

Investigation of the Current Situation and Problems of Libraries and Information Service Institutions for Visually Impaired Person in Thailand

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Abstract

With increasing concern over the difficulties in accessing information resources of people with visual impairment, several research studies suggested putting more efforts into the collaboration issue and models locally and globally. However, this seems to be in the embryonic stage in Thailand caused of several obstacles. This study aims to investigate the existing context related to various aspects of service operations for the blind. Exploratory research was used to collect data from 15 libraries and information service institutions in Thailand using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were data analysis tools. Findings of the research showed there were five major areas of organizational problems and requirements. The study also attempts to propose a guideline for collaborative network initiatives based on the requirements.

Keywords: Visually impaired person, Libraries and information service institutions, Collaborative network, Organizational problems and requirements

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Introduction

Libraries and Information Service Institutions are of importance and play a significant role in providing equal access to information regardless of race, religion, expression, disability, and other diverse backgrounds. This statement complies with Glasgow Declaration stated in the International Federation of Library and Institutions-IFLA in Scotland, which declares the right of freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. The people stated in this declaration also include people with visual impairment (IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section-IFLA/LBS, 2003; United Nations, 2016).

There are libraries and information service institutions for people with visual impairments, which have been continuously developed by various agencies, organizations, and foundations. These libraries and institutions were initially used to provide information services independently. After that, they were subsequently used for constructing a collaborative network for the dissemination of information to people universally and effectively (Library of Congress, 2011). For example, in the U.S.A., the Boston Public Library is the first institute that provided a bas-relief book, later known as Braille Books, for people with visual impairments in 1868. Following the Boston Public Library, the Library of Philadelphia, the Chicago Library, the New York Public Library, and the Detroit Public Library started to provide this service respectively. Another important event happened in 1931 when the American Congress founded the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS/BPH). This institution is serving as the nation's center for providing services and disseminating information for people with visual impairments, establishing cooperation between libraries and other institutions on the copyright information resources for reading, borrowing-returning services, setting standards, and quality assurance. Currently, the national libraries for people with visual impairments have served all American people, both living in the United States and outside the US, through the cooperative network between national libraries. This network was initially started with 19 libraries in 1931, and today there are 113 libraries across the United States. The American Congress allocates a budget for libraries annually, whereas the regional and sub-regional libraries are also funded by federal states and local governments.

The same as the United Kingdom, the Royal National Institute of Blind People (Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2014-2022) was founded in the same year as the Boston Public Library which first provided Braille books in 1868. The Royal National Institute of Blind People typically known as RNIB National Library Service or RNIB/ NLS, was founded by RNIB in 2007, and this library is considered the largest library for people with visual impairments. The objective of this library is to provide blind people with the opportunity to read books and access the information they need as normal people. The RNIB plays an important role in establishing cooperation between libraries and other institutions by providing a database of reading materials, building a platform for academics to share their expertise, and converting printed media and other types of media into formats that are suitable for people with visual impairments.

Whereas, in Thailand, only a limited number of libraries and information service institutions for visually impaired persons have been provided by The Thai government, compared to other types of libraries. Furthermore, the information services provided by these libraries are typically inefficient and cannot meet the total needs of all users. The research on information services and access to visually impaired persons shows that there are insufficient braille books and audiobooks for people with visual impairment as the process of publishing these media is complicated and requires a significant number of resources (Bureau of Information and Communication Technology, Ministry of Education, 2005; Vichit, 2010; Asvapoositkul, 2014; Kawai, 2017). Moreover, the research by (Netayawijit, Taumsuk, & Kwiecien, 2019) revealed that the information behavior of disabled people including the blinds has changed due to the development of information technology. The disabled users now intend to access the information via the internet on their own.

A collaborative network of libraries and information service institutions for visually impaired people can be one of the main strategies for solving this issue, however, the research about collaborative networks for libraries for the blind is limited. This research, therefore, studies the current status and problems that occurred in the collaborative network in Thailand, the future needs of both executives and employees. The study is then synthesized and summarized in order to indicate the potential solutions for a collaborative network of libraries and information service institutions for the visually impaired person.

To understand the collaboration within this network, the study analyzed the library/institutional and collaborative process of the existing context. The main objective of this study is to investigate the current context at both the organizational and network-level regarding problems and collaboration. The specific research questions were:

RQ1. What is the current status of service operation, and the collaboration situation in the libraries and service institutions?

