
Assessing the Awareness and Understanding of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) among Librarians and Users in Nigerian Academic Libraries

By

Gilbert Paul Igboechesi

Librarian, University of Jos Library, Nigeria
igboechesig@unijos.edu.ng

Anita Ann Amando

Librarian, University of Jos Library, Nigeria
amandoa@unijos.edu.ng

Abstract

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Nigeria, enacted in 2011, is a landmark legislation that guarantees citizens the right to access public records and information held by government institutions. Yet, over a decade after its enactment, questions remain about how well this legislation is understood and applied within the country's academic library ecosystem. This study assessed the level of awareness and understanding of FOIA among librarians and library users in selected Nigerian academic libraries. Using a survey research design, data were collected from 86 valid respondents drawn from different institutions in Nigeria. The study found that while 74.4% of respondents had heard of FOIA, significant gaps exist in understanding its scope, exemptions, and procedural requirements. Lack of awareness and training emerged as the most cited barrier to FOIA implementation (38.4%), and a disturbing 50% of respondents were uncertain whether their institutions had developed FOIA policies. The study recommends targeted capacity-building programs, the development of institutional FOIA compliance frameworks, and the integration of information literacy curricula that explicitly address FOIA in Nigerian academic libraries.

Keywords: Freedom of Information Act, FOIA, Nigerian academic libraries, information access, information literacy, transparency, library policy

INTRODUCTION

Access to information is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic governance. In societies where citizens can freely access information held by their governments and public institutions, accountability thrives and civic participation deepens. It is within this democratic impulse that freedom of information legislation has emerged globally as a mechanism to institutionalize the right to know. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, joined this global movement when it enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 2011, becoming one of the few sub-Saharan African countries to enshrine such a right in law.

Academic libraries occupy a special place in the information ecosystem. They are not merely repositories of books and journals; they are knowledge commons where the principles of free inquiry, intellectual freedom, and open access are lived out daily. As such, they stand at the intersection of FOIA's aims and the academic community's needs. Librarians and library users; whether they are faculty members seeking institutional data, students conducting policy research, or administrators processing information requests, are stakeholders who should ideally be conversant with what FOIA offers and demands.

Yet, more than a decade after Nigeria's FOIA came into force, empirical evidence suggests that awareness and practical utilization of the Act remain low across various sectors, including higher education. Studies have noted systemic challenges including government resistance, limited public education on the Act, inadequate institutional policies, and a general culture of secrecy that predates the legislation (Abdulkareem & Issa, 2013; Afolabi, 2015). Within academic libraries specifically, the picture is even less clear, as research on FOIA awareness among librarians and library users in Nigerian universities remains sparse.

