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Inclusion in the Library: a case study of accessibility in the Central Institutes in the North Eastern Region of India

Esther Moirangthem
Manipur University, Canchipur, Manipur, India, esther_18m@yahoo.com

Bobby Phuritsabam
Manipur University, Manipur, India, bobbyphster@gmail.com

INCLUSION IN THE LIBRARY: A CASE STUDY OF ACCESSIBILITY IN THE CENTRAL INSTITUTES IN THE NORTH EASTERN REGION OF INDIA

Esther Moirangthem

Research Scholar, Dept. of Library & Information Science, Manipur University, India
esther_18m@yahoo.com

Dr. Bobby Phuritsabam

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Library & Information Science, Manipur University, India
bobbyphster@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

With the creative advocacy of inclusion in every aspect of the society, Social Inclusion is now a universal concept and inclusivity in the library is no exception. An inclusive Library is an important element for an inclusive education and thereby, an inclusive society. Accessibility is the key concern when it comes to inclusion in the library. This study focuses on the various issues of accessibilities in selected academic libraries located in the North Eastern Region of India. This topic seems to be an underexplored study, especially in this region of the country. Therefore, it is high time to create a serious awareness about the importance of an inclusive library that supports the students with special needs in their quest for information and higher education. With this goal, the present study was undertaken to draw attention of the scientific community to the existing gaps in the library services to its users with special needs, especially in higher learning. This paper highlights the initial findings of a research study on the academic libraries in sixteen selected central institutes located in the North Eastern region of India, regarding their services to the persons with special needs. Various accessibility measures based on standard recommendations were studied to have a holistic approach towards inclusivity in these libraries. The study revealed the various barriers and constraints to accessibility and found that a proper framework of policy and a proper funding may well be the main solution in overcoming barriers to accessibility for this group of special people in their quest for knowledge.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Inclusive Education, Inclusive Library, Accessibility, Persons with Special Needs

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Inclusion is a universal concept, which is evident from the fact that inclusivity has become a priority in international policy discourse. It is the core of social development. According to the World Bank, social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society – improving the ability, opportunity and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. As defined by the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), an inclusive society is a society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play.The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted in 2006 is the highest instrument that focuses on an inclusive society that values, empowers and respect human diversity in all its form. This convention also strongly promote an inclusive education at all levels to ensure full development of human potential and instill a sense of dignity and self-worth so as to enable the persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society. In other words, an inclusive education is an important element in creating an inclusive society, as education provides the opportunity in young people to instill values of respect and appreciation of diversity and at the same time, empower those who are marginalized.

Long before social inclusion became a universal issue, libraries around the world had already embraced the commitment to equity and access for all its users irrespective of any kind of diversity, including people with physical impairment. Libraries play important role in increasing social inclusion of the people with special needs by providing the right information as per their need and making them well-informed and knowledgeable. Jaeger, 2018 mentioned that libraries stand as the most inclusive community institution inthe U.S. societyand have long included people with special needs as their community members.An important mandate of the library is providing equal access to information, in other words, equitable access to information resources. Accessibility and inclusion are at the very core of what libraries are all about. (Carter, 2004;Jaeger, 2015; Ruth, 2015). Therefore, it may be rightly stated that Libraries are the oldest institutions that practices inclusion.

2. Inclusion in the Academic Library

It is rightly affirmed that one of the main objectives of an inclusive library is to promote the rights of every user including people with special needs to be able to access information to develop their knowledge index and be independent and self-reliant (Gaur and Bhatt 2016).An inclusive library is very important to achieve an inclusive education and thereby an inclusive society. If libraries are considered as vehicles for community transformation, an evaluation needs to be done on how libraries are serving all of its patrons including the persons with special needs.

With the creative advocacy of inclusion in every aspect and appropriate support and awareness, young persons with special needs are now confident of their interest and ability in higher learning. However, different kinds of barriers haveoften discouraged them from continuing

higher educationand create a big hurdle. At such, the academic library plays an important role in creating a safe information haven for the students with special needs in their quest for knowledge. Dr. Radhakrishnan, an Indian Philosopher and former president had rightly said, "The Library is the heart of an academic institution". The Library as a repository of information sources acts as a centre for information resources and services to support learning, teaching, research and consultancy and helps in transforming information to knowledgein an academic community (Ukpanah, 2006). University libraries, as citadels of knowledge and the heart of higher learning institutions, should be at the forefront of removing all kinds of barriers hindering access to information(Majinge& Mutula, 2018).