RQ2. What aspects are required for the development of the collaborative network?

Literature Review

A. Visually impaired person

A visually Impaired Person, as defined in the Royal National Institute of Blind People (2016) is a person with partial vision, either in one or both eyes. According to the reports published by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, there are 191,965 people with visual impairment, and 187,534 out of these, accounting for 97.6%, do not have access to education. The quality of life of this group of people can be significantly improved if they have an opportunity to get access to all information services by themselves. The number of libraries and information service institutions for visually impaired people plays a vital role in providing free access to all information resources. The number of these libraries and institutes in Thailand however is limited, and the number of people working in this industry and the government budget is scarce so there are insufficient media and resources for the needs of visually impaired people.

Generally, the information service for visually impaired people consists of information resources services and information access services (Asvapoositkul, 2014). The information resources service is a production and providing information resources in a specific format that is suitable for the blinds. These information resources are including audiobooks, Braille books, large print books, tactile pictures which are produced by the library, and the information service center for the blind. (Kawai, 2017) Additionally, the production of information materials for the blind can be one kind of information service for the library and information center, especially the library in an academic institution where the production of teaching and learning materials are processed by user requests.

The other, information access service, is intended to provide general library services such as circulation service, reference services and to give the user assistive technology service as a tool to access information. The assistive technology service is the service that provides borrowing services of essential reading aids and equipment such as Braille notes, IC Recorder, and laptops. Moreover, computer and software skills training to assist blinds people to read and access information on their own is provided (Asvapoositkul, 2014).

B. Collaborative Network among libraries and service institutions

The library collaboration network is a collection of libraries to cooperate in various activities considering the mutual benefits of the network and the users and to promote library operations. Characteristics of cooperative activities are the exchange or sharing of information, training, or supporting the operations such as joint procurement of information resources, or cooperative project for working on journal indexing. There are many collaboration models applied to library network development which are varied by participants, users, geographical area, or subject coverage. There are many models of a consortium that were proposed such as subject-based consortia, regional-based consortia, or groups formed for the purchase of specific products. (Ghosh, Biswas, & Jeevan, 2006)

To make a collaborative network successful, there are many essential elements (Gorman & Cullen, 2000), for example, commitment from top management, a formal governing structure, staff participation, and adequate funds. Moreover, the study of strategic cooperation and consortia building for Indian libraries by Ghosh and Jeevan (2006) also suggested top ten issues that the libraries should be considered to streamline their consortia such as commitment to cooperation, type of agreement, budget and funding, the skill of planning, organization, and administration, and ego and attitude of consortia members.

From the study of network cooperation of libraries for the visually impaired at the international level, it is found that a network of cooperation has been established to work together in the production, procurement, and services of information resources. It is the cooperation between the libraries agreeing among themselves or between other types of libraries such as public libraries, national libraries, etc. The network abroad for information services to the visually impaired, including the United States, United Kingdom, China, Singapore, is a national cooperation network that is supported in terms of

policy or budget from the government. Moreover, the administration of cooperation is carried out by the central authority.

Regarding of situation of libraries for the blind in Thailand, the libraries are operated by education institutions and foundations for the blind. Each library has collaboration in a non-formal way with other libraries to share information resources or joint media production such as audiobooks or braille materials. There is no central organization to operate the collaboration.

C. Knowledge sharing and collaborative technologies

There is no doubt that efficient collaboration relies upon timely and effective flows of knowledge among individuals and organizations. Knowledge sharing is a process or activity through which skills or expertise are exchanged among people within and between organizations so that members will be able to work effectively together. Without exception, libraries and information service institutions need knowledge sharing to encompass exchange ideas, insights, and innovations through mutually beneficial activities (Igwe & Ugocha, 2018).

To enhance knowledge sharing with others, collaborative technologies are tools and systems that facilitate group work, allowing members to perform a variety of tasks remotely. For example, a collaborative workspace can bring teams into a shared workspace to conduct their projects in real-time. A collaborative network can be promoted through discussions and sharing of new knowledge using communication and conference tools, project management tools, document sharing, and knowledge base tools (Lopes, Oliveira, & Costa, 2015). Libraries and information service institutions gain benefits from networking groups in both collective development and library systems management such as shared database and portal, streaming resources, and cloud-sourced discovery systems.

