

**The Triumph of Visually Impaired Students in National Open University of Nigeria
(NOUN): True Students' Life Stories**

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Abstract

Many students within and outside Nigeria have embraced Open Distance Learning (ODL) based on the fact that it is flexible, affordable, convenience and nearer to students. The inclusion of visually impaired students in the programme has been uncompromising in the area of admission and academic support services to them. However, many of these visually impaired students in the study centres experience some uphill tasks on ways in which they navigate the geography of the university and also engaged in academic activities. On the basis of the above, three research questions were raised to explain ways they explore the university environment and academic activity. Qualitative research method was adopted, interpretive paradigm used to make sense of the narrative by these participants. Twelve visually impaired students and two officers were purposively selected to give account of what and how they navigated the university geography while carrying out programmes. Semi-structure interview was used as an instrument for the gathering of data. Similarly, data gathered was transcribed, coded, and the themes were analysed using narrative analysis. Findings indicated that visually impaired students found it difficult to navigate the local geography of the study centres. Furthermore, they were able to get unqualifiable support services from staff which made to succeed in their academics. It was therefore recommended among others that the geography of the study centres should be friendly for them to use.

Keywords: Inclusion, open and distance learning, triumphant, virtually impaired students.

Introduction

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has come to stay in Nigeria despite initial shortcoming occasioned by military intervention in 1983, in which the institution was abolished. However, then President Olusegun Obasanjo saw the need for the resuscitation of the institution in 2001. The institution has been moving from strength to strength in all its ramifications. In recent times, the institution has admitted all manners of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Official available record in the university indicated that there are over 75905 active students, among them were over hundred and twenty-five (125) students who endeavour to access formal education in spite of their hearth challenges. Out of the number, twenty-four (24) of them were visually impaired students. (Oral interview with Mrs. Christiana Uzuukwe, 2025). Soleimani-Sefat, Rostami, Amani and Movallali (2016) argued that the essence of visually impaired people accessing formal education is to seek better life devoid of hate, discrimination, segregation and violence. In year 2025 graduation, NOUN has turned out thousands of graduates, among whom were visually impaired students (Oral interview with Mrs. Christiana Uzuukwe, 2025). It is worthy of note to state that despite the visually impaired students' triumph from the university, their journey through the university environment is better imagine than explained. In fact, there has been series of obstacles they surmounted in trying to navigate the geographies of the university. Yadav (2024) opined that visually impaired students in the university finds difficult to locate administrative office for documentations during the admission process. In the absence of university support services, it was argued that visually impaired students in the university experienced challenges in meeting with the demands of academic activities and other personal needs (Nnama-Okechukwu, Chukwuka, & Okoye, 2020).

As shown in various studies, the undergraduate students with visual impairment within the Nigerian educational content are the partially sighted, low vision, and totally blindness (Okoye & Adirika, 2019). For the purpose of this study, visually impaired students are any undergraduate student suffering from any form of visual impairment ranging from severe vision impairment, low vision, and complete blindness. This category of undergraduate students experiences various forms of challenges in meeting with the demands of academic activities (Omede, 2015). The problems of visually impaired students have been explored by researchers. For instance, Nwosu, Orizu, Obiozor and Apiti (2024) indicated that the existence of problems such as using the

library, transport, difficulties in teachers' understanding about their needs are the major challenges faced by the visually impaired students in the university. Gambo, Adelokun, Gambo and Afolayan (2021) assert that it is because of several reasons which comprises lack of interaction between special needs and regular students, moreover, most teachers do not have sufficient skills in teaching them in an inclusive classroom. From all indications, visually impaired students are compelled to be screened for admission like normal students. This is absolutely at variance with their expectations of university environment which is conducive and accommodative. On the basis of the above discourse, the study seeks to explore visually impaired students' true-life experience while they are/were at the university (NOUN) for one programme or the other.

Research Questions

In order to find a valid finding to this research study, three research questions were formulated to unravel the challenges and support strategies available for the visually impaired students while they were or are getting in NOUN. The research questions are stated below:

- a) What are the challenges faced by visually impaired students in NOUN?
- b) How visually impaired students able to surmount these challenges?
- c) What manner of support service(s) are put in place by Special Needs Unit (SNU) in NOUN for the visually impaired students?