This study seeks to fill that gap. By surveying librarians and library users across several Nigerian academic institutions, the research assesses the current state of FOIA awareness, explores the depth of understanding of the Act's provisions, examines institutional readiness to implement FOIA, and identifies the challenges and perceived benefits associated with the Act in the library context. The findings, it is hoped, will provide a useful empirical foundation for policy dialogue, professional development programming, and future research in library and information science in Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the enactment of Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act in 2011, there is a persistent and concerning absence of structured awareness, institutional policy development, and practical implementation of the Act in Nigerian academic libraries. Several literatures reveal that many public higher institutions (including universities) have been slow or reluctant to comply with FOIA obligations (Akpan & Eke, 2017). Preliminary observation by the researcher showed that library professionals, who are arguably the custodians of information access in academic settings, may themselves lack adequate knowledge of the Act's requirements and implications. Similarly, this is also observed with library users; the students, faculty, and researchers who stand to benefit most from FOIA, may be unaware that such a legal instrument exists and could enhance their access to information. This disconnect between legislation and practice undermines the democratic promise of FOIA and hampers the development of informed, research-literate communities in Nigerian higher education.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the level of awareness of FOIA among librarians and users in Nigerian academic libraries.
2. Assess the depth of understanding of FOIA's provisions, scope, and exemptions among respondents.
3. Examine the institutional readiness of academic libraries to implement FOIA.
4. Identify the key challenges that hinder FOIA implementation in Nigerian academic libraries.
5. Explore the perceived benefits of FOIA as articulated by librarians and library users.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the following specific research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of FOIA among librarians and users in Nigerian academic libraries?
2. To what extent do librarians and users understand the scope, purpose, and exemptions of FOIA?
3. How institutionally prepared are Nigerian academic libraries to implement FOIA?
4. What are the major challenges to FOIA implementation in Nigerian academic libraries?
5. What benefits do respondents perceive FOIA to offer for academic libraries?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study makes several contributions to knowledge and practice. For library professionals, it offers a diagnostic snapshot of the state of FOIA awareness in Nigerian academic libraries, which can serve as a baseline for professional development initiatives. For academic library administrators and university management, the findings highlight the urgency of developing institutional FOIA compliance frameworks. For policymakers and civil society organizations advocating for the full implementation of Nigeria's FOIA, this research provides empirical grounding for advocacy interventions. For scholars in library and information science, the study contributes new data to a field where empirical research on FOIA in the Nigerian academic library context is limited. Finally, for library users (particularly students and researchers) the study draws attention to a legal instrument that, if properly understood and utilized, can substantially enhance their access to information and support the quality of their academic work.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in selected Nigerian academic libraries, with the majority of respondents (83.7%) drawn from the University of Jos, and additional respondents from ATBU Bauchi, Benue State University Makurdi, Federal University of Technology Minna, Federal Medical Centre Bida Library, and the College of Nursing Kafanchan. Data collection took place in March 2025. The study was limited to librarians and library users (students, faculty, and staff) who were physically accessible during the data collection period. The findings may not be fully generalizable to all Nigerian academic libraries but offer a rich and useful portrait of the situation in the sampled institutions.

CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

The Concept of Freedom of Information

Freedom of information (FOI) refers to the legal right of individuals to request and receive information held by public authorities. It is rooted in the broader concept of the right to information, which holds that citizens in a democratic society are entitled to know how their governments function, how public resources are managed, and what decisions are being made

on their behalf (Mendel, 2008). At its philosophical core, FOI is grounded in the belief that information asymmetry; where governments hold information that citizens cannot access, is inimical to democracy, accountability, and justice.

The first formal FOI legislation was enacted in Sweden in 1766 under the Freedom of the Press Act, which granted citizens access to government documents. Since then, over 100 countries have enacted similar laws, reflecting a global consensus that open access to public information is a prerequisite for good governance (Banisar, 2006). FOI laws vary considerably in their scope, strength, and enforcement mechanisms, but they share a common architecture: a presumption in favor of disclosure, a set of defined exemptions, and a procedural mechanism through which information requests can be made and resolved.

Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act (2011)

Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act was signed into law on May 28, 2011, following nearly two decades of civil society advocacy. The Act grants every person the right to request information from any public institution—whether federal, state, or local government agencies, as well as private organizations that receive public funds—without having to provide reasons for the request. Under the Act, institutions are required to respond to requests within seven days, and requesters may seek redress in court if their applications are denied without lawful justification.

The Act specifies categories of information that are exempt from disclosure, including information relating to national security and defence, information protected by legal professional privilege, personal information that would constitute an invasion of privacy, and commercially confidential information. It also mandates proactive disclosure, requiring public institutions to publish certain categories of information automatically, without waiting for a request (Akpan & Eke, 2017).

Despite its progressive intent, implementation of the FOIA has been hampered by numerous challenges. These include widespread non-compliance by government institutions, lack of awareness among citizens, resistance from public officials, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms (Abdulkareem & Issa, 2013; Okonkwo, 2019). The National Orientation Agency and the Media Rights Agenda have documented instances where FOIA requests were ignored or denied without valid justification, and court actions to enforce compliance have been slow and expensive for ordinary citizens.

