Friendly Librarians: The culture of caring and inclusion experiences of visually impaired students in an academic library

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Abstract
An academic library is a spiritual home to support users in their pursuit of lifelong learning. This study approaches the issues from the visually impaired students’ (VIPs) perspective towards librarians’ support. This study was conducted by using the qualitative approach. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. For trustworthiness of data, member checking and audit from experts are also used. The participants of the study remarked that the librarians’ friendly behaviour provided them a sense of being accepted, valued, cared for, respected, and welcomed which fostered the creation of their sense of belonging.

Keywords
sense of inclusion, sense of belonging, culture of caring, friendly librarian, visually impaired, academic library

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Lack of disability awareness prevents librarians from communicating effectively with visually-impaired users.

Introduction
A library is not only a place to store reading materials, or to present online or offline services. A library is a spiritual home for its users, their safe haven, and a perfect channel of hospitality, especially in the context of an inclusive setting. Therefore, it seems essential for librarians to not only employ advanced technologies, such as assistive technologies for individuals with special needs, but also to focus on their psychological well-being through promoting their disability awareness. As Fasick and Holt (2008) remarked, library and information science (LIS) is a service based profession, and a caring science with the aim of promoting learning among library users. Indeed, the nature of LIS is due to its contact with humankind that is humanistic in orientation (value, knowledge, and skills), and stresses an important role of disability awareness and communication skills among librarians (Higgins, 2007). Nonetheless, a glimpse at LIS literature indicates that less attention was paid to librarians’ (especially front-line librarians) degree of disability awareness and communication skills, especially from a user’s perspective. To support this, Afzal (2006) highlighted that considerable LIS research was devoted to examining the library system, with less attention being paid to library users (who use the designed system), the context within which users interact with librarians,
librarians’ caring and service friendly assistance, and their role in users’ psychological well-being.

This study will elaborate how visually impaired students (VIPS) perceive and experience the librarians’ support and friendly manner in a university library. The question that this paper aims to answer is, ‘How do VIPS perceive and feel about librarians’ support?’ In this study, we hope to reveal how librarians’ friendly behaviour and support in a university library could assist VIPS to enhance their psychological well-being and social learning experiences. The focus of this study is on the perceptions, experiences, and feelings of VIPS, and not on the librarians themselves.

Literature review

According to the literature on disability, there are two main perspectives towards the concept of disability. The medical perspective considers a person to be disabled because of their own limitations and the medical condition itself. The social perspective considers the disability not to be an individual tragedy, but something that occurs based on the limitations created by the environment that surrounds the individual, and accordingly, enforces the disability (Oliver, 1996). In this respect, a review of the published studies in LIS depict that the majority of the studies adopted the social model of disability. This means the key aim of LIS stakeholders was to optimise library services, sources, and, specifically, a library’s physical environment (library building, equipment, transportation system, and location) to be more accessible for users with special needs. Therefore, the key attempt of LIS stakeholders was to physically integrate users with special needs to the library mainstream (Kuh and Vesper, 1997, Noll, 1997, Joint, 2005, Baker et al., 2007). Albeit the real meaning of inclusion is more than this. In fact, the real meaning of inclusion is providing a supportive system, a welcoming culture, and atmosphere of acceptance to support the psychological well-being (such as a sense of belonging) of library users with special needs (Pinder, 2005, Baker et al., 2007, Peters, 2007, Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2009).

Furthermore, according to the LIS published literature, attitudinal barriers (which influence the librarians’ level of support, empathy, and communication) play a more important role than physical barriers in the inclusion of individuals with special needs (Todaro, 2005, Forrest, 2006). Indeed, negative attitudes of librarians towards individuals with special needs, their lack of disability awareness (regarding the real needs of users with special needs), their lack of disability training, and their lack of communication skills prevent them from providing a welcoming atmosphere. In other words, the librarians’ lack of social and communication skills in handling users with special needs prevents them from providing qualified support, and presenting a meaningful friendship towards users with special needs. Consequently, this hampers their sense of feeling included, welcomed, valued, and respected (Taylor, 2004, Barth, 2005, Joint, 2005, Galdi, 2007, Birdi, 2008). There is a direct relationship between the surrounding environment and individuals’ perceptions, feelings, and behaviour (Goode-now, 1993, Tinto, 1993). An individual’s beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of the established policies and environment around them (such as librarians’ behaviour) impact their decision to be included or excluded from the community (Oxoby, 2009). A sense of inclusion is a process and not just a result, and during that process, individuals may voluntarily or involuntarily include or exclude themselves from their mainstream environment (Burchardt et al., 1999). The Ministry of Social Development in New Zealand (2007) highlighted that a person who is not excluded does not necessarily mean that they were included in their society, because inclusion occurs when people connect and have relationships or communicate with other peers or individuals in that community. To support this, some scholars discussed that a sense of inclusion can come about when individuals within a community feel welcomed, accepted, and valued through friendly communication (Hatlen, 1996, Salend, 2004, Strayhorn, 2008).