3. Disability and Purpose of the study

The population of the differently-abled people in India is 26.8 million out of the 12.1 crore population which is 2.21% (as per the Census 2011, updated in 2016). Out of this, the North-Eastern region of India is home to 4.5 crore persons who live in the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, which is roughly 3.6% of India's total population, out of which 1.65% are disabled.

India, being a signatory of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act on 7th December 2016. Section 16 of this Act mandates the Government and the local authorities to provide inclusive education to the children with disabilities. Furthermore, Section 17 mandates to establish adequate resource centers to support educational institutions.

The North-Eastern region of India, houses a good number of central universities and institutes that promotes higher learning. However, an extensive literature survey reveals no literature on inclusive education and inclusive library in this region. This topic seems to be an underexplored study, especially in this region of the country. Therfore, it is high time to create a serious awareness about the importance of an inclusive library that supports the students with special needs in their quest for information and higher education. On this context, the main goal of the present study was to analyze how much the concept of inclusivity is being understood and practiced in these academic libraries by studying the various accessibility measures taken up. This research study is a small attempt to create awareness and draw attention of the scientific community to the existing gaps in the library services to its users with special needs as the academic libraries are the main libraries functioning actively in this part of the country.

4. Research Methodology

The present study is a case study in selected Central Institutes located in the eight north eastern states of India to have a holistic approach of the library services to the persons with special needs to study inclusivity; namely Assam University in Silchar, Assam, North-East Hill University located in Shillong and Tura, Meghalaya, Nagaland University, Nagaland, Manipur University, Manipur, Mizoram University, Mizoram, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim

University, Sikkim &Tezpur Univesity, Assamand some of the professional Institutes namely the National Institutes of Technology (NIT) located at Sikkim, Manipur and Nagaland, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (Assam), Indian Institute of Management, Shillong (Meghalaya) and the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal (Manipur).