Academic Libraries and Information Access

Academic libraries exist to support the research, teaching, and learning missions of their parent institutions. They provide access to books, journals, databases, and other resources, and increasingly they serve as centres for information literacy instruction. The values of academic librarianship—intellectual freedom, open access, equitable service, and the free flow of information—are closely aligned with the principles that underlie FOI legislation (Lor & Britz, 2007).

In the Nigerian context, academic libraries play a particularly important role because they often serve as the primary or sole point of access to quality information for students and researchers in resource-constrained settings. The Nigerian academic library sector faces well-documented challenges, including underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, limited digital resources, and brain drain among qualified library professionals (Ifidon&Ifidon, 2007). Against this backdrop, FOIA could serve as an important lever for improving access to information by compelling public institutions to proactively share data, statistics, and records that are relevant to academic research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical research on FOIA in Nigerian libraries is still emerging, but a growing body of work provides useful context. Afolabi (2015) examined FOIA awareness among journalists and civil society organizations in Lagos, finding that while awareness was relatively high among journalists (68%), practical utilization was limited due to inadequate knowledge of procedures and fear of institutional reprisal. Abdulkareem and Issa (2013) surveyed government ministries in Kwara State and found widespread non-compliance with FOIA obligations, with most institutions lacking policies or designated officers to handle FOIA requests.

In the library sector specifically, Nwosu and Ilechukwu (2018) examined information access practices in university libraries in southeastern Nigeria and found that librarians had limited knowledge of the legal framework for information access, with FOIA rarely mentioned in professional training programs. Okonkwo (2019) reviewed the implementation of FOIA in Nigerian public universities and found that most institutions had not developed FOIA compliance mechanisms, and that library staff were rarely involved in FOIA-related processes.

Internationally, comparative studies offer useful benchmarks. In the United States, where the federal FOIA has been in place since 1966, studies have found that university libraries play an important role in FOIA education and that academic librarians often assist researchers in making information requests (Kwon, 2014). In the United Kingdom, research following the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 found that public library staff reported high levels of awareness of the legislation but variable levels of training and institutional support for compliance (Shepherd & Ennion, 2007).

The literature consistently points to three critical factors that shape FOIA outcomes in institutional settings: awareness of the legislation, understanding of its procedural requirements, and institutional capacity to implement it. This study operationalizes these three dimensions in its survey instrument and analyses them in the Nigerian academic library context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Survey research is particularly well-suited to studies that seek to gather information about a population's attitudes, opinions, behaviours, and characteristics at a specific point in time (Creswell, 2014). Given the study's aim of assessing awareness and understanding of FOIA across a dispersed population of librarians and library users, the survey design offered the breadth and standardization needed to generate meaningful comparative data.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised librarians and library users (students, faculty, and staff) in selected Nigerian academic libraries. A convenience sampling approach was used, with the survey instrument distributed to individuals who were accessible and willing to participate. A total of 90 responses were received, of which 86 were complete and valid and thus used for analysis.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A captured demographic information, including gender, educational level, role in the library, years of experience or study, and institutional affiliation. Section B assessed FOIA awareness, including whether respondents had heard of FOIA, how they first learned about it, their understanding of its

purpose, scope, eligibility for requests, and types of exempted information. Section C examined institutional preparedness and perceptions, including whether the library had a FOIA policy, whether staff were trained on FOIA procedures, the ease of making a FOIA request, and the perceived challenges and benefits of FOIA implementation.