A glimpse of previous disability studies indicates that a sense of inclusion is essential for individuals with special needs, in order for them to achieve positive self-worth, social skills, and finding their own place and fit in the community (Doubt L, 2003; Upton, 2010). Previous literature shows that the physical conditions and physical integration of individuals with special needs must be optimised to nurture a sense of acceptance and a sense of value through social networks and friendship (McLeskey and Waldron, 2000, Pavri and Monda-Amaya, 2001). Friendship, relationships, and the type of interaction among individuals with special needs and other members of the community, such as librarians, play important roles in their sense of acceptance and inclusion.
Accordingly, the question that comes to mind is: what is the real meaning of friendship?

**Friendship**

The essence of friendship is culture and context dependent, and may shift based on the very immediate context, and even over time (previously there was a big difference between friends, family, or kin, which depicted the different categories of relationship). Indeed, individuals in a specific culture might have a different range of usage of ‘friendship’, considering the various designations for it (a friend is an informal relationship between equals that are voluntarily chosen, whereas kin is a formal obligatory hierarchical relationship between equals). There are also different categories of friendship (formal, informal, impersonal, persons who are known or unknown to you) with various meanings (a person you can meet for tea or coffee, a source of help, someone who is ready to act as a confidante, nearest and dearest, someone with whom there is a reason to associate, a person who cares about us, or a person with whom they feel at home) (Willmott, 1987, Jamieson, 2008). In general, unsurprisingly, friendship is more common between individuals in the same category (sex, age, ethnicity, social class background, and marital status, although it can happen across divisions) who share the same experiences, interest, and values (Matthews, 1993, Jamieson, 2008). In fact, friendship is one of the most important aspects of all human lives. In this respect, Hutchison and Lord (2010) noted that the benefits of friendship are immeasurable, based on the depth of the relationship, and the meaning individuals attach to this concept. They noted that friendship plays a key role in an individual’s self-esteem and identity development, providing companionship and emotional support. Friendship is also a good opportunity for individuals to communicate in the form of opinions and recommendations, and to establish a sense of being a valued and accepted citizen. Most interestingly, even an individuals’ geographical movement (long-distance travel) is directly related to their social networks and friendship (e.g. individuals prefer to visit places that their friends previously visited) (Cho et al., 2011).

Most importantly, the concept of friendship is central to the vision of inclusion for individuals with special needs, meaning its power, in terms of creating and fostering a sense of inclusion, cannot be underestimated (Hutchison et al., 2010). According to sociology, individuals, as self, are born into a social world, and in order to develop and sustain their self, individuals need to bind with the process of sustaining and induction into the social world. Therefore, in this respect, friends besides family members are considered to be the most important ‘others’ for transition from self to the social world. Furthermore, positive personal interactions and relationships among individuals as friends play a key role in developing and maintaining an individual’s personal well-being and sense of inclusion (Jamieson, 2008). Friendship provides proper opportunities for individuals to create meaningful relationships and connect with others within the community, via participation, and companionship (Hutchison et al., 2010).

In an academic environment, friendship plays a more important role for individuals with special needs. Most individuals with special needs associate mostly with their parents, peers with disabilities, and volunteers. In other words, individuals with special needs interact with a very small network of people, which gets even smaller during their studies in college and living on campus. Accordingly, their social world will be restricted to non-disabled peers (if any are interested in interacting with them), and staff, such as librarians, who provide them with support. Therefore, providing opportunities for them to experience more friendships with non-disabled people (such as peers and librarians) could assist in creating new opportunities for them to improve their social skills, and overcome their sense of loneliness (Brown et al., 2003, Hatlen, 2004, Flook et al., 2005, Langeland and Wahl, 2009). In this context, friendships not only provide social support, confidence, and security for individuals with special needs (through creating a meaningful relationship and friendship), but also assist them to learn about themselves and their strengths (Hutchison et al., 2010). In addition, a sense of friendship will contribute to individuals’ psychological well-being and their sense of inclusion, as they will feel accepted, valued, and cared for (Matthews, 1993).

