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PROVISION OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO THE VISUALLY  
CHALLENGED STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON

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# **PROVISION OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO THE VISUALLY CHALLENGED STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON**

## **ABSTRACT**

Visually Challenged students (VCS) in University of Ghana, Legon face various constraints in accessing library and information services. The study was based on Ranganathan's five principles of librarianship. Literature was reviewed on provision and access to library and information services. The researcher adopted case study, since the sample size was small they were all included in the study. Descriptive data analysis technique was used to analyze data. Tables and graphs were used to display information. Findings of the study indicated that there is no program for VCS, they were aware of technological developments in information communication technologies (ICT), access to information and library services was not in existence. It was recommended that the library and the University should make a conscious effort to upgrade its services to meet the academic needs of VCS.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The successful participation of citizens in a complex modern society depends largely on the provision and use of relevant, reliable, accurate and timely information. However, giving the complexity in the human nature, the achievement of the above realistic situation is often not feasible.

Today it is common knowledge that access to information is a prerequisite towards enlightenment and meaningful development at all levels of human endeavor. Any part of society that deny a section from enjoying the benefits accruing from access to information is likely to suffer from exclusion and decadence in this modern society which is largely controlled and driven by information.

Students who are visually challenged encounter certain constraints in accessing library and information services on the University of Ghana campus. This is due to the fact that most of the library collections are in standard print format. This situation presents a major access problem to VCS as they cannot read standard print format.

University of Ghana, Legon admits visually challenged students to read different programmes offered by the University. The University library (Balme Library) is expected to acquire the necessary reading materials for both sighted and the VCS to beef up their academic and research activities without appearing to be favoring any particular group.

The IFLA Guidelines for Development of The Public Library Service (2001) assert that “The development of collections should be based on the principle of access for all and include access to formats appropriate to specific client groups, for example braille and talking books for blind people.”

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

University of Ghana provides information and library services to support teaching, learning and research activities. It is not known whether these services adequately meet the special needs of visually challenged students.

Visually challenged students need information materials in the form of books and other non-book materials to enable them accomplish their individual academic programmes. However, instructional and learning materials are mainly presented in standard print format and rarely are the information needs of visually challenged students given any consideration.

The University of Ghana Report of the committee on facilities for the students with special needs (1993) clearly illustrates the problems that the visually challenged students face in an integrated system of education.

The researcher had observed that students with visual impairment find it difficult to access information and they spend a lot of time at the resource centre waiting for volunteers to read to them. The main purpose of the study was to establish the extent to which library and information services were available to students with visual impairment. This paper is an extraction from Ayiah (2007).

### **1.2 Objectives**

The study seeks to accomplish the following objectives:

- Identify specialized information services (other than those available in the library) for use by visually challenged students at the University of Ghana, Legon
- Determine the level of user satisfaction, given the range and quality of library and information services which exist
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the library and information services currently available for use by visually challenged students at University of Ghana, Legon

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The study brought to bear the disparities that exist in the provision of library and information services for the sighted students and the visually challenged students. In addition, the findings of the study are intended to re-awaken interest in the provision of library and information services by pointing out areas that require urgent attention. By identifying and evaluating existing information services available to the visually challenged students at University of Ghana, Legon, the study hopes to sensitize relevant authorities on the need to improve the range and quality of information services available to this group of information consumers.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows; related literature, methodology, results, discussions and conclusions.

## **2.0 Related literature**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

The study was based on a theoretical framework propounded by Dr. Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972). Ranganathan proposed five laws of library Science to satisfy a need and enhance productivity.

The aftermath of these laws have witnessed efforts made by librarians to bring library services to the doorstep of Library patrons. Librarians in all types of libraries tried to incorporate in spirit, action, and practice, the five Laws which are:

1. Books are for use

2. Every book its reader
3. Every reader his book
4. Save the time of the reader
5. A Library is a growing organism.

Looking through the library literature one can clearly see the evidence of the librarians' effort in this regard. The "reader" of the five laws is the "user" today and the "book" can be identified as all the formats of information sources. The bottom line today is "save the time of the reader user", and in the case of students who are visually challenged requires a well planned and executed library that provides efficient, thorough access to books and materials in all formats.

This predisposes that the acquisition, organization and the dissemination of information and materials should not be seen to disadvantage students who are visually challenged offering various academic programmes like their sighted counterparts in University of Ghana, Legon.

Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science support the objectives of this study, which, among others, seek to identify specialized information services (other than those available in the library) for use by visually challenged students, determine the level of user satisfaction, given the range and quality of library and information services which exist and lastly access the strengths and weaknesses of the library and information services.

## **2.2 General Library and Information Services for visually challenged students**

The G8 summit in Japan recognized that information and information technology are potent forces in shaping the 21st Century and recognizes the importance of information and technology in "bridging the divide"

" a key component of our strategy must be continued drive toward universal and affordable access... we continue to pay particular attention to the needs and constraints of the socially under privileged people with disabilities and older persons and actively pursue measures to facilitate their access and use" (The Okinawa Chart on Global Information Society, 2000).

In Ghana, in its quest to adapt to international standards in the provision of library and information services to persons with Disability has passed Persons with Disability Act 2006, Act 715 ss22 talks about the provision of library and information services.

According to Kurgat (1978) and Cheunwatten (1993) persons with any form of disability tend to be despised, marginalized, and to a greater extent, discriminated against all over the world. For these reasons, even the range of services made available to them is usually limited. These limitations include library and information services, particularly as the Government of Ghana favors integrated system of education but provision of these services to compliment it is nonexistent.

Williams (2000) believes that People who are blind or visually impaired need to be provided with a range of ways of meeting information needs as are available for people with normal sight.

### **2.3 Specialized Library and information services for persons with visual impairment**

Provision of library and information services to students with visual impairment in most developed countries is considered a social service and it is dependent on the nature of their disability. The works of Velleman (1990) and Hiroshi (1980) support the view that Governments in these countries take direct responsibility in the provision of these services free or at a subsidized charge.

However, the existence of National Libraries for persons with visual impairment in most countries is evident of these assertions. The free library postal service for persons with visual impairment in the USA relies on the efficient postal and telecommunication system in existence that guarantees efficient delivery of parcels. But these services have been established out of the pressure from organizations that seeks to the welfare of persons with varied disabilities, which have transformed themselves to very vocal and strong pressure groups.

Judging from the above discussions, it is evident that Libraries for the blind even in relatively developed and prosperous nations, suffer a disparity compared to public libraries. Most of them provide access to less than 5% of the materials published in their country. “In a world where information is estimated double every two to three years and less than 3% -5% of trade books

and half of one percent of magazines published are available to people unable to read print, we ask our blind students to excel on less than 5% of what sighted students have available to them. However, “in an information-intensive society we all need ready access to a wide range of information if we are to function effectively. Lack of access to that range of information is increasingly seen as one of the defining characteristics of social exclusion. (Moore, 2000)

According to IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) “Public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups”, the local library should be the primary service point to access information by both the sighted and the visually challenged.

However, Machell (1996) believes that “the ideal library service is one where each individual, regardless of the degree of visual impairment, has access to the materials and information at the time they are required, in a format that can be used, in the quantities that are needed, and where the needs of the user are understood by the staff”

## **2.4 Specialized training for those serving Persons with visual impairment**

Throughout history, people have feared visual impairment more than almost any other physical disability. In the last few years, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Cancer and Alzheimer’s and most recent Ebola diseases have become more feared in industrialized nations because massive publicity has brought them to the forefront.

The fear of visual impairment is based largely on two elements: the extent to which we rely upon vision as our primary sense, and the negative images about visual impairment which are almost universal throughout the world.

Nowhere is the need for specialized, intensive services more required than in dealing with the consequences of visual impairment. The basic skills and techniques to overcome visual impairment are many and varied and require discreet knowledge, a thorough understanding of visual impairment and its attendant problems.

### **2.4.1 Why the need for specialized training**

Dealing with individuals with visual requires that the individual understands, read and write in their preferred mode of communication which is Braille. The person must be someone who can read and use Braille in communicating with these students. Braille varies from a simple alphabetical notation to specialized notations for computers, foreign languages, music, mathematics and other disciplines.

Training in reading and writing Braille, the individual will be in better position to use assistive technology, including screen review software such as JAWS; scan and read systems such as OpenBook and Kurzweil 1000 and possibly portable note takers such as Braille Lite series, Braille 'n speak, Type 'n speak etc. to effectively and efficiently communicate with them and also using that to provide them with the requisite information timely.