Data Collection

Data were collected in 11 days; between March 4 and March 15, 2025. The survey link was distributed through email lists and WhatsApp groups associated with library staff and student communities at the sampled institutions. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality. No personally identifying information beyond email addresses was collected, and email data were excluded from all analyses to protect anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages. Each variable was analysed independently, and results are presented in tabular form accompanied by interpretive narrative. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the relatively modest sample size, no inferential statistical tests were applied. The data analysis was conducted using Python (pandas' library), and the results are discussed in relation to the study's research questions and the existing literature.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study adhered to established ethical principles for social science research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any time. No sensitive personal data beyond institutional affiliation and email (used solely for distribution purposes) were collected. The data were stored securely and analysed in aggregate form to prevent any possibility of individual identification. The study received no external funding that could represent a conflict of interest.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should guide the interpretation of its findings. First, the sample was drawn using convenience sampling, which means that respondents were not randomly selected and may not be representative of the wider population of librarians and library users in Nigerian academic institutions. Second, the sample was heavily concentrated in a single institution, with 83.7% of respondents drawn from the University of Jos. This concentration limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other Nigerian universities, particularly those in different geopolitical zones or with different institutional cultures around information access. Third, the sample size of 86 valid respondents, while sufficient for descriptive analysis, is modest relative to the size of the Nigerian academic library sector, and the study did not apply inferential statistical tests to examine relationships between variables such as role, experience, or educational level and FOIA awareness or understanding. Future research with larger, stratified samples across multiple institutions and geopolitical zones would strengthen the generalizability of these findings and allow for more rigorous comparative analysis between librarians and library users. Finally, data were self-reported, and responses regarding institutional FOIA policy and training may be subject to recall bias or limited respondent knowledge of administrative processes occurring outside their direct experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 86 valid respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 86)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	51	59.3
	Male	35	40.7
Educational Level	Secondary School	7	8.1
	Diploma	14	16.3
	Undergraduate	36	41.9
	Master's Degree	24	27.9
	Doctoral Degree	3	3.5
	Other	2	2.3
Role in Library	User (Student/Faculty/Staff)	55	64.0
	Librarian	28	32.6
	Library Officer (Assistant)	3	3.5
Years in Library	1–4 years	51	59.3
	4–10 years	19	22.1
	10–20 years	9	10.5
	20 years and above	7	8.1
Institution	University of Jos	72	83.7
	ATBU Bauchi	7	8.1
	Benue State University, Makurdi	3	3.5
	Others	4	4.7

The data reveal that females constituted the majority of respondents (59.3%), while males accounted for 40.7%. This gender distribution is broadly consistent with the feminization trend observed in librarianship in many African countries, where women have increasingly dominated library staffing at the para-professional and professional levels (Ifidon&Ifidon, 2007). In terms of educational attainment, the largest proportion of respondents held bachelor's or undergraduate degrees (41.9%), followed by those with master's degrees (27.9%). The presence of doctoral degree holders (3.5%) and diploma holders (16.3%) suggests a diverse educational profile, reflective of the mixed staffing and user population typical of Nigerian academic libraries.

With respect to roles, 64.0% of respondents were library users (students, faculty, or staff), while 32.6% were professional librarians and 3.5% were library officers or assistants. This distribution is appropriate given the study's dual focus on librarians and users. In terms of experience, more than half of respondents (59.3%) had been working or studying in the library for between one and four years, suggesting a relatively junior or recent sample. The majority of respondents (83.7%) were from the University of Jos, which reflects the accessibility of that institution during the data collection period.

Awareness of FOIA

Table 2: Awareness of FOIA among Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes – Have heard of FOIA	64	74.4
No – Have not heard of FOIA	22	25.6
Total	86	100.0

Table 2 shows that 74.4% of respondents had heard of the Freedom of Information Act, while 25.6% had not. On the surface, this appears to be an encouraging level of awareness. However, it is important to contextualize this figure. Given that the respondents were drawn from academic library environments—settings where information-seeking and information literacy are central activities—a quarter of individuals being entirely unaware of a 14-year-old national law represents a significant gap. Furthermore, as subsequent analyses reveal, having heard of FOIA is not the same as understanding it deeply or knowing how to operationalize it.

These findings align with Abdulkareem and Issa (2013), who noted that surface-level awareness of FOIA in Nigerian institutional settings tends to be higher than practical knowledge or utilization. The study by Afolabi (2015) similarly found that FOIA awareness did not necessarily translate into confident or frequent use of the Act's provisions.