To clarify the meaning of friendship, some scholars have prepared lists of mentor or staff behaviours that are perceived to be friendly for individuals with special needs, such as sharing a laugh, sharing mutual trust, providing a sense of relationship continuity, providing a sense of being accepted based on their own terms, being available to listen and speak to about problems, assisting them, paying them individual attention, and accepting them for who they are.
The key point is that individuals with special needs seek a formal as well as a special relationship with mentors, such as librarians (Clayden and Stein, 2005, Pockney, 2006, Jamieson, 2008). According to Jamieson (2008), there are big differences between service providers and users’ perspectives towards friendship. He noted that, unlike the perceptions of individuals with special needs regarding the degree of reciprocity involved in their relationship with staff, and the importance of relationships and friendship with them, staff or mentors do not have these same perceptions and attitudes. This prevents the total inclusion of individuals with special needs in the community mainstream.

Nevertheless, a review of published literature indicated that the key factors that hamper mentors, staff, and librarians from providing a friendly atmosphere or establishing friendship with individuals with special needs are their lack of disability awareness, disability training, and written policies regarding the types of support that should be provided to individuals with special needs (Colley, 2003, Philip, 2008).

**Method and materials**

This study adopts a qualitative approach in order to understand VIP’s feelings, perceptions, and experiences towards university librarians’ support and friendly behaviour. The target university was selected purposely since it was designed by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to be one to which students with special needs are directed. Furthermore, the library of the university was recognised as having the longest experience of providing special services for VIPs. The participants of the study stated that the university is the preferred destination for VIPs in Malaysia. According to the latest report from the Deputy Register’s Office of the university, the number of VIPs registered at the university was 79; however, only 20 VIPs registered with the library. The number of registered VIPs is based on the number of carrels that the library had allocated for them to use (15 carrels on the first floor and an additional 5 carrels on the library’s second floor). Accordingly, due to the lack of space for new carrels, some VIPs had no other option but to share their carrels. This paper is based on 22 VIP participants comprised of seven females and 15 males, ranging in age from 20 to 37 years. Ten of the participants were postgraduate students (four doctoral level students and six Master’s level students) and 12 were undergraduates.

Using a list provided by the library, the researchers personally approached participants, explained the objectives of the research, and requested their email addresses and phone numbers. All of the VIPs possessed screen reader software, such as Jaws or Window-Eyes, that enabled them to use computers and the Internet. The researchers emailed information sheets that described the aim of the research, their expectations during interviews, and how collected information would be managed. The researchers read the contents of the consent form to each participant. Each participant was required to sign a consent form prior to the initiation of the interview session. Participants were assured that their anonymity would be preserved in research findings. During the study, the researchers contacted each participant in their library carrel, their residence hall on campus, and in the special laboratory for disabled students in their residential colleges. In the beginning, the VIPs were shy and formal. Some showed limited interest because they were uncomfortable providing details of their experiences. As the interviews progressed, the VIPs became more comfortable, especially when they learned that we met and became familiar with their friends.

Data collection and analysis were carried out concurrently. Data collated was based on 8 months of work via semi-structured interview and focus group. The interviews provided rich depictions of VIPs experiences. In this study, the criteria to determine the number of interviews to be conducted were based on the amount and depth of information to be obtained through interview sessions until the researchers reached the point of saturation. In addition, the focus group discussions assisted the researchers to achieve a deep understanding towards VIPs’ attitudes and beliefs about the research topics. Focus group discussions were used as an auxiliary method for data collection to provide the researchers an opportunity to explore how participants confront conflicting ideas in a discussion session. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The focus group was divided into four groups that were agreed upon by respondents. Each focus group discussion lasted between one hour and 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with a digital audio recorder. The interview questions were divided into two broad sections. The questions in the first section were related to the librarians, library services, and
facilities that were provided for VIPs. Examples of questions asked included: ‘How often do you go to the library?’ ‘What is the first thing that comes to your mind when thinking about the library?’ and ‘If you encounter any difficulties in the library, who is the first person you will contact?’ Based on the interviewees’ responses, the researcher would then encourage the participants to express their opinion about librarians, and the degree of their disability awareness. The questions in the second section of the interview concentrated mainly on the perceptions and experiences of VIPs regarding the librarians who provide them with a sense of comfort, acceptance, and being valued. Questions included: ‘How do librarians in the library make you feel like you have a place in the library?’ ‘Would you please describe any situation in which you feel you are welcomed to the library?’ and ‘If you could change something in the library, what would it be?’