At the beginning of the present study, a qualitative data collection was done by conducting a structured interview with the Librarians/ heads of the Library of the institutions.However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, interview could not be conducted physically and thereby;structured questionnaire in the form of Google Formswas employed to collect qualitative data.Telephonic Interview was also conducted where necessary.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are shown in the following figure.
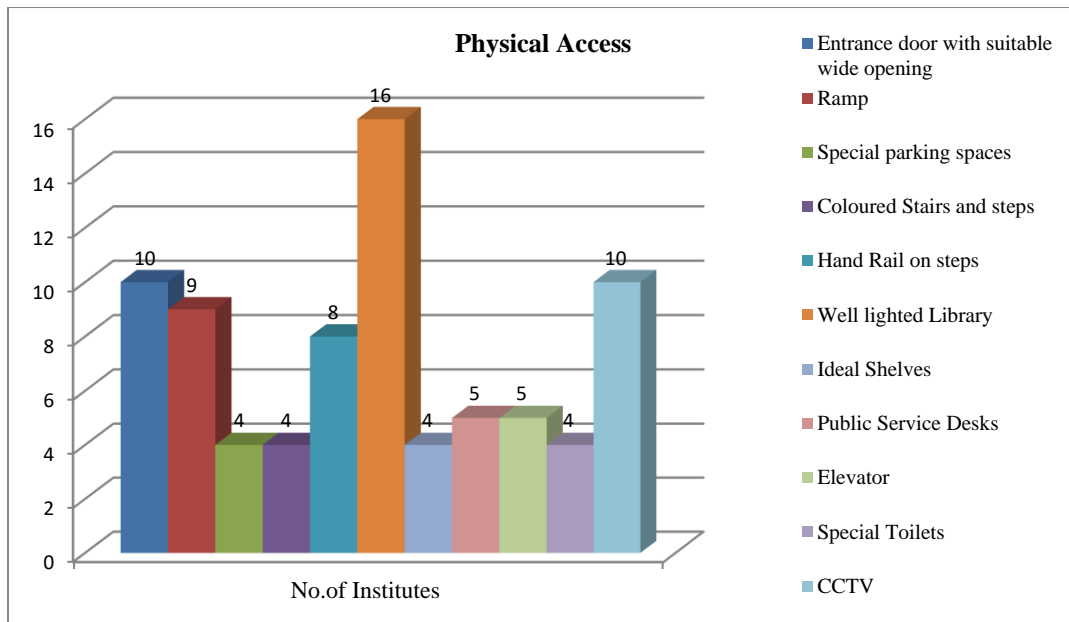
5.1 Administration
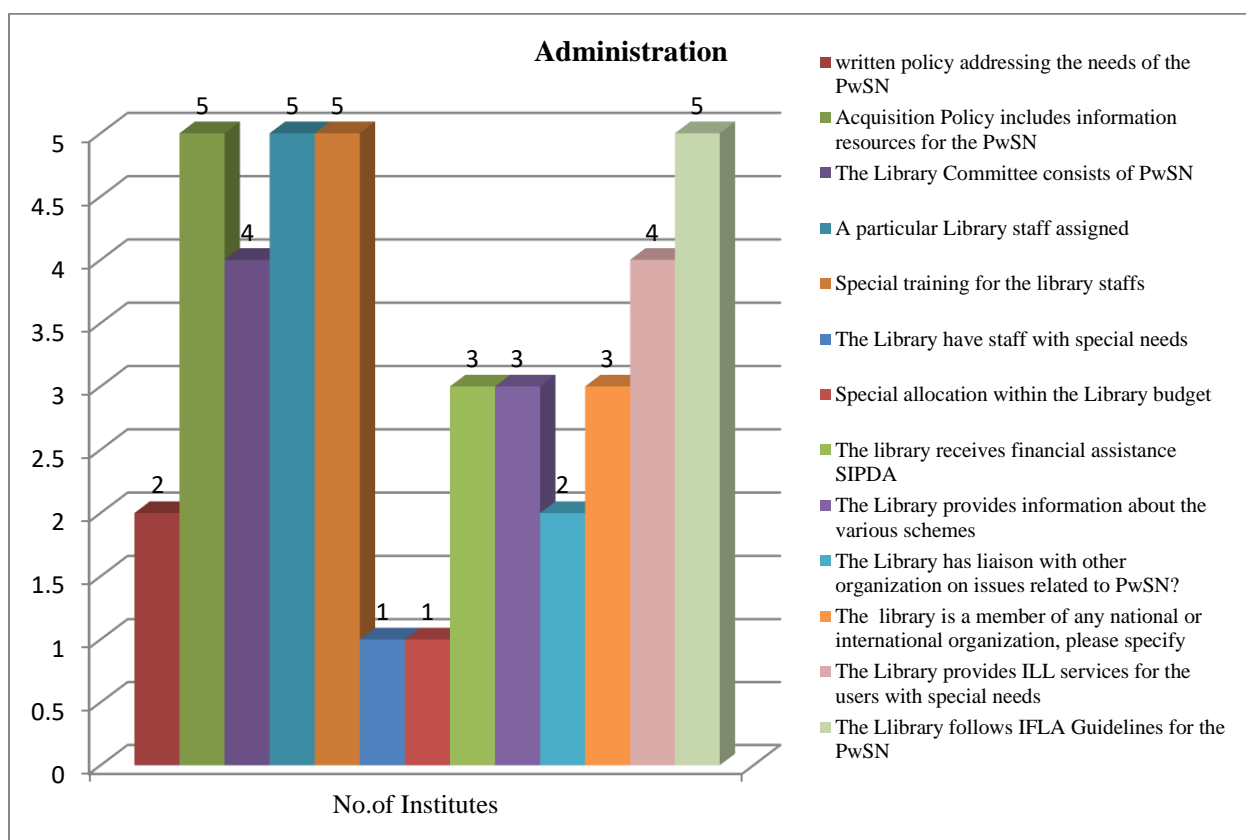
Figure 5.1: Administration

The administrative policy of a library is very important in defining the shape of the library and the roles it should play in providing the right services to the right users. The above figure shows the various administrative policies being followed in the libraries under study. The study reveals a lack of proper administrative policies for addressing the accessibility issues of the persons with special needs. Only two (12.5%) out of the 16 central libraries has a written policy for addressing the needs of the PwSN.A strong financial support is necessary to provide an accessible library services as this is a costly affair. However only one i.e. 6.25% out of the sixteen libraries has a special budget allocation within their Library budget for providing the special library services, which is why many libraries fail to provide an inclusive services to its users. Despite the government's effort to provide an inclusive education through its various schemes, only threei.e.18.75% of the Library receives financial assistance from the government under the SIPDA scheme. A strong awareness is very much needed at the top level of the institutes in order to address the issues of accessibility for the students with special needs. Only five which is 31.25% of the libraries under study follow some of the standard guidelines recommended by IFLA for the PwSNin their library administration.