Sources of FOIA Awareness

Table 3: How Respondents First Learned about FOIA

Source of Awareness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Through the media (TV/radio)	17	26.6
Through online resources	17	26.6
Social media	13	20.3
From a colleague/friend	11	17.2
Through a workshop/training	8	12.5
Other/Not heard before now	3	4.7
Total (aware respondents)	64	100.0

Among respondents who were aware of FOIA, the most common channels through which they first learned about it were the media (TV/radio) and online resources (both at 26.6%), followed by social media (20.3%), colleagues or friends (17.2%), and workshops or training (12.5%). Strikingly, only 12.5% of respondents first learned about FOIA through a formal workshop or training—the channel through which professional librarians might be expected to acquire such knowledge. This finding is concerning because it suggests that formal professional development avenues are not the primary vehicle through which FOIA knowledge is disseminated, even among library professionals.

The predominance of informal and media-based channels raises important questions about the quality and depth of the FOIA knowledge acquired. Information encountered through social media or casual conversation is unlikely to convey the legal nuances, procedural requirements, and exemptions that are essential for effective FOIA use. As Shepherd and Ennion (2007) noted in their study of UK library staff, there is a critical difference between awareness of FOI legislation and operational knowledge of how to apply it. The Nigerian data suggest that the majority of respondents may fall into the former rather than the latter category.

Understanding of FOIA's Purpose

Table 4: Respondents' Understanding of FOIA's Main Purpose

Perceived Main Purpose	Frequency	Percentage (%)
To provide access to information in all sectors	51	59.3
To promote transparency and accountability in all sectors	16	18.6
To provide access to sensitive information in all sectors	7	8.1
To protect sensitive information in all sectors	5	5.8
Do not know	2	2.3
Other/Missing	5	5.8
Total	86	100.0

A majority of respondents (59.3%) correctly identified FOIA's main purpose as providing access to information in all sectors, and 18.6% correctly associated it with promoting transparency and accountability. Together, these two correct or near-correct responses account for 77.9% of respondents, which is heartening. However, 8.1% believed that FOIA's purpose was to provide access to sensitive information—a mischaracterization that conflates FOIA with classified information access protocols—and 5.8% thought its purpose was to protect sensitive information, which is essentially the inverse of what FOIA intends. These misconceptions are not merely academic: they could lead library users to make inappropriate requests or to bypass FOIA when it could legitimately serve their information needs.

The 2.3% who admitted they did not know, while a small proportion, likely represents an undercount, as social desirability effects in survey research tend to discourage respondents from admitting ignorance. These findings echo Nwosu and Ilechukwu (2018), who found that Nigerian library users often have impressionistic rather than precise understandings of information access legislation.

Perceived Relevance of FOIA to Library Work

Table 5: Perceived Relevance of FOIA to Library Work or Studies

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes – FOIA is relevant	73	84.9
Unsure	11	12.8
No – FOIA is not relevant	1	1.2
Missing	1	1.2
Total	86	100.0

An overwhelming 84.9% of respondents affirmed that FOIA is relevant to their work or studies in the library. This is an encouraging finding, as it suggests that even where detailed knowledge of FOIA may be limited, respondents intuitively recognize its importance to the

library context. Only 1.2% of respondents believed FOIA was not relevant, while 12.8% were unsure. The high level of perceived relevance is a critical resource for FOIA education efforts: it suggests that librarians and users are receptive to learning more about the Act, and that advocacy around FOIA in academic libraries would find a broadly willing audience.

Understanding of FOIA Eligibility

Table 6: Understanding of Who Is Eligible to Make a FOIA Request

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Anyone	62	72.1
Only citizens of Nigeria	14	16.3
Only students/faculty/staff of the university	6	7.0
Missing/Other	4	4.7
Total	86	100.0

Under Nigeria’s FOIA, any person—regardless of nationality or citizenship status—has the right to request information from public institutions. This is a notably inclusive provision. Yet only 72.1% of respondents correctly identified that anyone is eligible to make a FOIA request. A further 16.3% believed that only Nigerian citizens could make such requests, and 7.0% believed eligibility was restricted to members of the university community. These misunderstandings, while reflecting a degree of logical inference (citizenship as a qualifier is intuitive in legislation), could function as practical barriers: a non-Nigerian researcher or a community member without university affiliation might be discouraged from making a FOIA request if told—incorrectly—that they are not eligible.