To ensure trustworthiness, transcribed data were checked and verified by members and external audits. For member checking, transcriptions and analyses were provided to participants so they could verify the accuracy and correctness of interpretations. Two senior lecturers, who are experienced qualitative researchers, audited the transcriptions and analysis.

Librarians who are Friendly

McAulay (2005) discussed that, although individuals with special needs appreciate the physical accessibility of the environment in any social context, a warm and friendly atmosphere is more important to them. In addition, according to Langeland and Whal (2009), social support, friendly behaviour, and a meaningful friendship have a direct effect on the mental health and social inclusion of individuals with special needs. A sense of friendship helps individuals with special needs to not only satisfy their emotional need to be happy, but also to moderate their stress and to solve their problems (Aviles et al., 2006). In this study, the concept of friendship was perceived among VIPs as having friendly conversations with librarians, and librarians’ willingness to carry out some tasks for them that they are unable to do.

‘I think the friendly library for visually impaired students is where the librarians are willing to help out! In such a library, the librarians would help students who are visually impaired find books or assign a particular staff to support visually impaired users. This would make our lives easier as we do not have to wait for our friends or volunteer readers to help us find books!’ (Hadi, 22 years old)

The VIPs perceived librarians to be friendly when they were willing to find books for them, helped them to overcome difficulties they faced in the library, simplified library procedures for them, and called a cab or showed them the way when they were having difficulty. According to the participants of this study, receiving this kind of support creates a feeling of being cared for, being included, and belonging to the library, which evoked a positive attitude toward the librarians.

‘Once, I was trying to locate two books and one of the books was located in the medical library. So to borrow the book, I had to request it using the inter-library loan service. At that moment, I was afraid of using that service for the first time! But when I went to the counter, there was a lady librarian who was very kind, although she had a sharp tone of voice! What we called (he paused for a second) a bit irritating tone of voice, but she was very kind. She helped me and told me to just leave my number and when the library finds the book, her office would call me back. At that moment I felt I belong to this library!’ (Nasir, 21 years old)

‘The librarians are so friendly. They help me find my way in the library or the security guards at the library sometimes help get a taxi for me in front of the library. Also, the librarians helped to repair the lamp or fixed things which were faulty in my carrel.’ (Yacob, 37 years old)

‘...Friendly for me means if I ask any help from the librarian and they really cannot do anything, they would tell me why they cannot help me and this feedback makes me feel they want to help me and that they are not unwilling. I mean, sometimes they help me not because it is part of their job!’ (Mostafa, 24 years old)

Librarians who are helpful

The participants of this study felt that the librarians’ support created feelings of being valued, respected, accepted, and welcomed in the library. Accordingly, this caused them to feel included in their community. According to Cothran and Ennis (2000), one of the main factors that save individuals with special needs from isolation in any educational system is their sense of acceptance and welcoming that is created by teachers or librarians.
‘Librarians can value us by helping us to find our way in the library when we are lost or to find books for us.’
(Hadi, 22 years old)

‘... For me, a welcoming library is a place in which the librarians tries to help us and if we have any problems, we could approach them to help us and they would do their best to help us. In fact, when the librarians help us to search and find books on shelves, this shows their respect to those students who are visually impaired.’
(Amir, 31 years old)

‘... When we ask for some help, and the librarian voluntarily helps us without asking any questions, without any resentment, we feel the librarian respects us as visually impaired users!’
(Yacob, 37 years old)

Similarly, the visually impaired students felt that failure to help them to find books affects their attitude towards the library, and their psychological wellbeing. A lack of support from librarians to find books created a negative attitude amongst some of the visually impaired students, and this made them reluctant to seek help from the librarians.

‘I am seriously sorry to say it, but the reality is that sometimes the librarians refuse to help us to find books on shelves or from OPAC! Such a moment, I felt depressed and cried a lot...’
(Nurull, 29 years old)

‘Librarian support is very important for us to make library usage easier... However, I am not satisfied with the support given by some librarians... based on my experience, my assumption is that they will never help me. For example, I asked them how to search for the book and they just told me to go and search in the OPAC!’
(Jamal, 22 years old)

‘I feel disappointed when librarians [are] reluctant to help me. For example, when we search for a book and it is not on the shelf, we ask the librarian where it is and they answer, we don’t know maybe another student borrowed it and did not return it! I cannot understand why they [would] say such a thing!’
(Shams, 22 years old)

Moreover, the participants of this study disclosed that librarians who provided feedback on the status of their request strengthened their sense of inclusion to the library. They indicated feelings of losing trust in librarians who did not provide any feedback, especially after a long wait.