5. 2. Physical Access to the Library Building

Figure 5.2: Physical Access

The second important thing after administration is how to enter the libraryeasily and safely without any difficulties in order to access the various information resources. For this a proper accessibility to the library building is very much necessary (Machado &Oliveir, 2021). The present study found most of the libraries under study follow some kind ofmodification in their

architectural structure with ten libraries i.e. 62.5% of the total 16 libraries adopting several measures for easy physical access to the library. However, this is not enough as none of the libraries are totally easily assessable overall. The figure above shows some steps followed by the institutes under study;entrance door with opening wide enough for the wheelchairs to enter easily (62.5%), ramps alongside doorsteps (56.3%), hand rails on the steps (50%) and parking space located close to the library specially marked for the PwSN (25%). Only five i.e.31.25 % of the libraries has elevators in the library; only four libraries i.e. 25% has special toilets for the users with special needs; and a good number of 62.5% has CCTV camera installed in the library. All the libraries under studyare well lit, though in terms of lighting.

5.3. Access to Library materials and services
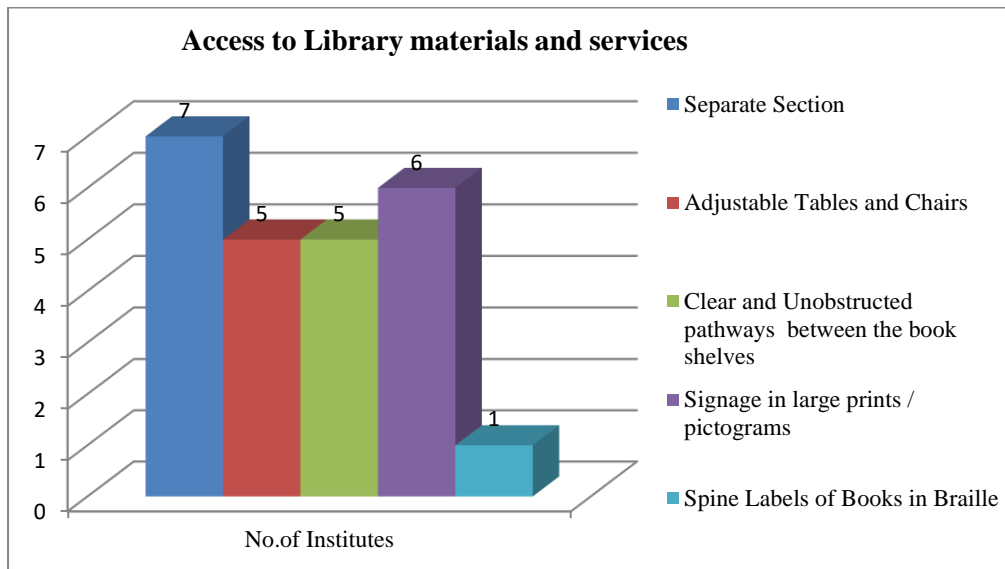
Figure 5. 3: Access to Library Materials and Services

Chaputula and Mapulanga (2016) in their study found that the challenges faced by the people with special needs in accessing libraries are compounded by the lack of facilities and equipments in accessing the library resources. The present study reveals a poor access to library materials and services; adjustable tables and chairs which are wheelchair friendly (only in five libraries i.e.31.25%); Clear and large print signage with pictograms for easy visibility (in six libraries i.e.37.5%) and only one library out of the sixteen libraries shows signage label in Braille for the visually challenged. However, seven libraries i.e. 43.7 % has allotted a separate section in the for providing special services to the PwSN.

