

Readiness in academic libraries to serve the differently-abled patrons

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Abstract

Purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a survey that was conducted among the libraries of the national universities of Sri Lanka. The aim of the study is to measure the readiness in libraries to serve the people with special needs in terms of provision for physical access; availability of appropriate facilities, resources and services; and provision for web access. In other words, this paper reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the Sri Lankan university library system in serving the people with various disabilities namely blindness, low vision, hearing difficulties, mobility problems etc.

Introduction

Removing barriers and creating opportunities to access all services and resources within a community are essential for people with disabilities (Aisan Development Bank, 2005). Libraries and information agencies were among organizations striving to become accessible, enabling environments for their differently-abled patrons and implementing suitable information retrieval systems (Copeland, 2009). It is early 1970s, that the library profession taken an interest in library services for people with disabilities (Murray, 1996). Since then library services have been vastly extended with the introduction of various special media formats such as talking books, video books with subtitles and/or sign language, tactile and the invent of assistive devices such as screen readers, Braille devices, screen magnifiers, special key boards etc.

Rationale of the Study

It was 1980's "Decade of the disabled," that brought the support of the governments and the attention of the society towards the people with disabilities. By now, rights of differently-abled people for better access to education, employment, and information is a well accepted factor. Sri Lanka is one of the countries that actively engage in promoting and protecting the rights of people with disability for quite some time. Advent of the 'Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (1996)', establishment of the 'National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities' in the same year and introduction of the 'National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka

(2003)' are good evidences for the government's support for differently-abled citizens. In addition, every child of Sri Lanka is entitled to free education up to the graduation and the Government accepts the policy of United Nations "Education for all" (Gunasinghe, 2004). Consequently, several steps have been taken to accommodate people with disabilities within the mainstream of education. However, as shown in the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka (2003), only a very few individuals who have disabilities have had higher education. Census of Population and Housing Sri Lanka conducted in 2001 also pointed out that there were only 783 disabled persons with degree and above level of education out of the 274,711 disabled population of Sri Lanka. Environmental and transportation barriers, poor availability of assistive devices and absence of a strong platform to access information are the main reasons that limit educational opportunities for people with disabilities in Sri Lanka. Within the university setup library plays a very crucial role in providing information for academic success. Therefore, it is essential to create a barrier-free environment in the libraries to provide equitable access to library facilities and services. However, at the time, the survey was being conducted, the circumstantial evidence seemed to indicate that majority of university libraries in Sri Lanka are not properly designed or suitably equipped to serve their differently-abled users. In addition, in spite of, the declaration of the necessity of disability-related research in the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka (2003) there are only a very few evidences of such studies in Sri Lanka particularly in the perspective of library services. Therefore, this type of a research is a timely need to enhance the quality and quantity of library and information services available to differently-abled Sri Lankans in order to intensify the opportunities in higher education for them.

Literature Review

Over the years, librarians and their professional bodies have taken numerous measures to upgrade the services for disabled users by creating barrier-free environments, developing collections and strengthening infrastructure facilities. 'Access to libraries for persons with disabilities: checklist' prepared by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and 'Library services for people with disabilities policy' formulated by American Library Association (ALA) are very good tools for libraries to assess existing level of accessibility and to enhance accessibility where needed. IFLA section on 'Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities', 'Disabilities interest group' of Australian Library and information group and the

‘Roundtable on reading materials for people with print disabilities’ are some of the key professional activities that work towards expanding services, increasing awareness and training library staff in order to minimize the difficulties faced by the differently-able patrons.

However, as declared by Copeland (2009) in recent years, there are only a few research studies that had investigated how library – physical and virtual – accessibility might be improved. Researchers (Copeland, 2009; Craddock, 1986) who had carried out studies to understand library services and accessibility to libraries from the differently-abled patron’s perspective had agreed that handicapped people are not always well provided for by libraries. Besides, professionals (Wojahn, 2006; Owen, 2004; Murray, 2001; Murray, 2000; Murray, 1996; Wilhelmus, 1996; Fitzpatric, 1990; Luccock, 1986) who had written position papers or review papers based on their proficiency, experience or observations had described numerous resources, services and assistive devices that can make a positive contribution to the patrons with special needs and emphasize the value of raising awareness and training the staff. They have also discussed about the ethical and moral obligations of librarians towards this sector of the patrons. Another point that been highlighted in the literature is the importance of eliminating barriers to access to the library for people with disabilities in order to comply with the legal requirements.

Web accessibility evaluation studies of library websites are another important component of the literature that assesses the level of virtual accessibility to library services. Axel Schmetzke Librarian/Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin has contributed immensely in this aspect. He has conducted accessibility evaluation studies from 1999 to 2005 at the University of Wisconsin campuses, USA (*details of these studies can be accessed from the Schmetzke’s “Web accessibility survey” site at <http://library.uwsp.edu/aschmetz/Accessible/websurveys.htm>*). In addition to Schmetzke’s studies several researchers (Lilly and Van Fleet, 1999; Craven, 2002; Wijayaratne 2008) had carried out accessibility evaluation studies of library websites of different types of libraries in different environments. There are several common features of these studies. Most of them have relied on automatic tools predominant by Bobby web accessibility evaluation tool while only a few of them have performed manual inspection. The overall results revealed that website accessibility percentages have increased over the years, but the number of barrier-free websites is still far below the satisfactory level.