‘... We need a progress report from the librarian regarding our requests or complaints. It is most important because if they don’t tell us the progress, we lose trust in them! For example, sometimes we complain about the internet access problems and send the complaint to them. The librarian told us to just wait. Even after two or three month we still have not received any feedback from the librarian on why the server is down for such a long time. We want to know what progress or action has been taken by the librarian. Such behaviour causes us to lose trust in the library. This lack of being informed decreases our trust level!’
(Louvee, 28 years old)

The visually impaired students indicated that besides the physical facilities that the library provided for them, social support and friendly conversation will help them to feel more included in the library community.

‘The only thing we expect from the librarians is just to be nice and gentle with us and committed to us whenever we ask for their help so that we are satisfied with such help... Yeah we know the library has already provided us a lot of facilities, such as the carrels, but we still need supportive librarians to help us find books on the shelves. Such a supportive system will help us feel like we belong and are included in the library...’
(Nasir, 21 years old)

**Librarians who provided positive experiences**

Attitude is shaped by feelings, likes, dislikes, thoughts, and ideas that we have about other people and things that we see and experience in our daily lives. Attitude is, therefore, the product of emotions that are triggered from our experiences with people and things. In other words, attitude is the result of socialisation experiences that a person experiences in life (Loreman, 2001). The participants of this study shared their good experiences in the library, which helped them to shape their positive attitudes, and, consequently, their sense of inclusion as a member of the library community.

‘I remember the day I forgot to bring my carrel key! I just waited outside the carrel. One of the librarians came and asked me why I am standing outside the carrel? Do I want to register for a carrel? I told them that I am a new student and I had forgotten to bring my carrel key. He reassured me and helped me and opened my carrel with the master key.’
(Ahdiyeh, 22 years old)

‘The librarians are also helpful. When I want to return a book, they showed me the counter or open[ed] my carrel door when I forget to bring my carrel key, I only need[ed] to ask the librarian who [was] in charge of the...’
carrel and he quickly open[ed] the door.’ (Hadi, 22 years old)

‘When I came to the library to register for a carrel, the librarian who was in charge for carrels helped me a lot! He showed me how to go to my carrel, what is inside my carrel. One day, the librarian even guided me to my carrel when there was a renovation.’ (Atifah, 22 years old)

‘If I have any problem, I go directly in front of my carrel room where the counter is located and ask for some help. The librarians gave their contact number so that I can contact them if I have any problems in the library.’ (Mehran, 29 years old)

Librarians who consult
Consulting with library users who have special needs is vital for librarians to ensure that they are meeting their actual needs, (which consequently improves the library’s service quality), and to support their psychological well-being (Browell, 1998, McCaskill and Goulding, 2001, Forrest, 2006). As a result, this behaviour causes individuals with special needs to feel included, accepted, and important to the library community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, Hagerty et al., 1996, Osterman, 2000).

‘The librarians discuss and negotiate about issues, when we expressed being dissatisfied or unhappy about a situation. This makes us feel like a legitimate member of the library… when you see such a chance to discuss and negotiate about your complaints or dissatisfaction, you feel better. We often discuss and then make a decision together.’ (Amir, 31 years old)

‘When librarians consult with us [with] regards [to] the library services or about our needs, I feel they are really friendly because their behaviour shows us they [are] concern[ed] about our community … ’ (Narges, 23 years old)

Visually impaired students appreciate being able to meet with the librarians. The students perceived these meetings as evidence that the library respects them and this gesture makes them feel accepted. Loreman (2001) opined that an educational environment that evokes a positive atmosphere would make students feel respected and accepted.

‘… When librarians consult with us regards our difficulties in the library, I, by myself, perceive it as being accepted to the library community.’ (Jamal, 22 years old)

In this study, Mehran and Shams, similar to other members, expressed that being consulted by the library made them feel connected to the library, and this was important to them.