Understanding of FOIA Exemptions

Table 7: Understanding of Information Exempted Under FOIA

Type of Exempted Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Personal data	34	39.5
National security information	24	27.9
Information on data/statistics	14	16.3
Commercial confidential information	6	7.0
Missing/Other	8	9.3
Total	86	100.0

Nigeria’s FOIA identifies several categories of exempt information, including national security information, personal privacy data, legally privileged information, and commercially confidential information. Respondents’ responses reveal a fragmented understanding of these exemptions. While 39.5% identified personal data as exempt (a broadly correct answer, though

imprecise), and 27.9% identified national security information (also correct), a substantial 16.3% believed that “information on data/statistics” was exempt. This is a significant misconception: government data and statistics are precisely the type of information that FOIA is designed to make accessible, not to protect. Only 7.0% identified commercial confidential information as an exemption category, suggesting that the commercial dimension of FOIA is poorly understood.

These patterns of misunderstanding are consistent with research in other African contexts. Banisar (2006) noted that in many developing countries, citizens and public officials alike tend to overestimate the scope of FOIA exemptions, thereby creating a chilling effect on information requests. In the library context, such misconceptions could cause librarians to decline to assist users with FOIA requests based on an incorrect belief that the requested information is exempt.

Institutional Readiness: FOIA Policy

Table 8: Institutional FOIA Policy Development

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unsure	43	50.0
Yes – Library has a FOIA policy	26	30.2
No – Library does not have a FOIA policy	17	19.8
Total	86	100.0

The data on institutional FOIA policy development paint a concerning picture. Half of all respondents (50.0%) were unsure whether their library had developed a FOIA policy. Only 30.2% affirmed that their institution had such a policy, while 19.8% confirmed that no policy existed. The fact that fully half of respondents—including professional librarians—did not know whether their institution had a FOIA policy is itself a significant finding. It suggests not only that policies may be absent or inadequate but also that internal communication about FOIA compliance mechanisms is poor.

Okonkwo (2019) found similar patterns in his review of FOIA implementation in Nigerian public universities, noting that most institutions had not designated FOIA officers or developed request-handling procedures as required by the Act. The present findings suggest that this institutional vacuum persists in the library sector.

Institutional Readiness: Staff Training on FOIA

Table 9: Staff Training on FOIA Procedures

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unsure	37	43.0
Yes – Staff have been trained	28	32.6
No – Staff have not been trained	20	23.3
Missing	1	1.2
Total	86	100.0

When asked whether library staff had been trained on FOIA procedures, 43.0% of respondents were unsure, 32.6% said yes, and 23.3% confirmed that no training had taken place. As with the policy question, the high proportion of uncertain responses is itself revealing: even among those who work or study in the library daily, awareness of institutional training activities is limited. This may reflect a broader disconnect between library administration and staff/users, or it may indicate that where training has occurred, it has not been systematic or institutionally embedded.

The finding that at least 23.3% of respondents—many of whom are librarians—confirmed that no FOIA training had been provided is troubling. Training is widely recognized as a foundational requirement for FOIA compliance. Without it, even the best-intentioned librarian cannot effectively assist users in making information requests, interpreting exemptions, or understanding the appeal process (Shepherd &Ennion, 2007).