Theoretical framework

The theory for the study is known as Self-Presentation Theory (SPT) and was propounded by Erving Goffman in the year (1959). The theory explains ways in which individuals use verbal and non-verbal cues to project a particular image in society. Arkin, Appleman and Burger (1980) held that the theory draws from the dramaturgy metaphors, such as backstage and front stage, as a lens to explore human behaviour in everyday life. The theory paved the way for a better understanding of identity development through the performance acts of individuals in society (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Shulman (2016) submitted that there are six key principles of the theory. Firstly, individuals are performers who express themselves to the society. Secondly, individuals want to put forward a credible image. They do so by being truthful and authentic on the way they present themselves (Jang et al., 2018). Thirdly, individuals take special care to avoid

presenting themselves "*out of character*," therefore, "they strive to ensure that their performance or communication aligns with their role and identity in society" (Jeacle, 2014). Fourthly, Menard, Bott and Crossler (2017) opined that "if a performance is inadequate and not up to the mark, individuals address or repair it by engaging in restorative actions." Fifthly, self-presentation happens in social spaces known as regions of performance, and these regions of performance occur in everyday life such as workplace, social gatherings and social media. Hollenbaugh (2021) said that individuals work in teams and manage the impression of the collective to achieve common goals. In practical terms, visually impaired students and teachers consciously or unconsciously employ various techniques to manage how they are perceived by others. Similarly, these disability students may unconsciously present themselves as needing assistance or struggling to elicit empathy from teachers. From the above assertion, this theory is extremely importance in the study in order to tease ways in which visually impaired students navigate NOUN's geography and the supports they receive from staffers.

Literature

The right of students with visually impairment to education has been explained in various fora. Traditionally, students with visual impairment are disadvantageous in concept learning because they depend on other senses for movement, writing and reading, than their eyes in the acquisition of knowledge. Students with visual impairment are dependent on information gathered by their touching, sensing and hearing. However, they have to face many difficulties which serves as a challenge to them. Kızılaslan (2020) asserted that these students acquire information about the distance or environment and direction of an object based on the sound of the object or by means of hearing.

On the issue of acquisition of education, Amin, Sarnon, Akhir, Zakaria and Badri (2021) argued that students with visual impairment experience five main challenges in school such as finance, public stigma, accessibility, peer-to-peer acceptance and total public rejection. Despite these ugly issues raised, students living with visual impairment are capable of studying for any academic discipline of his/her choice just like other normal students when supported. In Nigeria, this category of students is usually excluded from participating in discipline-related activities, due to perceived disadvantageous disposition (Amin, Sarnon, Akhir, Zakaria & Badri, 2021). Furthermore, this situation is more worrisome at the university level, where the focus of

education is being shifted to more serious academic theorisation and pragmatism. Here, these disadvantaged students deserve some studying tools such as braille machine, among others. In some developing countries these facilities are lacking, which prompted these students to withdraw from formal education.

Mobility and way-finding is always difficult and regularly riddled with danger for students living with visually impairment, especially at the university level. Furthermore, university environment is critical factor in achieving educational goals and fostering social inclusion for visually impaired students. In developing countries, university environment is designed for the comfort of only conventional students. Visually impaired students face great challenge in navigating the university environment unhindered due to barriers such as staircases, gutters, among others. Zhang, Tang, Wang, Yang, Wang, Zhang & Wang (2024) argued that visually impaired students face depression due to inability to navigate the university environment. Though, Bilal Salih, Takeda, Kobayashi, Kakizawa, Kawamoto and Zempo (2022) asserted that there are auditory cues and other facilities which serves as spatial information tools by students with visual impairment to navigating unfamiliar environments. In spite of the availability of these gargets, an average student cannot afford it due to its exorbitant price. In Nigeria, the majority of visually impaired students are from financially strapped families where acquisition of these gadgets is completely out of reach, hence their accessibility to functional and quality education limited.