‘We feel connected to the librarian as we sometimes meet them to discuss about ways to improve the facilities and services for users who are visually impaired. The librarians asked us, “what is good for you, what is the best way to you, what can be improved for you” …’ (Mehran, 29 years old)

‘… When librarians form a good relationship with us, we feel connected to them, I mean [a] sense of being connected to the librarians is important for us to feel comfortable … ’ (Shams, 22 years old)

Librarians who have disability awareness
Based on the LIS literature, attitudinal barriers in comparison with physical barriers create more difficulties for individuals with special needs (Forrest, 2006). Furthermore, librarians are often unaware of the needs and limitations of visually impaired students using the library. Consequently, such unawareness may contribute to a lack of empathy, friendly manner, and reluctance in helping users with special needs (Pinder, 2005).

‘If librarians want to help us, they have to know more about our difficulties! When they are aware about us and our needs, they behave more friendly, so we will feel more comfortable to ask for their help!’ (Atifah, 22 years old)

‘… When librarians don’t have awareness, it creates some problems for us as they don’t understand our request, which frustrates us! For example, when we ask for the screen reader software or need a special information skill session for visually impaired students, I see the librarians being very hesitent about it! They were wondering how blind people can learn IT skill!’ (Yacob, 37 years old)

Accordingly, the participants suggested that librarians should increase their knowledge by attending courses or seminars on individuals with special needs.

‘I think librarians should [be] motivate[d] to increase their disability knowledge. The library can consider some advantages for those who have good disability
awareness, or they should consider some compulsory training for the librarians.’ (Nurull, 29 years old)

‘I believe the best way to improve disability awareness among librarians is to train them. They can collaborate with disabled NGO’s. Such NGO’s can assist them to become aware about our real needs, and how to communicate with us!’ (Narges, 23 years old)

Furthermore, the participants of the study indicated that librarians’ degree of awareness is one of the conditions that causes them to feel proud and welcomed in the library.

‘For me the welcoming library is a place where the librarians have good knowledge about the needs of their users with special needs.’ (Louvee, 28 years old)

‘Yes, the librarians’ degree of awareness cause [us to] feel proud and amazed of them . . . ’ (Amir, 31 years old)

Table 1 gives a summary of student attitudes towards the support given by the librarians and the feelings of inclusion that were triggered.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper highlighted the VIPs’ perceptions and experiences towards librarians and their role in their educational and social life. In this study, VIP students judged whether librarians were friendly based on their conversation, consultation, or negotiation regarding VIPs’ complaints and dissatisfaction (with the aim of improving the library services), their willingness to find books for them from OPAC or shelves, their ability to simplify library procedures, their willingness to call a cab or show the way, and giving feedback on the status of their request. As Woo (2005) discussed, the librarians’ behaviour, such as friendliness and willingness to assist users, is one of the main criteria in evaluating library service quality from a user’s perspective. Moreover, the participants of the study remarked that librarians’ friendly behaviour provided them with a sense of pride, and a feeling of being connected, accepted, valued, cared for, respected, and welcomed. This influenced their positive attitudes towards librarians, and fostered the creation of a sense of inclusion among them towards the library environment, further supporting the findings from previous studies (Clayden and Stein, 2005, Pockney, 2006, Jamieson, 2008).

Most importantly, the participants of the study highlighted the key influence of librarians’ disability awareness on their friendly behaviour. The VIPs indicated that a lack of disability awareness prevented librarians, especially front line librarians, to communicate with them efficiently and assist them effectively. A review of LIS literature supports the fact that front line librarians are often found to have little knowledge on how to communicate with or assist students with special needs in a library context (Broady-Preston et al., 2006). This is perceived as being a major barrier for library users (Holmes, 2008). The most important point that should be kept in mind is that, although front line librarians do not have the power to formulate any policy, they can still help in creating a positive impression of the library, and, therefore, would motivate users with special needs to use the library repeatedly. Over time negative feelings and perceptions towards librarians could cause the VIPs or other users with special needs to exclude themselves voluntarily from the mainstream library (avoiding interaction with the librarians and attending library activities) (Peters, 2007, Oxoby, 2009, Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2009). Moreover, a lack of disability awareness among front line librarians not only affects library service quality, but also could impact the behaviour of non-disabled peers towards their VIPs peers. In other words, the non-disabled peers mimic the front line librarians’ behaviour towards VIPs.