Research Methodology

A mixed-method approach was used in the study and conducted using the following steps: (1) theoretical approaches and related research literature were studied from documents, textbooks, articles, and research studies, and (2) questionnaire and an in-depth interview of 15 libraries and service institutions including 15 executives and 15 operational officers about the current context of a collaborative network as well as the analysis of the future plan. These libraries and service institutions were selected

from websites and reports, which are the results of a survey on information about the promotion and development of service systems to support students with disabilities in higher education institutions under the office of the higher education commission, the academic year 2018. The selected institutions must have at least ten students with visual impairment (Office of Student Promotion and Development, Ministry of Education, 2019). The instrument used for data analysis included: (1) descriptive statistics using Excel. (2) Keyword extraction of collaborative network members. Data were analyzed by classifying the questionnaire data into different issues and topics. The conceptual framework of the research is shown in Figure 1

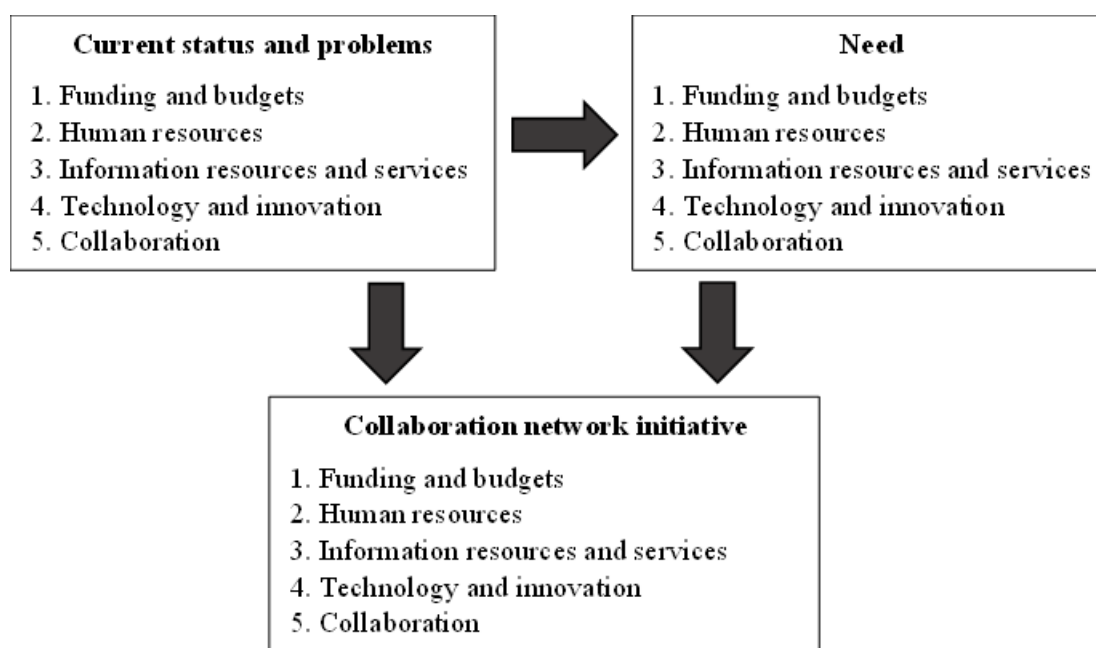


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

From Figure 1, as collaboration development depends on the need and readiness of members in the network, this framework shows an important factor that reflects the operation of libraries and information service institutions for visually impaired people and the needs of users (Asvapoositkul, 2014) that researchers need to be considered in the study. The topics are funding and budgets, human resources, information resources and services, technology and innovation, and collaboration. The proposed collaboration

network can be initiated by each topic based on the study that will fit the library's needs and maximize the capabilities of library service for the blind.

Findings

The study investigates the current context and problems of the collaborative network of 15 libraries and service institutions in Thailand. The requirements for enhancing the collaborative development of this network are also analyzed. To answer the research questions, the findings would be categorized into 2 main issues: the current context and problems and the collaborative network initiative.

