

Inclusive and Equitable Access In Academic Libraries and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: *The paper discusses the various components of inclusivity and equitable access in libraries and learning. The published literature explores how libraries have embraced this concept in multiple policies and planning. The literature review reflects ongoing practice across libraries.*

Keywords: Inclusive And Equitable Access, Academic Libraries, Democracies, E-Governance, Open Access, Open Data, Open Educational Resources

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1. Introduction

Libraries reflect that the entire range of users in a particular setting have access to the library materials as they require, irrespective of any social, democratic or physical factor. The kinds of user groups at any organization can access, regardless of their location, via digital modes and in person. Equitable access also refers to the availability of resources. The role of libraries in achieving targets to ensure equal access for all kinds of people to affordable and quality learning seems challenging. Though there is an advent of ICT, libraries are continuing with conventional service methods. Modern libraries are available throughout the day due to ICTs in a manner that users can easily access. With vast and easy-to-navigate digital collections, users are reaching library resources. The challenges for inclusive library services and equitable access depend on various factors such as reading space and furniture, availability of resources, regular maintenance, and library management.

Digital literacy, Digital Inclusion, and Equitable Access

Libraries at different levels and belonging to various types are responsible for framing information policies to create efficient instances of digital inclusion. This is possible once libraries are harnessing the power of digital literacy. There are a few examples (Thompson, Jaeger, Taylor, Subramaniam & Bertot, 2014; Brimhall-Vargas, 2015) where, apart from academic libraries, public libraries and school libraries comprehend the value of digital literacy towards achieving equitable access. Librarians understand the benefits of digital literacy, and this realization can bring about the achievement of inclusive and equitable quality learning. The roles of librarians (Mkumbo, 2016) have been discerned in bringing equitable access.

Certain examples of equitable access, as discussed in the literature (Schonfeld & Sweeney, 2017; Ciccone, 2018), range from diverse user populations to print disabilities. While libraries plan to include provisions for various types of users, there have been efforts at different levels, such as open technologies, equitable scholarly communications, research support services (Maron, Kennison, Bracke, Hall, Gilman, Malenfant & Shorish, 2019; Briganti, Dodson, Haugen, McMillan, Mecham, Ogier, ... & Wright de Hernandez, 2021; La Macchia, 2021) about inclusive educational environment.

Library Users and Equitable access

The components of successful inclusive and equitable library services are creating spaces for users and understanding users' needs. Examples from various libraries, studies, and experiences are observed (Donald, 2021). Effective and equitable access is required by library users, which can be bestowed upon them by encompassing the current opportunities (Delrue-Vandenbulcke, de Laverne & Swiatek, 2021; Hammons, Folk, Blocksidge, & Primeau, 2023) in the form of open access, open science and open educational resources. Teaching practices and library resources should have collaboration strategies which can be utilised to enable inclusive and equitable access in the library scenario.

Challenges for ensuring equitable access to information

While there were new hopes and technological advances at the beginning of this millennium, the transformation in the library resources collection, switching over to more online content and access, and bridging the digital divide etc., have been some of the actions taken by the libraries. Focus on users' specific needs, identifying various user groups, and user community-oriented library services have surfaced during the last decade. A significant aspect like social inclusion, along with the emphasis on technology usage, has emerged during the middle of the last decade (Ghose, 2001; Warschauer, 2004; Carter, 2004; Emiliani & Stephanidis, 2005), as observed in a few studies.

Provisions of library services with the support of assistive technologies to ensure equal access are required and have been implemented (Lee & Templeton, 2008). The challenges associated with people with disabilities and other user groups have been studied on a large scale to understand the possible solutions. The role of information in strengthening democracies is significant. Information access and exchange is one of the supporting pillars in such infrastructure. "Universal web accessibility" was the idea generated in the early millennium years (Jaeger & Burnett, 2005; Kerr, Burrell & Sait, 2006), which has shown the path towards ensuring equity of access through learning software and programs.

ICTs and Alternative Mechanisms for Inclusive Learning

There have been endeavours to identify alternative research frameworks. The aspects of information society and contemporary ICT policies have played a crucial role (Mansell, 2010) in establishing the need for equity of access. The studies of trends and issues for ICT integration into learning and library services opened new vistas of inclusive learning and access (Aktaruzzaman, Shamim & Clement, 2011; Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012). During the beginning of the last decade, there has been much emphasis on ICT applications in information science and services (Kibler, Biswas, & Juarez Lucas, 2014). The proliferation of social media and increased usage of social and professional platforms has increased equitable access opportunities.

The Open environment and equitable access

The emergence of big data, open data and government policies have also paved the way for e-governance on a larger scale (Bertot, Gorham, Jaeger, Sarin & Choi, 2011; Harrison, Guerrero, Burke, Cook, Cresswell, Helbig & Pardo, 2011; McCowan, 2016). The public value perspective is instrumental in addressing the democratic challenges and framing policies and recommendations. Quality education challenges have been observed in the inclusion of open education into learning resources. Sustainable Development Goal 4 has been considered important in meeting the opportunities. Such provisions are helpful in implementing remote learning goals, as well. The journey from information literacy to higher education success (McGreal, 2017; Morgan, 2020; Denga, 2022) in the context of equitable educational experience.

Challenges for ensuring equitable access to library

With the advent of digital technologies, the opportunities and challenges for librarians have increased, as observed since the beginning of the new millennium. There have been issues and challenges (Orick, 2000; Needham & Johnson, 2007; Tóth, 2009), such as ethical issues for distance learners' library facilities, information access in rural areas, government initiatives, etc. With the proliferation of distance and open education opportunities, the massive open online courses and social media usage have increased. Academic and research libraries' roles have expanded and encompassed the digital libraries' sustainability aspects (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012; Butler, 2012). In the context of equitable access, web challenges and types of user communities (Chowdhury, 2014; Drake & Bielefield, 2017). In the past, open government, big data, and open data (Maswabi, Sethate, Sebusang & Taolo, 2011; Bertot, Gorham, Jaeger, Sarin & Choi, 2014; Beck, 2015) have carved the path for the current advancement of information services, data access and user satisfaction. The concept of maker spaces has been popular in various countries (Slatter & Howard, 2013; Einarsson & Hertzum, 2019) yet has not been pervasive in the perspective of equitable access.

A few years ago, there was the prominence of equal access provisions, efforts and fostering partnerships (Sanchez-

Rodriguez & LoGiudice, 2018; Pentland, 2019; Wanyan & Dai, 2019) between libraries and user groups of various ethnicities, abilities and information needs. Such endeavours from various examples reflect the significance of social justice, intellectual freedom and equitable access (Branyon & Dawkins, 2020; Jones, 2020; Kosmicki, 2020). The concept of sustainable development in light of Industry 4.0 and remote library instruction (Ibacache, Koob & Vance, 2021; Msauki, 2021) is paving the way for social equity and an inclusive approach.

Conclusion

Inclusion, diversity, and equity are meant for prompt consideration among the libraries to provide equitable library services for various types of user communities. The advances created in open and equitable scholarly publications and resources' availability may open a window for inclusivity and equitable access towards a more inclusive future. Libraries may create a roadmap and develop a plan for increased diverse, inclusive, and equitable resource access and services, which are components of the inclusive educational environment. The participation of users in roadmap creation and future plan development is needed, which may be crucial for finalizing the framework for diversity and inclusion in various subjects and creating equitable and inclusive learning environments in libraries.

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