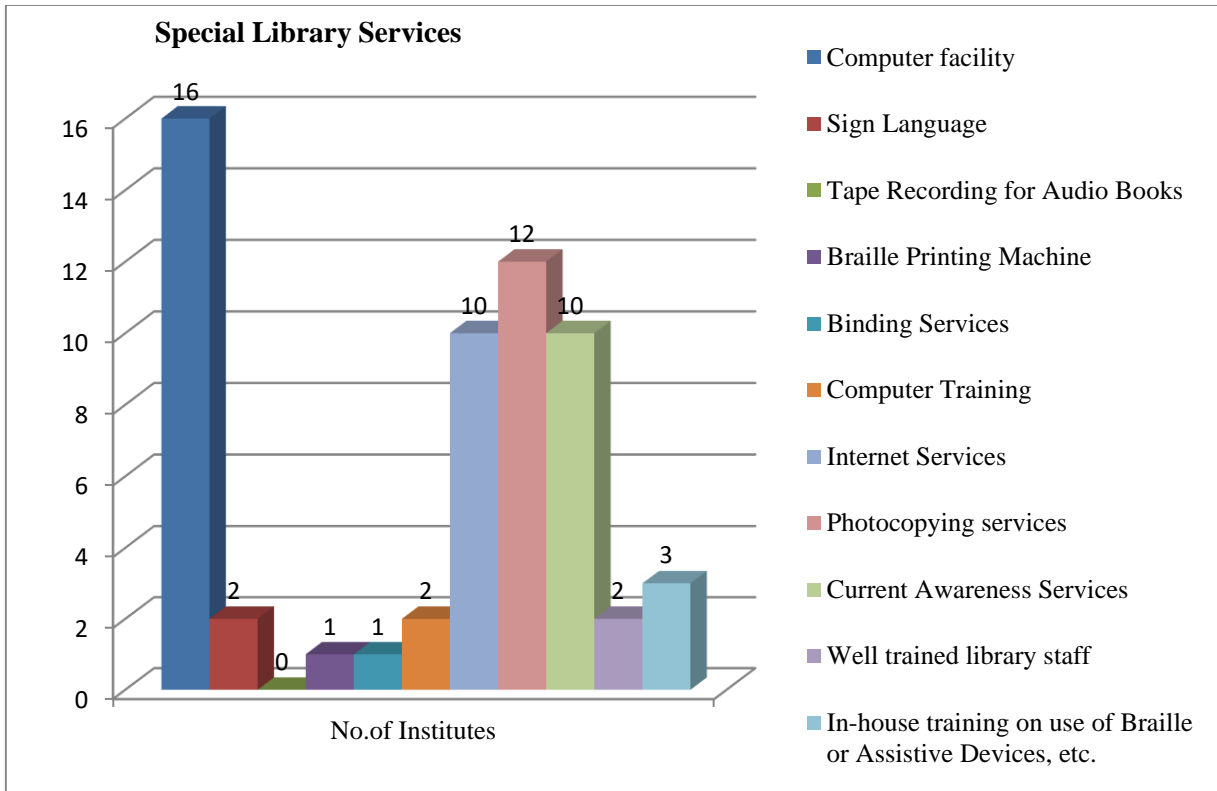## 5.4. Special Library Resources & Services
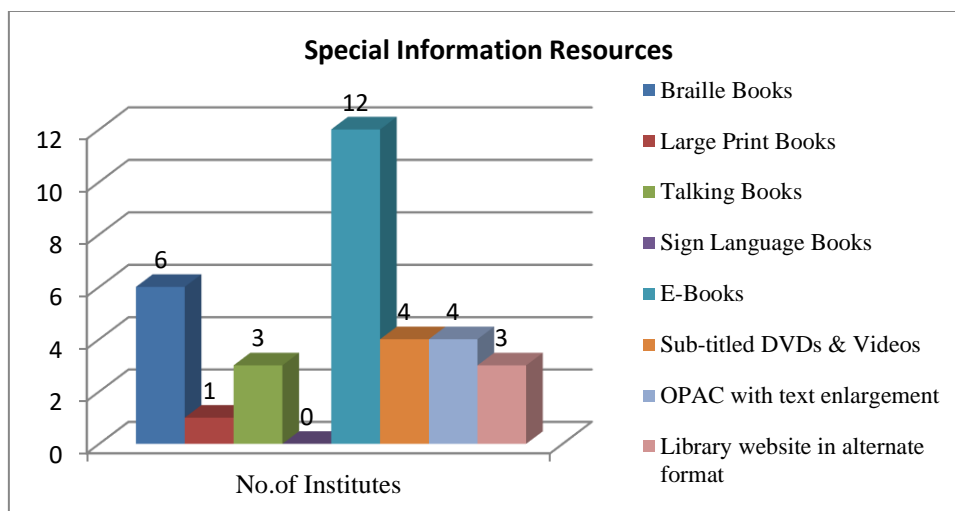
Figure5.4: Special Information Resources

The persons with special needs require information in special alternative formats. However, it is common problem in libraries particularly in developing countries that great bulk of library information is not available in accessible formats and thus information needs of persons with special needs are often unmet (Chaptula and Mapulanga, 2017; Ekwelem, 2013; Majinge and Stilwell, 2014; Rugaro, et.al. 2016). The same is noted in the present study as can be seen in the figure above which reveals a poor collection of special information resources. Only seven libraries (43.7%) have few Braille books, three libraries (18.75%) has audio books or talking books as they are called and only one library (6.25%) has large print book for the visually challenged users. None of the libraries under study has any kind of resource for the speech impaired. For the hearing impaired, only four libraries have a collection of sub-titles DVDs and Videos. Nonetheless, electronic books are available in most of the libraries i.e., twelvelibraries (75%). Another four libraries provide the facility of text enlargement or speech synthesis system with the library OPAC and four libraries provide the facility of library webpage in alternate format i.e., with text enlargement and speech synthesis.