## **2.5 Library and Information services to students with visual impairment at UG**

Provision of Library and Information services to students with visual impairment at University of Ghana is the absence of specially trained Librarians to serve them. Suggestions from Muya, Ogenga and Owiri (1986), Mwiti (1991) and Koech (1998) have supported the idea of including special courses for Librarians to acquaint themselves with the important skills required in handling and serving persons with visual impairment. Aside that Librarians need to know and understand the various formats that information are encrypted for students with visual impairment so as to be able to operate equipment for their benefit.

This has become necessary because persons with visual impairment are among the small but very important segment of the society. In all aspects persons with visual impairment are normal people endowed with all human biological faculties. For them to function effectively and efficiently in the society there is the need for them to get access to information and library services in the required format. There are a number of library and information services tailored to meet the library and information needs of persons with visual impairment in tertiary institutions. These services are designed to facilitate their access to information and library with the hope that the information acquired will improve the lives and help achieve their potentials.

Again, the Ranganathan law also makes it clear that books are there to serve the needs of individual user, regardless of disability, social class, sex, age, ethnic group, religion or any other factor. Every citizen has the right to information.

In University of Ghana, Library and information services for VCS is entirely dependent on resource persons and volunteer students. There are no readers employed by the University to serve students with visual impairment but as part of the Resource Person work schedule, they are supposed to provide that services whenever a student needed it. This is usually not adequate as they mostly rely on friends to read to them on tape.

Craddock (2001) has observed that accessing information is of utmost importance for anyone pursuing an academic programme. In that sense if a student with visual impairment is delayed access to information simply because a reader is not available or a Resource Person could not complete a task, the ability of such a student to complete assignment in time is interfered with and consequently, the overall performance will be affected.

Their dependency on few Resource Persons and the goodwill of volunteering is not enough and reliable. This dependency on volunteer student friends often makes it difficult to meet deadlines for assignments especially when these friends are not available because of other commitments. In a manual on how to provide various kinds of services to persons with special needs (Disability), by Wright and Davie (1996) cautioned about over reliance on volunteers. They write that the motives for offering free and voluntary services might be out of sympathy for students with visual impairment. But they do not need such sympathy, what they need and deserve is to provide them with the appropriate reading services which is reliable and efficient at any given time.

Bruhn (1989) adds that volunteer transcribers and readers with no professional training in handling library users affect the quality of the service and the product as well. Some volunteer's friends may not be suited for the task at hand and just because somebody is offering free services, there is the tendency to accept what is available hence lowering the quality of the intended service. He supports this line of argument by citing a case in the USA where a volunteer who served in a certain community centre for persons with visual impairment turned out to be a psychopath whose intentions were to abuse the patrons of the centre. Although this is an extreme

case, it is not uncommon to find badly taped information due to the use of an unsuitable reader. Not every student who volunteers as a friend to read for students with visual impairment is gifted in reading.

Using volunteers to read for students with visual impairment at University of Ghana, Legon does provide a temporary solution but the long term, but there is an urgent need to employ staff specifically to read to students with visual impairment. The advantage of having readers available at all times guarantees VCS continuous access to information at any time. As educational system become more available for persons with visual impairment in Ghana with the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2006 Act 715, there is bound to be a marked increase in enrollment in the University based on the enactment and awareness in the education of such.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study adopted a case study research method to get detailed information on the issue and also to enable the researcher to probe deeper into the respondent's insight, thereby eliciting data, that otherwise would not have been readily available. Busha and Harter (1980) observe that case studies approach allows a concentrated focus on a single phenomena and the utilization of a wide array of data-gathering methods. The researcher collected data on registered students who were visually challenged. The data measured their access to information and library services.

#### **3.1 Population**

The target population of this study was registered visually challenged students, Braille transcribers, librarians and policy maker all in University of Ghana Legon. According to Peil (1995) the elements that make up the population should be identical, either by living together in a defined territory or having a common nationality. Visually challenged students at University of Ghana, Legon have common characteristics in accessing information.

#### **3.2 Sampling Technique**

The study did not use a sample due to the small nature of the targeted population.

### **3.3 Data Collection Instrument and Procedure**

The study involved an interview and questionnaire. The interview schedule comprised a list of open and closed- ended questions. The researcher read out questions to the respondents from a prepared interview schedule and their responses were recorded on a sheet of paper by the researcher. The researcher distributed questionnaires to Braille transcribers, Librarians and Policy maker personally. The questionnaire had a cover letter stating the researcher's affiliation with the Department of Information Studies with a brief description of the project, and a statement of anonymity of the subject's data.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section A was on social background; Section B library nature of disability; Section C focused on the use of information and library services in the University; Section D what type of information and library service most preferred and why it is so. Finally Section E asked what devices or sources could be used to improve access to information. The open-ended questions allowed the respondents to express themselves freely by providing their own answers. The closed ended questions on the other hand required specific answers from respondents.