More interestingly, the participants of the study were mostly apologetic when they voiced their complaints regarding the front line librarians’ behaviour. Perhaps they realised that they might be asking for too much help and attention, which was beyond the role of frontline librarians who are too busy with their other formal duties. Such perceptions are the consequence of a lack of written and formal policies regarding librarians’ duties in providing VIPs with friendly support (Royal National Institute for the Blind, 1997). Accordingly, the lack of a written and clear policy causes the VIPs to feel guilty, preventing them from voicing out their real needs and requesting more help from the librarians. Over time these feelings can spread among the VIPs’ community as senior VIPs advise junior ones to try to be independent, solve their problems through their volunteer readers, and avoid as much as possible requesting help from the librarians. In this study, the researcher could not find any special policy formulated for visually impaired users in the library vision and mission statements. In fact, the researcher could only find information about the number and location of carrels for VIP users in the
Table 1. VIPs attitudes towards support from librarians and feelings of inclusion.

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<th>Situations</th>
<th>Types of feelings</th>
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<td>Guided to the borrowing counter</td>
<td>Informed</td>
<td>Being respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain about carrels and other facilities</td>
<td>Guided</td>
<td>A welcoming place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guide to the restroom</td>
<td>Respected</td>
<td>Belonging to the library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inform regarding progress of complaints</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unavailability of volunteer readers</td>
<td>Feel depressed</td>
<td>excluded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Refusal/reluctance of librarians to find books on shelves</td>
<td>Cried</td>
<td>Negative attitude towards librarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of librarians’ support to find books</td>
<td>Careless librarian</td>
<td>Sense of not being valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
<td>Not being considered</td>
<td>Sense of not being considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians who provided positive experiences</td>
<td>Open carrel door during an emergency</td>
<td>Reassured</td>
<td>Sense of being considered/valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make duplicate keys when keys are lost</td>
<td>Considered</td>
<td>Being valued</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enquire after their condition</td>
<td>Grateful</td>
<td>Being respected</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help return books</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Being accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guided to carrels</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being considered</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Act immediately upon receiving SOS from VIPs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Librarians who consult</td>
<td>Formal meetings</td>
<td>Reassured as a legitimate member</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal meetings at student’s carrels</td>
<td>Connected as given the opportunity to give opinions</td>
<td>Sense of being included/considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions and negotiations about issues</td>
<td>Feel better and feel welcomed</td>
<td>Sense of being accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coming to a consensus or an agreement</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Positive about being able to influence</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Respected</td>
<td>decisions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>Being respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feel connected</td>
<td>Being important to the community of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Connected to librarians because of the</td>
<td>disabled users</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>interactions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feel important as their opinions count</td>
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(continued)
library brochure, with no information found on the library website. Additionally, on one occasion the researcher was discussing the negative perceptions of special needs users towards some aspects of library services with a library manager who was in charge for VIPs services. The library manager said to researcher,

‘Why [did] you only ask them (the visually impaired) about the library? Why didn’t you ask us? They are not normal and cannot judge!’

This obviously depicted the lack of disability awareness among the library managers who were in charge of establishing the library policy.

The point that should be kept in mind is that social inclusion occurs in situations where students with special needs feel accepted because of the types of support that they receive from all members of the community (Stainback and Stainback, 1990). A sense of inclusion refers to a condition when an individual feels that their needs are important to the social system and they receive appropriate support and care from other members of the group (Osterman, 2000). Therefore, social inclusion initiatives lead to the targeted group feeling connected and belonging to their community. Appropriate social and emotional support is essential for students with special needs. This support would make them feel welcomed, valued, and accepted by members of the community. The outcome of a warm and supportive environment would increase interactions between members of a community, as well as across groups (Solomon et al., 1997). Furthermore, students who experience caring and supportive environments feel more connected to the system they are in, and, therefore, feel a sense of inclusion. This, in turn, influences the frequency of their participation and interactions within the environment (Salend, 2004). In this respect, Moore (2003) pointed out that the success of students with special needs in an educational system is mostly related to the type of emotional and social support they received. Emotional support helps students with special needs to use all of their potential talents to reach their educational goals. Accordingly, to support that type of feeling, an educational system should, in addition to optimising the physical aspect, consider how disabled students are treated by staff and peers in the system.