5.5. Special Library Services

Figure 5.5: Special Library Services

With the advancement of technology, computer facility has become an essential facility in the library to access information, which can be seen in all the sixteen libraries. However, internet facility is being provided only in ten libraries (62.5%) and computer training for the PwSN in two libraries (12.5%) only. Only two libraries (12.5%) provide sign language facility for the speech impaired; none has the facility of producing or preparing Audio books and only one library has Braille printing machine for printing Braille books for the visually challenged. Lacey and Smith (2005) found from their study that not only do libraries require special inclusive resources for lending but staff also requires sufficient training to meet the needs of PwSN. Disability awareness training can upgrade the quality of frontline services delivered to users with special needs. However, only two libraries (12.5%)have specially trained staffs assigned to guide the PwSN in accessing library services. Other services provided are book binding (6.25%), photocopying services (75%) and Current Awareness Services (62.5%). Library Orientation programmes and training and workshops on use of Assistive Technology is rarely done in the libraries under study except in three libraries.

5. 6. Assistive Technology
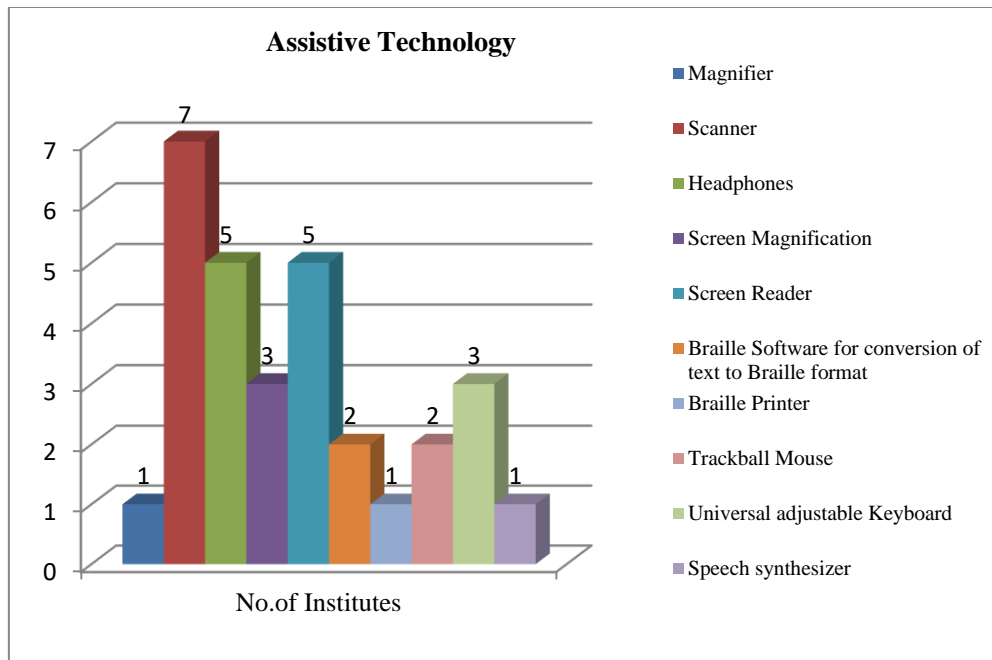
Figure5.6: Assistive Technology

It is rightly observed byMajinge and Stilwell (2013) that the information services provided by academic libraries for people with special needs in most developing countries tend to be ineffectual due to lack of proper formats of information and assistive equipments. The present study also reveals that the libraries under study have little collection of assistive devices or none at all; magnifier (in one library i.e. 6.25%), Braille Printer to print text in Braille format (in one library i.e. 6.25%), Headphones for Audio Books (in five libraries i.e. 31.25%), Screen Magnification or Enlargement Software (in three libraries i.e. 18.75%), Braille Software for conversion of Text to Braille format (in two libraries i.e. 12.5%), Trackball Mouse (in two libraries i.e. 12.5%), Universal adjustable keyboard (in three libraries i.e. 18.75%), Speech Synthesizer with Speech Output (only in IIT, Guwahati i.e. 6.25%) are some devices for assisting the visually challenged users. Despite all the libraries providing computer facility, only five libraries are equipped with Screen Reading Software with which a visually challenged user can operate a computer.