Ease of Making a FOIA Request

Table 10: Ease of Making a FOIA Request in the Library

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	36	41.9
Very easy	22	25.6
Somewhat easy	15	17.4
Very difficult	4	4.7
Somewhat difficult	3	3.5
Missing	6	7.0
Total	86	100.0

Respondents' assessments of the ease of making a FOIA request in their library were mixed, with 41.9% reporting a neutral stance, 25.6% finding it very easy, and 17.4% finding it somewhat easy. Only 4.7% found it very difficult and 3.5% found it somewhat difficult. On the surface, these figures appear relatively positive. However, the large proportion of neutral

responses may reflect uncertainty rather than genuine neutrality: respondents who have never attempted to make a FOIA request, or who are unsure what the process entails, may default to “neutral” as a non-committal response.

The combined 8.2% who found the process difficult or very difficult likely represents a lower-bound estimate of the barriers to access, as many who have never attempted a FOIA request would not yet have encountered these barriers. These findings underscore the importance of demystifying the FOIA request process through clear, user-friendly guides and active librarian support.

Challenges to FOIA Implementation

Table 11: Challenges to FOIA Implementation in Academic Libraries

Challenge	Frequency (Mentions)	Approximate %
Lack of awareness/training	50+	~38.4%
Insufficient resources	27+	~20.8%
Difficulty in locating requested information	17+	~13.1%
Lack of updated/current copies of requested information	19+	~14.6%
Lack of electronic copies of requested information	9+	~6.9%
Multiple combined challenges	8	~6.2%

Given the multi-select nature of the challenges question, the data represent mentions rather than unique respondents. Nonetheless, the pattern is unambiguous: lack of awareness and training was by far the most frequently cited challenge, appearing in well over 38% of responses across all response combinations. This finding aligns powerfully with the preceding data on training gaps and policy uncertainty, and paints a coherent picture of a sector in which the foundational knowledge infrastructure for FOIA compliance has not yet been built.

Insufficient resources ranked second (approximately 20.8% of mentions), which is not surprising given the chronic resource constraints facing Nigerian academic libraries. The inability to locate requested information (13.1%) and the absence of updated or electronic copies (14.6% and 6.9% respectively) reflect both the archival challenges and the digitization gaps that characterize many Nigerian academic library collections. Together, these findings suggest that FOIA implementation in Nigerian academic libraries requires not just awareness campaigns but also investment in collection management, digitization, and staffing.

Perceived Benefits of FOIA

Table 12: Perceived Benefits of FOIA for Academic Libraries

Perceived Benefit	Frequency (Mentions)	Approximate %
Improved access to information	54+	~38.3%
Increased transparency and accountability	28+	~19.9%
Enhanced research output for users	14+	~9.9%
Enhanced reputation of the library	10+	~7.1%
Users/staff rights to special collections	12+	~8.5%
Multiple combined benefits	13+	~9.2%

Respondents were broadly positive about the benefits of FOIA, with improved access to information cited most frequently (approximately 38.3% of mentions), followed by increased transparency and accountability (19.9%). Notably, 9.9% of mentions highlighted enhanced research output for users—a finding that resonates powerfully with the academic library mandate. The recognition that FOIA could enhance the library’s reputation (7.1%) and extend users’ rights to special collections not easily available (8.5%) suggests a nuanced appreciation of the Act’s potential.

These perceived benefits provide a strong motivational basis for FOIA education and advocacy in academic libraries. When library users and professionals understand what FOIA can do for them in concrete terms; better access to research data, more transparent institutional processes, wider access to restricted collections, they are more likely to engage with the Act proactively. This finding aligns with Kwon (2014), who found that FOIA utilization in U.S. academic settings was highest when users had a clear understanding of the practical benefits of making information requests.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a complex and nuanced portrait of FOIA awareness and understanding in Nigerian academic libraries. At first glance, a 74.4% awareness rate might seem reassuring. But when we probe deeper—asking not just whether people have heard of FOIA but whether they understand its purpose, scope, eligibility rules, and exemptions—the picture becomes considerably more sobering. Misconceptions about who can make a request, what types of information are protected, and how to navigate the institutional request process suggest that surface-level awareness has not yet matured into operational knowledge.