Methodology

The design for the study is qualitative research approach. The adoption of this approach is based on the fact that the researcher want to understand in-depth the true-life experience visually impaired students went or are going through in NOUN before graduation. In line the design of the study, interpretive paradigm is used as lens to in-depth understand the true stories in which visually impaired students narrate. The population of the study is the entire visually impaired students who studied in NOUN. According to the NOUN desk officer of Special Needs Unit (SNU) (2025), there are twenty (20) visually impaired students who graduated or are doing one programme in NOUN between 2018 and 2025. Out of the number, twelve participants were purposively selected. In a similar vein, two (2) officers (Mrs. Janet Otaru and Mrs Christana Uzuukwgu) from SNU were equally selected purposively. The researcher decide to choose the two officers based on Donkoh and Mensah (2023) assertion that triangulation in qualitative study

is use for the multiple complementary data to investigate a phenomenon. Here, the researcher adopted small sampling size based on Sarfo, Debrah, Gbordzoe, Afful and Obeng, (2021); Subedi's (2021) assertion that small sample size is needed to ensure that the research findings are both valid and rich.

In order for the researcher to have free and unrestricted access to the participants, due to their vulnerability, the researcher applied to the university management and participants for permission for the interview. It is incumbent to say that permission was obtained in this direction. In a similar circumstance, a written 'Consent Form' was designed and given to the participants to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Summarily, the entire ethical considerations were adhered to. It is pertinent to report that the researchers design an instrument known as Visually Impaired Students' Interview Schedule (VISIS). This instrument was developed in order to gather information on the way in which the affected students navigated the geographical terrain and interaction with staffers of the university. In the study, these researcher reported that audio recorder and field-book were used to interact with the participants. It is appropriate to submit that the interviews with the participants were conducted in a conducive environment. After the interview, the data received from the field were transcribed using Nvivo. The transcribed data was subjected to axial coding. The reason for the coding is based on Onwuegbuzie, Frels and Hwang (2016); Saldaña (2021) who says that a researcher code the data in order to classify and attach conceptual labels to empirical objects, organize and interpret them in the given research context. After the data was coded, saturation point was reached and the emerging themes were obtained. The themes that emerged was analysed using narrative analysis.

Results

Research question 1: What are the challenges faced by visually impaired students in NOUN?

From the analysis, the visually impaired students who went through different programmes in NOUN reported that they went through series of challenges in the university, however, the major ones were navigating the geographical space in the university and not provided with braille machine by university management.

Navigating the Geographical Space

The researchers want to report that one of the challenges faced by either current or graduated visually impaired students was their inability to navigate geographical spaces in the university. At the Student Centre level, the participants said that there were barriers everywhere in the university. This university was not built to accommodate them (visually impaired students). In fact, when one of the participants was asked how he moved around the Study Centre, he declared:

I do not find it easy to move around my Study Centre during throughout the three years of my programme in NOUN. I want to say that environment at the Study Centre was not friendly. From the entrance to the sitting arrangement in the university, the whole thing was not set up with people who could not see in mind. There were a lot of barriers which prevented us from moving freely.

In another vein, Adaeze (not real name) added that the sitting arrangement in the school was poor, and he always got injured each time he tried to sit down in the main hall. Adaeze mentioned that at Enugu Study Centre, the sitting arrangement was extremely poor and it cannot accommodate me except being led by someone. Moreover, he said that “*I have to climb stair case before he could locate the sit, this is unfriendly and uncomfortable.*” Furthermore, Stanley mentioned that at Kano Study Centre he was always assisted by other normal students in the school. He concluded by saying that the university entrance to the main hall should be widened to accommodate him and other visually impaired students like him.

Non-provision Braille Machine

It was also indicated by the participants that visually impaired students in the university were not be provided with braille machine or audio recorder. Stephen (not real name) narrated that since he from poor financial background, he was unable to have financial muscle to purchase these gadgets for his study. In light of this assertion, Stephen submitted that his effort in studying freely and easily without these gadgets is not only difficult, but extremely stressful. Similarly, when these researchers probed another participant on the non-provision of audio recorder and braille machine by the school authority, she responded angrily by saying:

Nigerian government not know what it takes to provide education needs for the physically challenged people in the society. In fact, though NOUN has done for providing laptops to

us, however, non-provision of braille machine by the university to us is very annoying, unfortunate and sad. Based on this circumstance, visually impaired students has hectic time like other normal students

The above excerpt from these participants indicated that poor geographical terrain in the Study Centres, non-provision of writing materials and audio recording machine were some of the challenges faced by the visually impaired students in NOUN.

Research question 2: How visually impaired students able to surmount these challenges?

From the interview conducted, almost all the participants agreed that the challenges faced by them was surmounted through the assistance of course mates and both academic and non-academic staff.