### **3.4 Administration of Questionnaires**

A total of 7 printed-paper questionnaires were distributed to Braille transcribers, Librarians and Policy Maker and an interview scheduled for 14 registered visually challenged students in University of Ghana. Questionnaires were directly given to respondents by the researcher. This allowed the researcher to clarify issues where necessary. With the interview schedule booked appointment with the students and interview them at different times.

### **3.5 Data Analysis and Presentation**

Descriptive data analysis technique was used to analyze the data. Tables and graphs were used to display information. Some information was presented in written form. Objectivity in data analysis and presentation was strictly followed.

## **4.0 Results**

This section describes the results. The results are presented in tables and charts according to the various following sections.

- Background of the visually challenged students
- Nature of impairment
- Access to information and library services by visually challenged students
- Preferred sources of information by visually challenged Students

### **4.1 Background of visually challenged Students**

In order to ascertain the background information of the students, the respondents were required to state their year of study, course of study and last school attended.

#### **4.1.1 Course Year of Study**

The respondents were asked to indicate their course year, the results show that 14.29% (2) of the respondents who were in the first year and those in the second year accounted for 14.29% (2) of the respondents. Year 3 and 4 had the same number of students representing 28.86% (4) for each and finally 2 postgraduate students representing (14.29%). This shows almost equal proportions of all the levels.

### **4.2 Causes of impairment**

Each respondent was asked to state the causes of his/her visual disability. Ten (10) 71.43% stated that their visual condition was caused by disease, (2) 14.29% said it was caused by accident and (2) 14.29% responded from birth. They were also asked to state the nature of their visual impairment 5 (35.71%) said that were partially sighted and 9 (64.29%) stated they were total. The study found that there were more totally visually challenged students in University of Ghana than the partially sighted students at the time this research was undertaken. Diseases were found to be the main cause of their visual impairment.

### **4.3 Special Library and information services for VCS**

A number of library services which are specifically tailored to meet the library and information needs of visually challenged students exist. The following services were provided at University of Ghana, Legon, these are highlighted below:

#### **4.3.1 Reading Services**

The researcher observed that provision of reading services is entirely dependent on resource persons and volunteer students. There are no readers employed to serve visually challenged Students but as part of the resource person work schedule, they are expected to provide that service whenever the student needed it. As Craddock (2001) observed accessing information is of utmost importance for anyone pursuing an academic programme. If a visually challenged student is delay access to information simply because a reader was not available or a resource person would not complete the task, then the ability of the visually challenged student to complete an assignment in time is interfered with added consequences.

#### **4.3.2 Formats in which VCS access Information**

Students were asked in what format they commonly read or borrowed reading material from the library. In order of preference 12 out of 14 respondents preferred print, 8 respondents preferred Tapes, 7 preferred Braille and 3 preferred large prints. This may seem surprising that Respondents use more of standard print than alternative formats but this is due to lack of information in suitable or appropriate formats. Visually challenged students in University of Ghana use more of standard printed material than large print which is mostly in gospel magazines and audio tapes which are usually made on request. The few books in Braille that exist are very old and outdated.

#### **4.3.3 Literature Searches**

It was reported by librarians interviewed that this type of service involves retrieving documents and related material needed by visually challenged students. This request come in the form of pre-prepared reading lists given to the visually challenged students by their respective lecturers. At the moment the visually challenged student has to submit the search enquiry to the resource person at post for assistance. Alemna and Armah (2007) states that out of the three public

Universities that admit visually challenged students only one has provided computers with the appropriate installation to be used by visually challenged students.

#### **4.3.4 Reference and Personalized Library Services**

The researcher realized the reference services in most cases were offered to visually challenged students on request by students at the Braille Library. This service is highly interactive and brings the visually challenged students closer to the resource persons and this brings a lot of problems since these resources persons are not professional librarians.

#### **4.3.5 Transcription services**

Transcription work is done at the Braille Library situated in Balme Library which doubles as a resource center for students with Disabilities. This may seem to be against the established practice. Craddock (2001) believes that a library serving visually challenged students must provide such readers with the information they require in the appropriate formats and in sufficient time for it to be useful.