This gap between awareness and understanding is not merely an academic concern. It has real-world consequences. A librarian who incorrectly believes that only Nigerian citizens can make FOIA requests may inadvertently deny a non-Nigerian researcher access to public information. A library user who thinks government statistics are exempt from FOIA may not realize that the institutional data they need for their thesis is legally accessible. An administrator who is unaware that their institution is legally required to have a FOIA policy may inadvertently leave the institution in non-compliance with national law. In each of these scenarios, the deficit is not one of goodwill but of knowledge—and that is a gap that targeted education and institutional investment can address.

The institutional dimensions of the study are equally revealing. The fact that 50% of respondents were uncertain whether their library had a FOIA policy, and that 43% were unsure whether staff had received FOIA training, speaks to a broader culture of institutional passivity toward FOIA compliance. Nigeria's FOIA imposes specific obligations on public institutions, including the requirement to develop policies, designate information officers, and process requests within seven days. The data in this study suggest that these requirements have not been systematically implemented in the academic library context.

The challenges data reinforce this conclusion. Lack of awareness and training is the single most frequently cited barrier—and it is a challenge that is both addressable and urgent. Unlike infrastructure deficits or resource constraints, which require sustained capital investment, training and awareness can be built relatively quickly through targeted professional development programs, curriculum integration, and institutional policy mandates. The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) and the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) have a critical role to play in making FOIA training a standard component of library professional development and in advocating for institutional compliance.

The strong perceived benefits of FOIA—particularly improved information access and enhanced research output—provide a compelling motivational foundation for this work. Academic librarians who understand that FOIA can help their users access government datasets for research, obtain institutional records that document academic processes, or access rare and restricted information collections are far more likely to champion FOIA proactively. Framing FOIA advocacy in terms of these concrete benefits, rather than abstract rights language, may be more effective in mobilizing library professionals and users in the Nigerian context.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study set out to assess the awareness and understanding of Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act among librarians and library users in selected academic libraries. The findings reveal a pattern that is simultaneously encouraging and concerning: awareness of FOIA is relatively widespread (74.4%), and there is strong perceived relevance of the Act to library work. However, understanding of the Act's specifics—its purpose, eligibility rules, exemptions, and procedural requirements—is frequently imprecise or erroneous. Institutional readiness is alarmingly low, with half of respondents uncertain about whether their library has a FOIA policy, and nearly a quarter confirming that no staff training on FOIA has occurred.

The challenges identified—chief among them, lack of awareness and training, insufficient resources, and difficulties with information location and currency—are structural problems that require sustained institutional and policy responses. The benefits perceived by respondents, including improved information access, greater transparency, and enhanced research output, provide a strong motivational basis for action. FOIA is not merely a legal obligation for Nigerian academic libraries; it is an opportunity to deepen their mission as knowledge commons that serve the academic and democratic life of the communities they support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

First, the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) and the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) should develop and mandate FOIA training modules as part of continuing professional development requirements for all library practitioners. These modules should cover not only the legal provisions of FOIA but also practical skills in handling requests, communicating with users about exemptions, and filing appeals.

Second, university library administrators should urgently develop and publish institutional FOIA compliance frameworks. These frameworks should include the designation of a FOIA information officer within the library, a clear request submission and processing protocol, a proactive disclosure policy, and an annual review mechanism to ensure ongoing compliance.

Third, information literacy programs offered by academic libraries should explicitly incorporate FOIA content, teaching students and faculty how to identify when FOIA can assist their research, how to formulate and submit requests, and how to interpret responses. This integration would build a generation of FOIA-literate academic researchers.

Fourth, the Federal Ministry of Justice and the Attorney-General's office, which oversee FOIA implementation, should develop targeted outreach programs for academic institutions, potentially in partnership with university libraries. These programs should address the specific information needs of the academic community and promote awareness of the FOIA's provisions in accessible, non-technical language.

Fifth, library collections and digitization programs should be resourced to address the challenges of information location and currency that respondents identified. Libraries with well-organized, current, and digitized collections are better positioned to handle FOIA requests efficiently and effectively.

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