

Services for the Blind at the UM Library

oleh
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Ringkasan: *Universiti Malaya mula mengambil penuntut-penuntut buta pada tahun 1970. Memandangkan keperluan khas golongan pelajar ini, satu perkhidmatan khas disediakan di Perpustakaan UM bagi menolong mereka mengikuti kursus masing-masing tanpa sebarang halangan. Makalah ini meninjau sedikit sebanyak tentang kemudahan-kemudahan yang terdapat di Perpustakaan UM bagi penuntut buta. Bahagian Odio ditubuhkan pada tahun 1978 untuk memberi perkhidmatan istimewa kepada mereka ini. Antara lain, bahagian ini mengadakan suatu projek untuk merakamkan buku-buku teks yang diwajibkan bagi sesuatu kursus ke dalam pita kaset. Koleksi pita kaset ini disimpan di Bahagian Odio untuk rujukan. Kemudahan lain seperti karel (bilik bacaan kecil) juga disediakan bagi pelajar buta di Perpustakaan UM.*

About a decade after its establishment, the University of Malaya included blind students in its intake for the first time in 1970. From then on, there has been an average of about 2 – 3 blind students at each annual intake. So far 21 have graduated from the university. Currently, there are 9 students on the campus, 3 of whom are pursuing Masters programmes, 4 doing arts and 2 law.

Blind students as library users constitute a group with special needs, which makes it necessary to provide a special service at the Library to enable them to pursue their academic courses with minimum difficulty. For a start, the University of Malaya Library (UML) provided individual carrel facilities to every blind student to allow readers to read texts to him in the Library. In 1978, a new Audio Division was initiated at the Library to provide services for the blind. One of its main objectives is to create and maintain a core collection of recommended texts on cassette tapes to which blind students can have access. While the sighted literate can read anything they can lay their hands on, blind people's access to information is limited to only those materials which are 'readable' to them i.e. braille and sound recordings for the totally blind, and large print books for the partially blind.

Library materials for the blind at UML are in two formats i.e. braille and audio cassettes. Braille books are kept in the stacks while the audio cassette collection is kept separated from the books, merely because of its format, in the Audio Division of the Library. This division is situated at the topmost

level of the library building. Though not an ideal location as far as the blind are concerned, being a late inclusion, the choice for a more suitable site was very limited.

The Collection

At the initial stage of collection development the Library received 21 titles of items in braille donated by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (R. N. I. B.). These titles, contained in 66 bulky volumes are presently kept in the stacks, at one end of the ground floor. Subsequent gifts received from the same organisation now total 934 volumes. The Law Library, a branch of UML, has 24 titles of textbooks and statutes on braille.

In 1979, the British Women's Association donated 500 blank audio cassette tapes to be used for recording textbooks. An additional 110 tapes were donated by the Association in 1981. To date, about 500 tapes have been used to record prescribed textbooks for the various courses. So far, 45 titles including materials on law, have been recorded and catalogued, and are available to blind students while another 5 are in the process of being recorded. All master tapes are kept in the Audio Division. Since the Law Library is housed in another building, duplicates of law items, totalling 7 titles on 90 tapes, have been made and kept at the Law Library for the convenience of the two blind students of the Law Faculty.

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In keeping with the avowed principle of imparting an all-round education to students entering the University's portals, the UML has not confined its service to the blind students to prescribed texts alone. The Library has availed itself of the facilities offered by the Library of Congress National Library Service to the Blind and Physically Handicapped whereby many titles of general reading material on audio cassettes, mainly fiction, have been borrowed from the institution at the request of blind readers.

Facilities

Although the core of library services to the blind has been coordinated by the Audio and Circulation Divisions, other departments within the library have also been very supportive in this regard. The Bahagian Koleksi Kebangsaan has, in particular provided invaluable service to one masters student.

The Library undertakes the task of recording textbooks recommended by the faculties onto audio cassette tapes for blind students. The Library owns appropriate recording equipment complete with microphones for 'readers' to record books on to tapes. Volunteers, mainly from the British Women's Association and members of the library staff, have given a helping hand towards this end. The recommended texts are recorded as and when required. To do this, the UML liaises with the faculties concerned, who then send a list of reference books required for the particular courses taken by blind students. The master tapes which are kept in the Audio Division are not for loan. However, blind students are allowed to bring their own blank tapes and have copies made for them by the staff, using a fast duplicating machine.

The students also have access to six cassette recorders, manufactured by the American Printing House for the Blind, which have some special features to allow 4 track cassettes to be played individually. They have speed control, to enable the listener to play tapes at a lower speed if required. Besides, the control buttons are all labelled in braille.

In 1981, the library received 6 brailers, kindly donated by Ohio University, U. S. A. However, these have not been made use of due to the unpopularity of braille as a format for containing information. With the advent of new technology, there is clearly a preference for devices such as the audio cassette players and tapes for they are compact, easy to operate, portable, and are light in weight.

The cassette player has one important feature essential to learning, in that, it has playback facility.

In early 1983, the UML purchased a CCTV (closed circuit television) to provide service to a masters student who is partially blind. The CCTV enlarges regular print from a minimum of 20 times its original size to an optimum size to fill the entire 14-inch screen.

Special carrels are provided for blind students at the ground floor of the Main Library where they can listen to the tapes, or have someone read to them, without causing disturbance to the other users. Similar facilities are also provided at the Law Library. It appears that most blind students seem quite content with the carrel facility provided by the library whereby volunteers (usually their course-mates) read to them in the carrels and probably discuss their work as well, whereas using the tapes at the Audio Division means having to listen to it at the division itself, only during office hours. One wonders why most blind students refuse to make use of the tape duplicating service provided at the Audio Division. It could be that blind students are not aware of such services, despite the fact that this service has been heavily publicised. In future, the Library will plan for a special orientation programme for blind students whereby they can be guided to the various areas in the Library where the services are provided.

In providing services for the blind, the Library has valuable support from the various faculties and also from one voluntary organisation outside the campus. The Library is grateful to Prof. Madya Chua Tee Tee who keeps us informed of blind students' needs, and of seminars and conferences about the blind; and also to the Malaysian Association for the Blind and its staff who help in the brailling of diagrams from textbooks. The close rapport which the Library maintains with these bodies has helped in no small measure towards providing adequate library services to the blind undergraduates.

New developments in reading aids

Technological innovations have enabled disabled people, to a large extent, to participate actively in various fields of life. In the academic field, as far as the blind are concerned, aids and devices developed to facilitate learning have come a long way. Braille had been the genesis of such aids. Subsequent devel-

opments in science and technology through the ages has resulted in the invention of the Optacon (optical-to-tactile converter), and the Kurzweil reading machine, through which a wider range of material are made available to the blind who otherwise have to rely on a limited media for their information needs.

The Optacon

This is portable reading aid, the size of a cigar box. The user runs a light sensor along the line of print with one hand and places the index finger of his other hand in a slot in the electronic unit. As the sensor moves along, tiny vibrators mark the shape of each letter on the underside of the user's finger. It can read up to 80 words per minute. Its advantage lies in the fact that the user can read anything that ia printed in regular type.

Kurzweil Reading Machine

This machine has been regarded a most remarkable reading aid ever invented for the visually handicapped. It is a machine which turns print of any

ordinary style and in any language into synthetic speech. The design is sensitive to the needs of the blind — it has a key, which, when pressed, causes the machine to spell out the last word letter by letter, should the user find difficulty in deciphering the machine's speech.

Future Programmes

A programme is being planned to coordinate the various activities related to special services for the disabled at the UML, as an attempt to provide a more efficient service to this special group of users.

References:

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