5.7. Library Management Software used in the Library
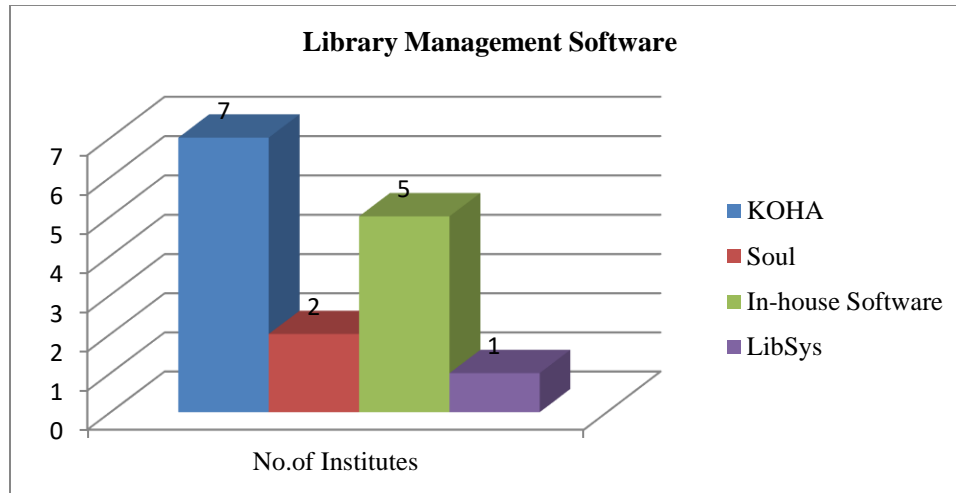
Figure 5.7: Library Management Software

All the sixteen libraries under study are using Library Management software to manage their library database except for one. The above chart shows the different kinds of software being used in their libraries. KOHA Library management software is the most widely used software with seven libraries (43.7%) using it. Five (31.25%) of the libraries are using in-house software i.e. tailor made according to the library needs namely TLSS in Mizoram University, VTLS in IIM, Shillong, Master in NIIT, Manipur and iskool in NIT, Dimpaur. Two libraries (12.5%) are using SOUL and only one library (6.25%) is using LibSys for their library management.

5.8 Constraints faced in providing special services
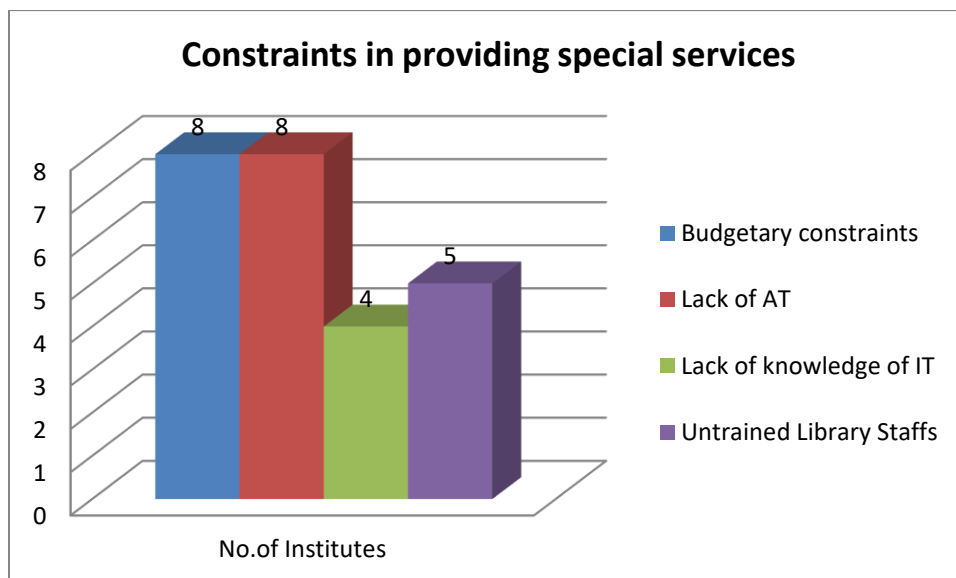
Figure 5.8: Constraints in providing special services

