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**SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG VISUALLY IMPAIRED
STUDENTS IN A UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IN MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

A sense of belonging is essential in inducing individuals with disabilities to either voluntarily or involuntarily exclude or include themselves from the library community. Previous studies about the visually impaired in libraries were library focused, either benchmarking services offered against available standards and practices or surveying the types of services or facilities made available by libraries to their disabled users. Very few studies examined the issues from the visually impaired own perspectives. This study examines the beliefs, experiences and perceptions of belonging among the visually impaired students in the context of an academic library in Malaysia. This study applied the social model of disability and uses the qualitative approach to derive themes and sub-themes relating to feelings of belonging based on visually impaired students' interpretations of their daily life experiences in using the library facilities and services. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The participants were eighteen visually impaired students who had registered as members of the university library and who had consented to be involved in the study. The contact period was 7 months. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, peer review, external expert audit and the researcher's own reflexivity. Two main themes intrinsic and extrinsic conditions emerged. Intrinsic conditions refer to participants' feelings towards library policies, library staff and their peers. Their sense of belonging was triggered when they felt respected and comforted by library policies that gave them longer borrowing periods, the availability of liaison staff who met them periodically, who asked for their feedback about issues that can improve the library services for them. Participants felt included and safe with library staff who showed awareness and empathy about their disability and therefore more open to help them. Participants felt happy and belong when peers and staff communicated with them thereby expanding their social interaction skills and networks. Extrinsic conditions refer to the participants' feelings about the library facilities, services and design layout. The visually impaired students felt comfortable, proud, accepted and valued when their special needs for carrel rooms, laboratories and toilets were provided. Participants felt that they have a feeling of belonging when the library provided special lifts for them to move between floors, the use of appropriate assistive technologies to access the OPAC and the Internet. Participants appreciated the library services such as managing their volunteer readers, support of special librarians, and special information skill session, and regarded these as an indication of being respected, supported and

accepted and these influence their sense of belonging and being included into the library community. Participants also voiced their concerns about the barriers they experience in the library and made suggestions for improvements. This study highlights the conditions that could foster sense of belonging to a library and the findings would be useful for library management to take note to formulate better disabled-friendly policies, and plan better library services and facilities for their visually impaired users.

ABSTRAK

Semangat kekitaan adalah penting untuk mendorong seseorang yang kurang upaya untuk secara sukarela mengasingkan diri atau menyertai dalam komuniti perpustakaan. Kajian lepas mengenai mereka yang terjejas penglihatan dalam konteks perpustakaan telah fokus kepada perkhidmatan perpustakaan, samada menanda aras perkhidmatan yang diberikan dengan piawaian dan amalan atau mengkaji jenis perkhidmatan atau kemudahan yang disediakan oleh perpustakaan untuk mereka yang kurang upaya. Terdapat kurang pengkajian yang memeriksa isu ini dari perspektif pengguna perpustakaan yang kurang upaya. Kajian ini meneliti kepercayaan, pengalaman dan persepsi rasa kekitaan di kalangan pelajar yang terjejas penglihatan dalam konteks sebuah perpustakaan akademik di Malaysia. Kajian ini menggunakan model sosial kurang upaya dan pendekatan kualitatif untuk mendapatkan tema dan sub-tema yang berkaitan dengan perasaan kekitaan berdasarkan interpretasi dan pengalaman harian pelajar terjejas penglihatan apabila menggunakan kemudahan dan perkhidmatan perpustakaan. Maklumat dikumpulkan melalui temu-bual berstruktur dan perbincangan dalam kumpulan berfokus. Peserta kajian adalah lapan belas pelajar yang terjejas penglihatan yang telah mendaftar sebagai ahli perpustakaan sebuah universiti dan yang telah memberi kebenaran untuk melibatkan diri dalam kajian. Tempoh hubungan adalah tujuh bulan. Boleh kepercayaan ditentukan melalui penglibatan yang berpanjangan, semakan oleh ahli temubual, semakan rakan sebaya, pengauditan pakar luar, dan renungan penyelidik sendiri. Dua tema utama muncul, iaitu keadaan-keadaan intrinsik dan ekstrinsik. Keadaan-keadaan intrinsik merujuk kepada perasaan pelajar terhadap polisi perpustakaan, staf perpustakaan dan rakan sebaya. Semangat kekitaan dicituskan apabila mereka merasa dihormati dan selesa dengan polisi-polisi yang disediakan oleh perpustakaan seperti memberi kemudahan meminjam buku untuk tempoh yang lebih panjang, menyediakan staf penghubung yang menemui mereka dari masa kesemasa, staf yang mendapatkan maklumbalas dari mereka mengenai isu-isu yang boleh meningkatkan perkhidmatan perpustakaan. Peserta kajian merasakan pandangan mereka diambilkira dan merasa selamat dengan staf yang menunjukkan kesedaran dan empati terhadap kekurangan mereka dan akan lebih terbuka untuk membantu mereka. Peserta merasa gembira dan timbul rasa kekitaan apabila rakan sebaya dan staf perpustakaan berkomunikasi dengan mereka dan dengan ini meluaskan kemahiran berinteraksi dan rangkaian sosial mereka. Keadaan-keadaan ekstrinsik merujuk kepada perasaan peserta kajian terhadap kemudahan, perkhidmatan dan rekabentuk susun atur perpustakaan. Pelajar yang terjejas penglihatan merasakan selesa, bangga, diterima dan dinilai apabila

keperluan khas disediakan untuk mereka seperti bilik karek, makmal dan tandas khas. Peserta merasakan semangat kekitaan apabila perpustakaan menyediakan lif khas untuk mereka bergerak dari tingkat ke tingkat, diberikan penggunaan teknologi bantuan untuk mengakses OPAC dan Internet. Peserta kajian menghargai perkhidmatan yang diberikan seperti menguruskan pembaca sukarela mereka, sokongan dari pustakawan khas dan pemberian sesi kemahiran maklumat khas dan menganggap perkhidmatan tersebut sebagai tanda bahawa perpustakaan menghormati, menyokong, menerima mereka dan anggapan ini mempengaruhi perasaan kekitaan dan mereka termasuk dalam komuniti perpustakaan. Peserta kajian juga menyuarakan kebimbangan terhadap halangan yang mereka alami di perpustakaan dan memberikan cadangan untuk penambahbaikan. Kajian ini membangkitkan keadaan-keadaan yang boleh memupuk perasaan kekitaan kepada sebuah perpustakaan dan dapatan mungkin berfaedah untuk pengurusan perpustakaan ambil kira apabila membentuk polisi yang mesra pengguna kurang upaya dan meningkatkan perancangan perkhidmatan dan kemudahan perpustakaan kepada pengguna yang terjejas penglihatan.

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