A. Current context and problems

The results revealed that the aspect of human resources was raised the most critical problems by the participants. The problems with personnel are a shortage of staff and a lack of skills in information technology, information organization, and media production, respectively. These problems also affect other operational tasks. For example, there are insufficient information resources due to a lack of media production skills. Other key problems were lacking technological equipment and no formal collaboration policy. So, different collaborative activities to enhance resource sharing and skills improvement are vital factors in optimizing library operations. More detailed explanations of each element can be summarized as followings.

1. Funding and budgets: According to the response from 15 libraries and information services on the last 5-year budgets, most of the libraries received a hundred thousand Thai baht for their annual budget, whereas some of them received a million Thai baht for their annual budget, and the rest, which is only a limited number of libraries, received only ten thousand Thai baht for their annual budget. Most of the budget spending was on salary and information resources acquisition. The results also found that the libraries affiliated with the foundation still have a shortage of budget for reading aids maintenance, an inflexible budget and some of the funding needs to be prepared in the long term. While some of the libraries affiliated with education institutions encountered limited budgets from budget cuts by their affiliation. These budgets however are not enough to run the medium-to-large scale projects.

2. Human resources: The results found that most of the staff in libraries for the blind in Thailand possessed a degree in education. Most of the libraries in the study reported that they encountered

insufficient numbers of staff and technology specialists. This insufficient, lack of assistive technology proficiency and unqualified staff can lead to a shortage and delay of information media services for a visually impaired person.

3. Information and service resources: As most of the libraries for the blind in Thailand are affiliated with educational institutions both at the school and higher education level, the research found that information resources for education support are in need. Whereas information resources for pleasure reading are provided by libraries affiliated with foundations for the blind. Information resources are in many formats, for example, audiobooks and braille materials. However, most of the libraries in the study face the problem of a shortage of information resources due to insufficient budget and personnel, and a lack of tools and suitable technologies to produce braille or audiobooks materials.

There are 2 types of information services provided in libraries and service institutions to support the blind: information resources production and information access. Most of them generally use the online channel to deliver their support and some information materials. Moreover, the library also provided education support services and daily life skill development for the blinds such as administration of education funds, preparation of facilities to support their daily life, education planning, and mental health counseling.

4. Technology and innovation: The libraries provide various technological devices to support users' information access and use. However, the devices are still not sufficient for the users. Some of the libraries are a shortage of budget which affects the replacement of new devices or acquiring new technologies. Moreover, the scarce budget also affects innovation development in the libraries.

5. Collaboration: The libraries for the blind in Thailand already have non-formal collaboration with other libraries for sharing information resources or sharing capabilities and tools of material production. There is no formal collaboration policy, and no staff and budget provided for the collaborative operations.

B. Requirement for successful network development and plan of libraries' operation enhancement

Based on the analysis of the requirements from the executives and heads of operations of 15 institutions, the result can be categorized into 2 dimensions: The need for developing a collaborative network and the plan for enhancing libraries' operation

1. The need for developing a collaborative network

The respondents were asked to identify their needs/ requirements for developing a collaborative network related to (1) Funding and budgets; (2) Human resources; (3) Information resources and services; (4) Technology and innovation, and (5) Collaboration. Within each aspect, the relative importance of requirement or activity was reported as follows:

1.1 Funding and budgets: It revealed that to develop a collaborative network successfully, the network model should have a formal policy with a clear objective of collaboration with a sufficient and consistent fund to operate the network.

1.2 Human resources: At the present, the libraries encountered insufficient staff for the library's service and operation including running network activity. Both administrators and staff pointed out that having a staff for network operation is required for the success of the collaborative network.

1.3 Information resources and services: As information resources for the blinds are rarely acquired from bookshops, most libraries usually produce information resources on their own, or by outsourcing services. To share a library catalog among members was raised the most because it provides access to the users and the library. The activity is useful for the member to reduce duplication of information resources, and the user can have more choices of information access.

1.4 Technology and innovation: Technology may help better communication among members. To succeed in the network collaboration, databases for sharing information resources, and web portals as a communication and information access platform for the network were needed.

1.5 Collaboration: The possible collaboration initiative would be exchanging the knowledge and sharing of a list of information resources and items among members within the network. To strengthen the collaborative network, inter-library activities or network activities should be promoted continuously.

