1.1 Background of the study

Todaro (2005) begins her research article on ‘Library services for people with disabilities in Argentina’ by quoting Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986):

“I, who imagined the Paradise, in the shape of a library”

Indeed, some of us may feel that the library is somewhat like paradise to us. Some may even hope that when they reach Paradise, it would have everything a library has.

However, to someone who is visually impaired, having a library filled with over hundreds of thousands of books and magazines, computers with Internet access, databases with electronic books and electronic journals, and everything else will never be like paradise if the books are not in an accessible format, if the computers don’t have assistive equipment, and if the library staff are not trained to be of assistance. Instead of being like paradise, it could very well be quite the contrary.

Libraries have come a long way, with many advances brought about by advancements in technology. Library services for the visually impaired have also advanced and benefited from better technology. There is also a growing awareness for the need of library services for the visually impaired as libraries are an avenue to obtain valuable information and knowledge not only for the sighted but also for the visually impaired.

1.1.1 Blindness / Visual impairment

According to the study conducted by Resnikoff et al. (2004), there were in excess of 161 million people worldwide with visual impairment in 2002. This included about 37...
million who were blind, and 124 million who had low vision. This puts the worldwide prevalence of blindness at 0.57% and the prevalence of low vision at 2%.

The definition of visual impairment used in Resnikoff’s study was that given in the ‘International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries and Causes of Death’, 10th revision (World Health Organisation, 1993, In, Resnikoff et al., 2004). Visual impairment includes low vision and blindness. Low vision is defined as “visual acuity of less than 6/18, but equal to or better than 3/60, or a corresponding visual field loss to less than 20 degrees in the better eye with best possible correction.” The definition of blindness used is “visual acuity of less than 3/60, or a corresponding visual field loss to less than 10 degrees in the better eye with best possible correction.”

Visual impairment could occur at any time during a person’s life. Some are born visually impaired, but for most others, visual impairment occurs later in life. In 2002, more than 82% of all blind people were 50 years and older (Resnikoff et al., 2004). The major causes of blindness in the United States are cataract, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, macular degeneration and retinitis pigmentosa (National Federation of the Blind, 1995). There are other causes of blindness such as due to accidents (as in the case of Louis Braille) and illnesses such as high fever (as in the case of Helen Keller), but the numbers are small.

Louis Braille, the inventor of the Braille tactile print, was three years old when he was blinded due to an accident. He obtained his education at the School for the Blind in Paris, which was the world’s first school for the blind. Later, he became a full Professor at the school at the age of 19. He strongly believed that the blind had to have full access
of books in order to achieve higher educational attainments (Dobree and Boulter, 1982, 197-198).

Helen Keller, a woman who contributed greatly to the blind and the deaf around the world, became blind and deaf at the age of nineteen months due to high fever. She was the first deaf-blind person to graduate with an Honours Degree from Radcliffe College. She believed highly in the education and rehabilitation of the disabled and was a great champion of this cause (Dobree and Boulter, 1982, 206-207).

For the purposes of this study, the term visually impaired persons (VIPs) will be used to denote all persons who are blind or with low vision.

**Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs) in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, the number of VIPs registered with the Social Welfare Department in the year 2000 was 13,743 (13.96% of the 98,452 total people with disabilities registered) (Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability, 2005). As registration with the Social Welfare Department is done voluntarily, this does not necessarily give an accurate picture of the number of VIPs in Malaysia. Many VIPs may not have registered due to reasons such as ignorance, indifference, etc. There may also be those who have become visually impaired due to old age and see no need to register.

In order to obtain another perspective figure of the population of the visually impaired, the results obtained from the report ‘Global data on visual impairment in the year 2002’ (Resnikoff *et al.*, 2004) were used to estimate the number of VIPs in this country. The results of Resnikoff’s study found a 0.57% prevalence of blindness and a 2% prevalence of low vision for the world population. However, the level of prevalence varied for
different regions. The study divided the world into 17 sub-regions, with Malaysia being one of the countries in sub-region ‘Sear-B’, which also included 3 other countries, namely Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand. The results of this study showed that this sub-region ‘Sear-B’ had a 1% prevalence of blindness and a 2.4% prevalence of low vision. This shows a higher prevalence of blindness and low vision compared to the average world prevalence.

The level of prevalence given for ‘Sear-B’ may not be the exact prevalence of blindness and low vision in Malaysia as the level was obtained from a study conducted in a combination of 4 countries including Malaysia. Nevertheless, the level of prevalence for sub-region ‘Sear-B’ can be used in estimating the population of blind and low vision Malaysians since there is no other known estimate of the prevalence of blindness and low vision for Malaysia.

