

Investigating the use of online information resources by visually impaired undergraduates during the pandemic period: a case study at University of Colombo

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During the pandemic period, undergraduates were not able to access library resources physically; therefore, they were heavily depending on online resources. All students faced challenges to access online resources provided by Library. Students with visual impairment were not exception facing these challenges. This study was conducted with the objectives of identifying the online information resources used by the visually impaired (VI) undergraduates, their awareness of resources and challenges faced by them. Total number of 37 undergraduates in all four years at University of Colombo were selected as sample. Interviewer-moderated questionnaire survey was conducted to collect data and the data collected were descriptively presented and conclusions were drawn based on thematic content analysis. Out of 37, total number of 27 undergraduates participated in the interview at the rate of 73%. There were 15 female students and 12 male students. Majority of the respondents (18) were in age group of 23-26 years. Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), Library online helpline facility, Online databases, Library webinar series, Single Sign On (SSO) facility to download articles, library website, library Facebook and library YouTube channel were identified as the online resources used by the VI undergraduates. Among these identified resources majority of the respondents stated that they were aware about library OPAC (33%) and the least known resources were Webinar Series (7%). Online journal databases (26%) and library website (26%) were the online resources highly used by the VI undergraduates. The least used resource was the library YouTube (4%). Lack of awareness, issue in accessing several web contents, lack of suitable assistive devices, lack of skills in using the Internet, and lack of proper Internet connectivity were main challenges stated by the respondents. Accordingly, conducting awareness on library online resources, training on the Internet literacy and information literacy skills, and verifying whether the content could be read by screen readers when developing web pages have been recommended. Visually impaired students should be made aware more of help line service or Ask a Librarian services since they are more helpful in times of restricted physical access to library resources. These proactive approaches and improvements may help VI users tap their necessary information during inaccessible times like pandemic lockdowns.

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