Although, as discussed above, there are strong evidences in the literature to believe that libraries are a long way behind in the path of delivering library services effectively to this special group, it is also mentioned in the literature that administrators are aware of the need to eliminate barriers to access to the library while librarians are willing to be of assistance.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed through a process of self-evaluation and peer comments. The questionnaire was sent to the Reader-Service Librarians of the national university libraries of Sri Lanka as an e-mail attachment with a covering e-mail. The list of universities was obtained from the website of the University Grant Commission (UGC) at www.ugc.ac.lk.

A list of URLs of library websites was prepared by browsing the web during the third week of April 2011. WAVE web accessibility evaluation tool version 4.0 (<http://wave.webaim.org>) was used to measure the level of web accessibility of the homepages of library websites listed. The evaluation process was carried out on 30th April 2011.

Key Findings

Out of the 15 questionnaires sent, 10 of them returned. 80% of the responded libraries declared that they have students with disabilities - at least one type. Out of the responded libraries majority of them (70%) had users with mobility problems while 50% of libraries had blind or low vision users.

Provision for physical access

Results indicate that 60% of libraries are inaccessible for people with disabilities particularly for wheelchair users. Only two libraries mentioned that they have separate wheelchair access to their library buildings. It is also reported that librarians paid only a very little attention towards making the surroundings of the library accessible and clearing paths of travel to and throughout the library sections.

Availability of appropriate facilities, resources and services

Libraries should ensure that they acquire resources and offer services to meet the needs of all people without discriminating against individuals with disabilities. However, the findings indicate that a very few Sri Lankan university libraries possess necessary facilities, resources and services to serve their disabled patrons.

Appropriate furniture and lighting systems were available only in two libraries while there was not a single library with lavatory facilities. Besides, out of the 10 libraries responded only four libraries had library materials in disability-friendly formats. Results were shown in the Table 1

Table 1 Availability different types of specialized library materials

Type of material	% of Libraries
Brail books	40%
Talking books	10%
Large print books	10%
Video productions with voice scripts	10%
Audio cassettes with recorded texts	10%

Similarly, as given in the Table 2 only three libraries had at least one type of adaptive devices or assistive technology.

Table 2 Level of availability different types adaptive devices

Type of adaptive device	%
Screen readers	10%
Braille devices	20%
Special Key boards	10%
Magnifying glasses	10%

The current situation seems to be more critical when considering the level of availability of special services for differently-abled patrons. Apart from the specialized staff support service offered by the two libraries, none of the libraries were reported to be having services that were recommended by IFLA guidelines and ALA policy such as extended loan periods, waived late fines, extended reserve periods, books by mail, home delivery service, volunteer readers and technology assistants.

Provision for web access

One of the good signs is that, out of the 15 university libraries, 14 of them had a separate library website – at least two pages. As shown in the Table 3, the accessibility of websites was also in a somewhat satisfactory level.

Table 3 WAVE results of university library homepages of Sri Lanka

No. of library sites	No. of instances zero errors	No. of instances 1 - 5 errors	No. of instances 5 - 10 errors	No. of instances more than 10 errors
14	1	5	4	4

Another positive point is that the frequent accessibility errors identified (*i.e. absence of alternative text <alt> tags for images, server-side images, and absence of headers for tables*) can be easily corrected with a very little knowledge on web designing.

Although, WAVE is capable of checking the web pages for conformity issues with several established web accessibility standards such as WCAG guidelines (<http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>) and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 of USA (<http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=content&ID=12>), systematic manual inspection is needed to confirm the results.

Future Prospects

In response to the question regarding the measures that are going to be taken in order to facilitate people with disabilities, 50% of libraries declared that there are no such plans in the agenda as yet. Future plans mentioned by the respondents are: expand multimedia facilities for blind students (10%); multiply talking books and CDs and introduce lending facilities for these materials(10%); purchase a CD platter to select CDs(10%); construct a new library building with facilities for people with special needs(10%); develop a special collection(10%); construct a separate wheelchair access(10%).

Discussion

Overall findings of this study reveal that provision for physical access; availability of facilities, resources and services; and provision for web access are far below the satisfactory level. It is

understandable that the lack of interest from the part of librarians is mainly due to the small number of differently-abled students get into the universities. Hence, it is obvious that individuals who have disabilities are being discriminated against the abled in higher education in our society despite of disability policy statements. It is also obvious that in spite of the government's, semi government institutions' and non-governmental organizations' efforts to build barrier-free environment for persons with disabilities, most of the public buildings and transportation systems are inaccessible for people with disabilities in Sri Lanka. This is a critical situation that should be discussed in highest levels of authorities in order to remove barriers and create opportunities to access all services and resources for people with disabilities.

In addition, we should not forget that as humans there is a chance of any one becoming disabled permanently or temporally due to diseases or accidents. Hence, no librarian can escape the duty of preparing their libraries to serve the people with special needs. It is true that libraries are under pressure in order to provide good services in an environment where funding is continually decreasing in a face of an overwhelming range of resources available and in demand (Murray, 1996). Nevertheless it is librarians' legal and moral responsibility to assign a proper place in their agenda for people with disabilities.

Recommendations for future research

The scope of study is very limited. In addition to limiting the survey to the 15 national universities of Sri Lanka, this study did not measure the awareness, attitudes and willingness of librarians towards serving the people with special needs. It is a timely need to carry out studies (including all the key parameters) in other types of libraries particularly in schools and public libraries to understand the overall status of library facilities available for differently-abled users in Sri Lanka.

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