The figure shows the various constraints faced by the Libraries under study in providing special library services to its users with special needs. The most common problem is financial constraints (50%) due to lack of proper or low budget and lack of assistive technology (50%) as observed in the present study. Another four libraries (25%) declare lack of knowledge of Information Technology as a constraint. Lack of specially trained staff also create hurdle in facing the users with special needs and their information needs as claimed by five libraries (31.25%). All the constraints mentioned above are directly or indirectly related to the budgetary constraints as a proper fund or budget is required to provide special services.8

5.9. Reasons for failure to provide special services
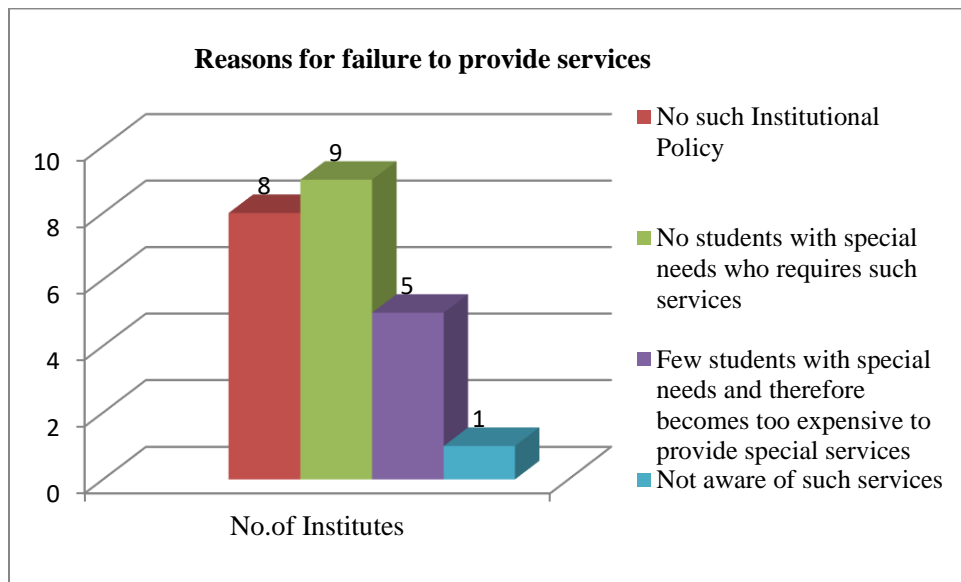
Figure 5.9: Reasons for failure to provide special services

The above data shows some of the reasons cited by the libraries under study for their failure in providing special services to their users with special needs. 50% of the libraries claims lack of administrative or institutional policy as the first and foremost reason; 56.25% cited lack of students with special needs who requires specialized library services which shows lack of awareness among the youths with special needs in this region of the country; another 31.25% explains less number of students with special needs and therefore becomes too expensive due to budgetary constraints; and one library i.e. 6.25% declares unawareness of such special service.

Conclusion

It is noted from the present study that there is little or no effort to fully practice social inclusion in the library due to several factors and reasons as discussed above. There is no proper policy of library administration and acquisition; inadequate accessibility in terms of library building; lack of proper access to library materials and resources;dearth of accessible information materials and assistive devices; lack of specially trained staffs to deal with the persons with special needs; etc. All these are directly or indirectly related to lack of proper funding and budget and also attitudinal problem of the higher authority. Thereby, most of the libraries of the Central Universities and Institutesunder study are not adequately equipped to serve the information needs of the students with special needs.Among the central institutes under study, the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Shillong, Meghalayais the only institute that offers maximum accessibility in terms of the administrative policy, library building, special information resources, Assistive Technology, etc. followed by IIT Guwahati, Assam, which provides a wall mounted book drop outside the library for easy access.

Unless serious commitment to library inclusivity is demonstrated at a national level by the higher authority, there will be little progress in realizing equal access to libraries which will affect inclusive education (Rogaro, et.el. 2016). The researchers feel that a serious attention is needed towards developing inclusivity in the academic library at a national level. For this, a proper and a separate funding especially for developing inclusive libraryis very much necessary to achieve these initiatives as lack of fund is the most important constraint in providing equal access as observed in this study. Ultimately, when all these are achieved, only then the Librarians will be able to create a world of opportunity for this group of special people and help them play their part in the social development of the nation.

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