Furthermore, as Thomas (2004) discussed, the ‘psycho-emotional dimension of disability’ is a new dimension that was added to the social model of disability. This new dimension refers to barriers arising from the relationship between individuals in society based on their daily experiences. Negative experiences may influence and restrict the psycho-emotional well-being of individuals with special needs. Through prolonged or repetitive experiences of negative attitudes of non-disabled people towards them through daily interactions, individuals with special needs encounter internalised oppression. Such feelings prevent them from challenging societal boundaries, and may negatively affect their psycho-emotional well-being (Reeve, 2002). In this regard, Hanisch (2011) observed that the disabling process is not only what society cannot do, but it is also about what agents do to individuals with special needs. This means that the psycho-emotional well-being of individuals with special needs is more important than their participation or integration. Hanisch’s investigation indicated that enablement occurs through interpersonal connectedness, bonds, and friendship among individuals with special needs and with others in society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging Themes</th>
<th>Situations</th>
<th>Types of feelings</th>
<th>Triggers to Sense of Belonging</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Librarians who have disability awareness</td>
<td>Librarians’ lack of awareness</td>
<td>Concerns about librarians’ lack of awareness about visually impaired people's capability and limitations</td>
<td>Negative attitude towards librarians</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of care from librarians</td>
<td>Disappointed that staff shows a lack of understanding</td>
<td>Sense of being excluded/not being considered</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doubts of librarians about the ability of the visually impaired</td>
<td>Sad that librarians do not understand the real needs of VIPs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cooperating with other associations handling individuals with special needs</td>
<td>Feel frustrated</td>
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<td>Compulsory workshops</td>
<td>Feel amazed</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Feel proud</td>
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10 Information Development
Certainly, LIS is a caring science with the aim of promoting learning among library users through mixing theory and practice together. In this respect, Fasick and Halt (2008) noted that librarians are information caregivers who welcome and support users in their enjoyment of reading and their pursuit of lifelong learning. Based on Carl Rogers’s Self-Actualisation Theory, Higgins (2007) suggested that librarians should equip themselves with three main components to interact and enhance user efficiency: congruence (honest behaviour with users), empathy (viewing the world through a user’s perspective and understanding their feelings), and respect (unconditional acceptance of library users). According to the Jean Watson Human Care Theory, librarians can be defined as servant-leaders who listen to users, empathise with them, encourage them to develop their knowledge, focus on the community, and, most importantly, care about the users (Heaphey, 2006). The central idea of Watson’s theory is human values, such as concern, kindness, and love of self and others. She suggests that love of self reflects an individual’s sensitivity toward their feelings, thoughts, cultural and personal beliefs (such as racism, classism, sexism, etc.), and experiences achieved during work in their professional context. This sensitivity provides a proper foundation for librarians to fully present themselves to the users instead of hiding behind their notion of professional detachment (Watson, 1999). A love of others refers to an individual’s awareness regarding their caring relation (empathy and warmth that depicts their respect and acceptance regarding others), and interpersonal communication that will facilitate authentic communication, influence a helping-trust relation, and enable the others to express their emotions (Watson, 1997). Jean Watson’s Theory of Human Caring can be adopted to prepare service friendly librarians. According to this theory, librarians need to improve the culture of listening to the voice of users, provide more support, consider more ways to deal with users, and develop qualities of human caring in a library context.

LIS is a service based profession that offers various types of services to library users. Librarians, especially frontline librarians and reference librarians, are the ones who have the most interaction with library users and play a key role in creating their first impressions. A review of LIS literature indicates that less attention has been paid to the frontline librarian’s communication skills and disability awareness. In this respect, Afzal (2006) noted that while considerable LIS research has been devoted to examining the library system, less attention has been paid to library users (who use the designed system), the context within which users interact with librarians, librarians’ friendly assistance services, and their role in users’ psychological well-being. LIS professionals are aware that for librarians to work efficiently, two main categories of skills are needed: professional skills (content knowledge, IT literacy, providing cost-effective information services, organising and disseminating information, evaluating the outcome of information use, and improving library services), and personal skills (effective communication skills, networking skills, intellectual curiosity, being flexible and tolerant, a positive attitude, respects diversity, creative thinking, self-motivated, self-confidence, and assessment) (Nonthacumjane, 2011, Hashim and Mokhtar, 2012). Nevertheless, a glimpse at LIS courses highlights the fact that the types of skills (professional and personal), courses, and curricula offered to LIS educators are not sufficient. Although new LIS curricula have been added over time, especially with the advances in technology, key caring skills, such as communication skills and disability awareness, have been overlooked (Hamada and Stavridi, 2014). Accordingly, LIS stakeholders should familiarise, empower, and equip librarians with a caring philosophy, social and communication skills, and disability awareness. This could be achieved through specific courses for LIS educators, training sessions for librarians (disability awareness, nature and types of disability, and assistive technology training), and incentives for librarians to improve their communication skills, such as bonuses or promotion.

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