### **4.4 Sufficiency of Library and Information services for VCS**

To determine and understand the level of user satisfaction with library and information services, respondents were asked to say whether they were satisfied with the current library and information services or not. All the respondents recognized the fact that accessing information in the library is not easy due to the fact that the visually challenged students rely on the resource persons for that information and since they are not trained librarians. Visually challenged students agreed that the library is stock with information but they are mostly in the standard print format which does not favor them.

The researcher also observed the obsolete and inadequate nature of information materials for visually challenged students in the library. Responses from informants confirm this inadequacy. The findings are consistent with that of Bruhn (1989) and Wambua (1995) who found that student with special needs in general are usually grateful for what is given to them, stating that

though some of the services are inadequate it would be tantamount to biting the hand that feeds them if they express in gratitude.

## **5.0 Discussions**

The findings of the study indicate that the provision of library and information service to visually challenged students at University of Ghana, Legon is core to their studies and should be given the necessary attention. This is consistent with Craddock (2001). The majority of the respondents indicated using print documents at their risk due to the fact that other formats are not available for them to use. This is also consistent with Bruhn (1989) that volunteer readers with no professional training in handling library users affect the quality of the service and the product as well. Wambua (1995) believes that students with special needs in general are usually grateful for what is given them, stating that though some of the services are inadequate it would be tantamount to biting the hand that feeds them if they express ingratitude. Respondents indicated that the present library and information services for VCS at the University of Ghana were dissatisfied with the provision of library and information services. All the respondents were positive on future provisions to reading materials. Respondents affirmed the importance access to relevant and timely information play in their academic endeavors.

The findings of the study also show that there are three categories of identifiable strengths that can be exploited to improve on the quality of services provided to VCS at University of Ghana, Legon. These are Human resource, materials and information services which the library, ICT centre and the Resource centre can use to improve services. However, lack of coordination amongst these is part of the problem. Cooperation and coordination has always had the advantage of reducing the cost and improving service provision.

The study indicated the potential of information technology in opening up the world of information resources and services for them. They also recognized the importance of the internet, e-mail and mobile phone technologies. This affirms previous studies on Internet use, such as Lazinger et al (1997) and Liebscher et al (1996) which reported the high usage and growth of internet.

The findings affirmed that the need for specialized training on how to serve VCS in general cuts across all aspects of personal whose duties necessitate dealings with people with special needs.

Mwiti (1991) also found the needs for specialized training crucial in the development of individuals.

### **5.1 Summary of findings**

- The analysis of the data revealed that VCS recognize the importance of information in academic work.
- VCS see the provision of library and information services is the foundation of academic work for learning and research.
- All VCS were dissatisfied with library and information services provided.
- Efforts should be made to stock and broaden the range of materials available to VCS.
- Balme library should develop a coordinated plan for the provision of services over an agreed timescale, consulting with students and staff.
- Premises housing library and information services for VCS should be fully accessible.
- A designated member of staff at a senior management level, with appropriate professional qualifications, should be responsible for the planning, implementing, operating and monitoring services for VCS.
- The existing brailled materials on the shelves were outdated and not relevant in meeting their informational needs.
- The study found that additional special training was needed for all staff who serve visually challenged students.
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### **5.2 Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited to access to information and library services available at the University of Ghana campus. The study covered visually challenged students at all levels, resources persons and librarians. Since data was collected on a particular campus based on the services available on that campus it will be unfair to generalize the findings to other campuses with different service provision. Also data presented in this paper was collected in summer 2007. Therefore the findings

might be outdated since awareness in the provision of library and information services for the visually challenged students have changed enormously since then.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

This study was conducted to assess the provision of information and library services to visually challenged students. It was based on the assumption that visually challenged students use other means to access information for their academic work. The findings of the study indicate that visually challenged students do not bypass their friends, resource persons and the library in satisfying their information needs. Visually challenged students also make use of sources such as audio recordings, lecture notes and interaction with their lecturers, friends and resource persons in their research areas.

It is difficult to generalize the results of this study since it was the first of its kind in a Ghanaian university. Furthermore, no study was found that to evaluate the provision of information and library services parameters addressed in this study. There has been enormous advancement in technology since this study was conducted. Current studies including Niu, Hemminger, and Lown (2010) and Niu and Hemminger (2012) have found high dependency of students on electronic resources online. With Internet access currently available on mobile devices owned by almost every student in Ghana, it is recommended that a similar study is conducted focusing on how students use current advancement in technology available to visually challenged students to access relevant information needs to satisfy their needs.

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