

Training for Academic Librarians in Assistive Technologies (AT) Requires Higher Priority and Targeted Funding

Munyoro, J., Machimbidza, T., & Mutula, S. (2021). Examining key strategies for building assistive technology (AT) competence of academic library personnel at university libraries in Midlands and Harare provinces in Zimbabwe. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47(4), Article 102364. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102364>

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Objective – To explore strategies for building up library worker abilities in assistive technology (AT) for inclusive implementation. The primary focuses of the study’s interviewing included the extent of existing training, the challenges of funding and executing this type of training, and any notable strategies for creating greater access to high-quality AT training.

Design – A qualitative exploratory study of library workers.

Setting – Three academic libraries in Zimbabwe.

Subjects – Thirty library workers comprised of Senior Library Assistants, Administrative Assistants, and Assistant Librarians.

Methods – The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews confidentially over WhatsApp and telephone. They then conducted thematic analysis on the results.

Main Results – Exposure to AT training for academic librarians in Zimbabwe is low. Of the 30 librarians interviewed, only 13 had been exposed to any formal AT training. Of those 13, 12 scored their AT training experience as “not very effective.” Primary challenges listed included lack of AT experts as trainers, not enough funding, and ignorance around disability issues.

Conclusion – To improve AT expertise in academic librarians, suggestions included integrating AT training into LIS professional education, and for those already in the profession to establish partnerships across academic departments to perhaps leverage more professional AT training across campus. There was also a noted suggestion that hands-on exposure is more beneficial than passive training.

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

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Conclusion – To improve AT expertise in academic librarians, suggestions included integrating AT training into LIS professional education, and for those already in the profession to establish partnerships across academic departments to perhaps leverage more professional AT training across campus. There was also a noted suggestion that hands-on exposure is more beneficial than passive training.

Commentary

Assistive technology (AT) is an enormous concept that umbrellas “any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially, off-the-shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (World Health Organization, 2011). These technologies are studied in varied library types, specifically AT for visual impairment. For Zimbabwean context, visual impairment is the second most prevalent disability (26%) after physical disability (31%) (Munyoro, 2023). This study takes an important closer look at research in AT specifically in the Midlands and Harare provinces of Zimbabwe.

The EBL Critical Appraisal Checklist was used to measure the validity of the study (Glynn, 2006). The study had an overall score of 71%. The methodology was clearly described and justified, and the results and discussions are clearly aligned with the objectives and research questions. Though the sample size of the study is small, 30 participants is an appropriate number of respondents in a qualitative study such as this. Furthermore, the authors suggest the study be replicated with larger groups and in other geolocations. In addition to the sample size, the authors could have bolstered the study by including the full interview guide. There are five tables and two figures showing different elements of the interview, but it is not clear if this is the complete question bank. Considering these were semi-structured interviews, it may not have been possible to include a complete set of all questions asked, but the initial structure may be helpful for those hoping to replicate the study. Additionally, though the study states that thematic analysis was completed, the authors do not expand on this. The themes described in the article seem to come from the original research questions rather than the interview data.

The results of the study imply that AT training needs more attention, funding, and care in academic libraries. As information stewards, librarians need formalized expertise in supporting all abilities in their users. Of the 30 librarians interviewed, only 13 received some type of AT training; training occurred in-house through AT vendors, typically focused on device-specific tools like braille printers, screen readers, and voice recorders. Less than half of study participants having any training in these technologies strongly implies the need for an agenda of more robust training in future practice—not only in academic libraries and not only in Zimbabwe.

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