challenges above were reiterated by Ayoung et al., 2020) who asserted that none of the academic libraries in Ghana were adequately equipped with learning aids, and adaptive technologies for reading materials in alternative formats hence these users could not intellectually access resources of their respective libraries. Users with disabilities in most institutions were not content with the library services provided due to the fact that very few resources were accessible in alternative formats. This is a violation of the UN (2020) declaration of "leaving no one behind" by discrimination and exclusion due to disability or gender issues. Kiruki & Mutula (2021) further observed that the library websites were not accessible and usable by visual and physical disabled students in public universities in Kenya due to the fact that the website design were not user friendly for disabled users and secondly, these specialized patrons were not aware of the existence of the library websites and e-resources available through them.

Strategies to alleviate the challenges encountered with the aim of ensuring equity and inclusivity of library services to PWDs

The challenges cited by the PWDs served to evaluate the inadequacies of the current facility. Having established shortcomings from the elicited responses, the study has emanated strategies to alleviate the challenges to ensure equity and inclusivity in service provision is achieved. The study recommends the following strategies: -

i) Revision of the Collection Development Policy (CDP) to broaden the scope and include the alternative formats of resources such as Braille and hard copy braille books, digital talking books, purchase of scanning and reading software
ii) Revision of the Library Use Policy to include the specialized spaces, assistive devices and technologies, operating elevators with speech recognition and pictograms in braille, handheld magnifying lenses for reading newspapers, braille translating software and software that will translate the print book into an audio book
iii) Sensitization and awareness promotion to the library staff on the knowhow of handling and serving these specialized users.
iv) Enhance the scope of IL skills programme to take into account the technique of effectively utilizing assistive technologies; accessing the alternative resource materials; audio recordings sessions of library events for PWDs such as orientation, bibliographic instruction and information literacy skills sessions, or any notices and announcements.

v) Make the discovery tools user friendly for these specialized users in terms of increasing the fonts, the use of an accessible format of the OPAC (braille and audio)

vi) Engagement of a library staff with sign language interpretation skills to be on call 24/7 in order to facilitate communication with the hearing-impaired users.

vii) Engagement of a System's Librarian equipped with technical skills to activate the screen magnifications software to enlarge the fonts on the computer to enhance usability of the OPAC and accessibility of the library website and e-resources for the visually impaired users.

viii) Lobby at national level with the members of parliament to have legislation enacted in parliament to ensure that money is set aside in the national budget to kick-start and sustain the issue of infrastructure and acquisition of assistive devices in the newly established public universities and constituent colleges.

ix) Establish linkages and partnerships (PPP) with like-minded institutions in the Country and beyond (internationally) to establish infrastructure at KAFU and source for donations to purchase equipment (assistive technologies) and alternative resource materials (ARM). KAFU will then serve the adjacent Counties of Kakamega, Nandi, Kisumu, Bungoma and Busia.

V. CONCLUSION

The study established that the library had the following strengths including: - a Disability Mainstreaming Committee had been appointed and trained to build its capacity and empower it in discharging its mandate to ensure the University facilities had conducive environments for PWDs. Construction of the ultra-modern library was currently underway with all the requisite spaces and facilities for these users clearly defined and factored in the new building as evidenced by the concept note and the bills of quantities (BQs).

That notwithstanding, moments of crisis dictated that the library be proactive and rethink its position with regard to equity and inclusion during planning to ensure all-inclusive remote library services to all users. As a matter of principle, it needed to prioritize accessibility to its spaces during the design stage and bring on board assistive and adaptive technologies and other assistive devices to enhance the vulnerable users' experience. The library could leverage on opportunities and optimize the capabilities presented by the social media platforms as useful tools of remote service provision to these vulnerable patrons during lockdowns occasioned by the new normal. Taking the library to their doorstep would equally ensure convenience and access during the rainy season given KAFU's location (proximity to the rainforest), thus portending challenges of rainfall throughout the year. The concept of the library in the PWDs pockets would serve to bridge the digital divide and enhance equity and inclusivity in service provision. Imparting of information literacy skills on the utilization of assistive technologies would facilitate optimal accessibility to multiple formats or resources. Imparting of information literacy skills would equally ensure the PWDs safety while accessing the social media platforms, enhance communication that was hampered by the wearing of face masks, engage the users otherwise separated by social distancing and facilitate the captioning and sharing of videos and any other content the library deemed fit.

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