

Experiences of students with disabilities toward digital library resources: A case study of selected public universities in Kenya

Background: The rapid expansion of digital technologies has reshaped higher education, with digital libraries significantly increasing access to scholarly resources. Despite these advances, students with disabilities (SWDs) continue to face barriers that restrict effective participation in digital library environments across many universities.

Purpose: This study examined the experiences of SWDs in accessing and using digital library resources in six Kenyan public universities, with particular focus on institutional infrastructure, policy frameworks, and staff engagement.

Research Design: A qualitative descriptive and exploratory research design was adopted to gain in-depth understanding of accessibility conditions and user experiences in digital library contexts.

Study Sample: The study involved 54 SWDs, including 33 visually impaired and 21 hearing impaired students, alongside library staff and disability coordinators from six public universities in Kenya.

Data Collection and/or Analysis: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document review, and field observations. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 to identify recurring patterns and key factors influencing digital inclusion.

Results: Findings showed significant differences in accessibility and usability across institutions. Universities with integrated assistive technologies, trained and supportive staff, and structured support programs promoted autonomy and active engagement among SWDs. In contrast, outdated technologies, inaccessible platforms, and weak policy implementation limited participation. Barriers were technological, environmental, institutional, and individual, while facilitators included proactive staff support, peer networks, orientation programs, and basic adaptive tools.

Conclusions: Sustainable digital inclusion requires coordinated institutional action combining assistive technologies, universal design principles, continuous staff training, and strong governance frameworks. Enforceable accessibility policies, inclusive platform design, and national standardization frameworks are recommended to improve equitable access to digital library resources for SWDs in Kenyan public universities.