Assistance by Course Mates

Analysis done by the researchers indicated that the challenge of navigating geographical space in the university though difficult, but they (visually impaired students) were assisted by their course mates to move round the school. Precious (not real name) narrated that immediately she arrived the school premises, she is always assisted by her friends to move around. In the same vein, Micheal declared that he is supported by his friends to move him from point A to B, in spite of using his Mobility Cane (MC). These researchers by hearing the word 'mobility cane' wanted to established its usefulness, therefore, they probed further by asking the meaning of mobility cane and what it is used for. Responding Micheal queried thus;

Don't you know the meaning of the mobility cane and it use? Well, mobility cane is the stick-like equipment used to indicate his whereabouts both in the university environment and society. In fact, it is very useful, however, only well-to-do individual can purchase it.

Assistance from Parents/ Staff

Another way in which visually impaired students surmounted some challenges was that their parents and staff were readily available to render them assistance. Peter particularly reported that he was assisted by two of lecturers. In line with the above assertion, he was probed further on how was assisted by the lecturers. In response, Peter narrated that when his lecturers knew that he was NOUN student, in spite of their busy schedule, they were able to pick him in their car to and from the school. Another participant added that his movement to the university was made

extremely easy by Mrs Patience (non-academic staff) who live closed to him. The participant submitted that he usually prepared on time in order to follow the woman. When he asked whether the said staff ever requested for transport fare whenever he joins her in the car. He responded thus “*Mrs Patience is amiable women, she never requested for any money throughout the time I moved with her.*”

The extract from the participants’ narration clearly established that the visually impaired students in the university surmounted their challenges through the assistance provided by both their class mates, parents, academic and non-academic staff. From all indications, the assistance rendered by these individuals enable these students to have it easy while in the university.

Research question 3: What manner of support service(s) are put in place by Special Needs Unit (SNU) in NOUN for the visually impaired students?

The researchers were of the view that to have balance and unbiased position concerning the support services provided for visually impaired students, two staff of the special unit responsible for academic activity of visually impaired students were interviewed. However, they mentioned that support service provided by NOUN was exceptional. In fact, Mrs Christiana Uzuukwgu and Janet Otaru said that some of support services are provision of laptops specifically made for visually impaired students, training them on entrepreneurial work and provision of staff to assist visually impaired students during examination period.

Provision of special laptops to visually impaired students

From the interview, it was revealed by the Head of Special Need Unit (Mrs. Christiana Uzuukwgu) in NOUN that only two staff operated since this unit was established some years ago. At the moment, the Vice Chancellor has employed four additional staff, in total the entire staff in this unit has been increased to six. According to Mrs. Christiana Uzuukwgu, a lot has been done in the area of providing support service to these students, the Vice Chancellor (VC) has assisted immensely in the provision of special laptops to these students for used during and after examination. In fact, Mrs. Christiana Uzuukwgu went further to narrate that most of these students finds it easy to independently write their examination without any assistance from the staff. However, she reported that few of these students are lazy and they use the laptop, therefore, they still need to be spoon-fed by the staff. When Mrs Christiana Uzuukwgu was asked how

they meet these students' needs at various Study Centres scattered all over the country, while they are in the NOUN headquarter. In response, she declared:

I have made a proposal to the management that most staffers should be sent to the Study Centres where their services are most needed instead of keeping them at the Headquarters. It is absolutely useless and unproductive to keep all the staffers at the headquarter while they supposed to be in the field working with these students.

More so, Mrs. Janet Otaru informed that a sound-based assistive technologies as well as Braille books, Braille slate and Stylus are needed for their academic activities. Furthermore, these staff informed the interviewers that what the university need to do is employ Braille expert to teach these students. She concluded that most of the visually impaired students do not understand how to use Braille Machine.

Training visually impaired students on Entrepreneurial work

During the interview with the staff of Special Needs Unit, it was narrated that the VC of NOUN was always on hand to render assistance to visually impaired students. When one of the researchers questioned another the type of support service given to these students aside from laptops, Mrs Christiana Uzuukwgu replied:

Recently, the VC instructed us that all the physical disadvantaged students should be sent to Non-Government Organization (NGO) for training on any entrepreneurial work his or her choice. In fact, the first batch of the students were sent and were undergoing training in Zaria, Kaduna State.