2. Plan of libraries' operation enhancement

To enhance the capabilities of library operations, additional data related to short-term requirements (1-2 years) and medium-term requirements (3-5 years) were gathered from the participants. Using the Mind Mapping software to visualize the future requirements, Figure 2 and Figure 3 were then proposed.

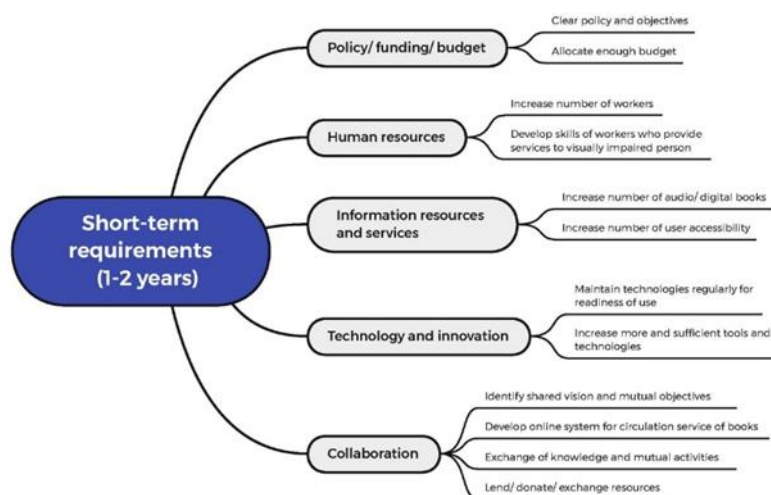


Fig. 2 Short-term requirements

From Figure 2, in the short-term requirements, the respondents intend to increase information resources, staff, and technological equipment to fulfill user needs and maximize information access. The result can be implied that most of the libraries give priority to the way to solve the current problems found in the routine operation such as insufficient tools and information, and lack of skill in staff. The collaboration initiative for the short-term period can be sharing of information resources or inter-library loans. Furthermore, an online database or online platform was also raised in the requirement issues. So, the potential for collaboration regarding the short-term period would cover all activities to enhance resource sharing within the network such as database development and staff training for technical skills.

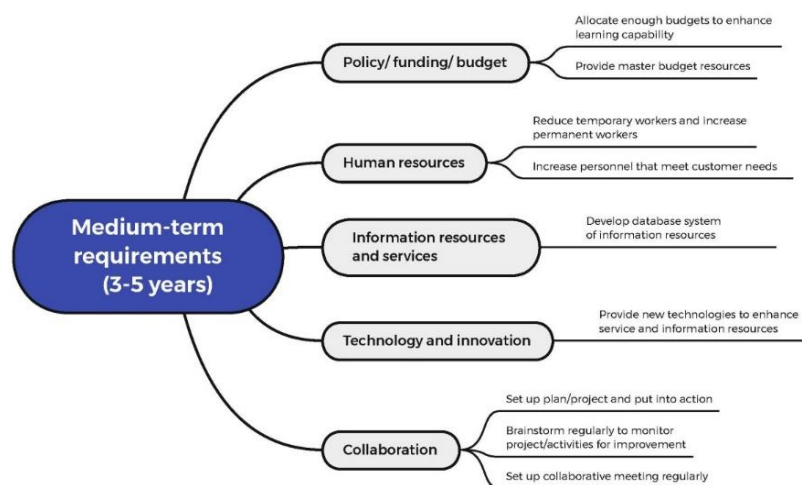


Fig. 3 Medium-term requirements

Besides short-term requirements, the respondents also proposed the requirements for the middle-term plan focusing on the development of innovation or new tools to enhance the operational capabilities within the collaborative network. It implied that the libraries may not be aware of the collaboration network as a tool for solving problems as found in the routine operation. However, it will be more useful if the libraries pay more attention to the improvement of the operation and innovation.

C. Guideline to initiate collaboration network of the libraries for the blind

Based on the results described in the previous sections, the proposed future plan and activities to initiate the collaboration network that fit the current situation and needs of the libraries for the blind are as follows.

Table 1 Proposed plan for collaboration initiation of the libraries for the blinds

Plan category	Initiative project/ activities
Policy development	Formal policy development
Human resources	Up-skill training project
Information and service resources	Information resource sharing via database
Technologies and innovation	Knowledge sharing activities
Collaboration	Seminar, or meeting for collaboration plan

Table 1, it showed the projects or activities that should be launched to initiate collaboration among network libraries. There are 5 activities depending on the plan category namely policy development, human resources, information and service resources, technologies and innovation, and collaboration.