In addition to the above assertion, Mrs. Christiana Uzuukwgu and Mrs Janet Otaru reported strongly that they also have challenges in dispensing support service to visually impaired students. At this point, they were asked the challenge they encountered. Mrs Christiana Uzuukwgu replied:

Though, I am a specialist in another field of special education. Some of these visually impaired students' needs braille specialist who would be able to render assistance in this direction. I want to state that unfortunately we do not have any braille specialist in this unit.

From the above notions from the participants, it has been established that NOUN immensely provides support services such as provision of Laptops, partnering with NGO to train these students on entrepreneurial skills. In summary, the Vice Chancellor of NOUN has improved the

services rendered to visually impaired students through the employment of staff, provision of laptops and other necessary instructional resources.

Discussion

Findings indicated that visually impaired students face various challenges which almost prevented them from schooling. For instance, poor and unfriendly geographical terrain at the Study Centres was one of the barriers visually impaired students encountered. Furthermore, it was observed that most of the Study Centres do not have visually impaired friendly walkways. There are barriers everywhere at the Study Centres. This necessitates visually impaired students to be guided by his or her course-mates. Similarly, non-provision of braille machine is another challenge visually impaired students faced. Though, NOUN management has provided these students with laptops, most of them prefer braille machine to laptops. Summarily, it may be argued that unfriendly geographical space of the university and non-provision of braille machine has negative influence academic performance of visually impaired students in the school. The findings aligned with position canvassed by Ndegwa, Cheplong and Korir (2015) who said that poor geographies of the school and lack of instructional resources negatively affect visually impaired students such as interpersonal communication skills, life skills, mobility skills and overall academic development.

In another vein, it was totally agreed that these students encountered various challenges in school. In fact, the interviewers were rather informed that the students were able to surmount most of these challenges through the assistance of both their course-mates and staff. It was found that their course-mates aided their mobility within and outside unfriendly geographical space of the university. Moreover, the assistance of some staff of the university towards these students was equally noticeable and appreciated by the students. These visually impaired students were taken to and from the university by the staff. The implication of the assistance rendered to these students by their course mates and staff, is that aside from easing their mobility, it also significantly enhances these students' overall academic success in the university. The position of this study aligned with Senjam, Foster, Bascaran, Vashist and Gupta's (2020) findings who argued that the majority of visually impaired students assisted either by their fellow students in their mobility or use of tactile based technology in the class, performed excellently well in their academic than those who were not assisted.

Findings of the study have shown that NOUN through SNU provided best support services to visually impaired students in the area of the provision of sound-based laptops for their academic work. Equally, this university management engaged them on entrepreneurial skills development in Zaria in skill acquisition for self-reliance and sustainability. The finding is supported by Johnstone, Altman, Timmons and Thurlow (2009) who argued that the provision of blind students with skill while in the school enhance their self-development. However, Silman, Yaratan and Karanfiller (2017), Pandey (2018) was of the view that provision of technologies to visually impaired students is satisfactory in facilitating the teaching and learning processes for enhancement of academic success.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Studies such as Tekin (2019), Atasay (2020), Shafiullah and Akay (2023) have established that the majority of visually impaired persons get unrestricted access to university education, however, the principal challenges aside from stigmatization and inclusion in the mainstream classroom by non-visually impaired counterparts is that they encountered an unfriendly geographical space in the university, non-provision braille laptops and partial dependence of NOUN classmates and staff for their mobility. Furthermore, the university (NOUN) provision of support services to all visually impaired students in the content of laptops are commendable. In a similar circumstance, subjecting visually impaired students to entrepreneurial skills training will eventually bring about income generation and self-reliance.

In light of the findings, it is therefore recommended that:

1. Most support staff who are at the headquarter should be transferred to the Study Centres where these students are domiciled for proper assistance to these students, instead wasting time at the headquarter without doing any tangible thing.
2. Some staffers should be trained in the use of various assistive technologies such as braille machines and books so that they would be able provide maximum support services to these students in their care.
3. Though, the VC of NOUN has tried in providing friendly environment to these students for serious academic exercise, he should provide automatic high-speed book scanners to the students. In fact, this kind of device will scan up to 300 pages per minute and turns the

book into electronic text which then can be converted into audio by an electronic book reader. This will automatically aid the students in their academic exploit.

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