1. Policy development. As most of the libraries in the study already have non-formal collaboration with other libraries or outside organizations. To strengthen the network with clear objectives and policy, formal collaboration should be developed as soon as possible. All libraries will help together to develop policy and objective of network and proceed to sign a memorandum of understanding among the members.

2. Human resources. The lacking skill of personnel, especially information resource production and information service for the blind, is a significant problem in many libraries in the study. The collaboration can be a tool to improve the skills of personnel by sharing best practices of the library operation of each member. These non-formal up-skill activities can be done both online and onsite whereas formal training projects can be arranged within some specified period, e.g., every year, every 6 months.

3. Information resources and services. To solve the problem of insufficient information resources, collaboration activities such as sharing information resources both in bibliography and full text should be initiated throughout the entire network. The beginning of the network can develop from the libraries in the same types of users or affiliation, for example, the libraries affiliated with the university, school, or foundation.

4. Technology and innovation. Technology is among the most concerning skills that the research participants need to improve. All libraries provide technology equipment to let users read, learn, and search information conveniently. Knowledge sharing about how to maintain technological devices and how to use software to produce educational materials for the blind can be an immediate activity of the network. All members can also arrange knowledge-sharing sessions online and the development of collaboration platforms such as wiki to retain and disseminate knowledge among members is also crucial.

5. Collaboration. As shown in the result that there was no collaboration policy and formal collaborative network. To initiate the collaboration, the seminar or meeting to form the network and

collaboration policy should be arranged as soon as possible. Moreover, communication channels such as Facebook group, or Line group for the member should be developed to disseminate information or exchange knowledge among the members

Conclusion and Discussion

The cooperation of the libraries for the blind is essential to provide access to a wide range of information opportunities for visually impaired people. However, the collaboration situation is not stable because most libraries have informal collaboration to share their expertise and information resources. Regarding the library operations in Thailand, most of them are different in affiliation, for example, university, school, and foundation which affects service policy, types of information resources, and services provided. Additionally, many libraries are still experiencing some problems in their service operations, e.g., insufficient budget and staff, lacking skill of technology, and production of information resources.

As the collaboration situation of the libraries for the blind in Thailand is informal, no policy and organization taking care of collaboration activities are found. Whereas the successful network abroad, such as the United States, or Singapore, usually has formal collaboration and organization to operate the collaboration activities. The situation of collaboration among the libraries in the study showed that there were no collaboration policy and no budget for collaboration, resulting from an unclear commitment to cooperation among the library's networks. Regarding the study of consortia building in India, the commitment to cooperation is one of the success factors for collaboration building (Ghosh & Jeevan, 2006). This issue may be one of the key factors that the collaboration of the libraries for the blind is not stable and sustainable.

The results also show that there are no national-level organizations that obviously participated in the collaboration or were responsible for the operation of the library for the blinds. This may be the reason that the libraries for the blinds are still faced with difficulties in their operation, even collaboration development. As found in the study, there are no budget and staff to take care of collaboration activities. When each library encountered a problem in library operation, the librarian contacted another library that know in person for help. This situation is different from the situation of successful libraries in some

countries, such as the USA, the UK, or Sweden where the libraries' activities and operations get support from national-level organizations (Library of Congress, 2011; Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2014-2022).

Lacking the skill of personnel is the most concerning problem in the library's operation which is like the situation found in academic libraries for the visually impaired person in many countries. The study of Mutula & Majinge (2017) revealed that many university libraries lack the capacity to provide effective information services for visually impaired users. As visually impaired users have unique information needs and behavior, the individuals need to learn and develop specific skills to provide effective information service for the users. The collaboration for up-skill training and knowledge sharing session will be useful to improve personnel skills and can be promoted as an initial project to develop the collaboration among the libraries for the blind in Thailand.

A suggestion of further research

The objective of the study is to examine the current situation of the libraries for the visually impaired person and to propose the guideline to enhance the collaboration network of the libraries for the blind that fits the current status and needs of the libraries. Further study about the implementation and application of the guideline, the measurement of efficiency, and the analysis of success factors of the proposed guideline will be most useful.

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