In 2002, Malaysia had a population of 24.53 million (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2003, xxi). From the level of prevalence of blindness of 1% for ‘Sear-B’, there would be an estimated 245,300 blind Malaysians. The prevalence of low vision for this sub-region of 2.4% would mean an estimated 588,720 Malaysians who have low vision. This gives a total of 834,020 Malaysians with visual impairments in 2002.

For the most current estimate of the number of visually impaired Malaysians in 2005, the level of prevalence given by Resnikoff et al. (2004) is applied to the 2005 population statistics. The Malaysian population in 2005 had arisen to 26.13 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2005). If the level of prevalence of blindness and low vision obtained from the 2002 study by Resnikoff et al. (2004) still applies in 2005,
then the number of blind Malaysians in 2005 is estimated to be 261,300 and low vision to be 627,120. This gives a total of 888,420 Malaysians with visual impairment in 2005.

Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs) and the Library

The Library of Congress’ National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) in 1966 broadened their regulations of service to blind readers to cover those not only legally blind but also to make their service available to those who because of visual or physical impairments are unable to read standard print materials (Kamisar, 1983). Thus, the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), Library of Congress, (National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, 2005a) provides the following comprehensive list of criteria for eligibility to use their services:

“A. Blind persons whose visual acuity, as determined by competent authority, is 20/200 or less in the better eye with correcting glasses, or whose widest diameter of visual field subtends an angular distance no greater than 20 degrees.

B. Other physically handicapped persons are eligible as follows:
1. Persons whose visual disability, with correction and regardless of optical measurement, is certified by competent authority as preventing the reading of standard printed material.
2. Persons certified by competent authority as unable to read or unable to use standard printed material as a result of physical limitations.
3. Persons certified by competent authority as having a reading disability resulting from organic dysfunction and of sufficient severity to prevent their reading printed material in a normal manner.”

Thus, in the library context, the criteria for eligibility for use of library services for VIPs should not be limited to definitions for visual impairment such as those used by Resnikoff et al. (2004). If this definition is used, it may restrict people who are not within the limits of this definition but may have some form of impairment that restricts them from reading printed materials, from using library services for VIPs. Besides those
who have visual impairment, library services for VIPs should also be provided to those who because of physical disabilities are unable to read standard print materials. For example, this would include those who are unable to hold a book or turn a page.

1.1.2 Public libraries

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), in its publication “The Public Library Service: IFLA / UNESCO Guidelines for Development”, gives a detailed definition of a public library. It goes:

“A public library is an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organization. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, employment status and educational attainment” (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2001).

Public libraries in Malaysia

According to the Directory of Libraries in Malaysia, the public libraries in Malaysia are categorized into national, state, municipal council, branch, local council, mosque, district, town, village, mobile and cyber libraries. The directory lists Malaysia as having a National Library and 14 state libraries, one for each of the following states: Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, Terengganu, and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, 2002).
However, the National Library of Malaysia’s website lists 15 State Public Library Corporations. The additional one being the Labuan Public Library Corporation (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, 2004). In a telephone conversation with a Librarian at the National Library of Malaysia’s Bahagian Rangkaian Perpustakaan [Library Network Department], he stated that the Labuan Public Library Corporation is not an official state public library as there is no official state public library in Labuan. However, it is the largest library in Labuan. It is also run by a Public Library Corporation and does receive some development funds from the Federal Government (Mohd. Azmi, 2006).

In Peninsular Malaysia, the public library services are provided by the State Public Library Corporations. In Sabah, the situation is different as the state library is a state government department. As for Sarawak, the public library services are provided by the state government and local government authorities (Singh, 1998).

The National Library and the 14 state libraries are separate entities. Each State Public Library Corporation governs the public libraries in their state. The National Library of Malaysia is a government department. The National Library assists the state libraries by channeling Federal Government funds for the development budget. The Federal Government also provides 50% of the state library corporation’s annual operating budget and the balance is provided by the State Government (Mohd Azmi, 2006).

Public libraries and VIPs

The provision of library services for Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs) is not a new service provided by public libraries, especially in developed countries like the United Kingdom and the United States.
In the United Kingdom, the provision of library services for the blind by public libraries began in 1857 at Liverpool on the initiative of R.W. Roulston, Superintendent of Lending Libraries (Cowell, 1903, 52, In, Kelly, 1977, 80). This was followed by Manchester in 1863 (Edwards, 1869, 95, In, Kelly, 1977, 80).

In the U.S., the history of public libraries providing services to the VIPs also dates back to the 19th century. Herman (1977), in writing on the origins and development of library services for the blind in the US, states that the receipt of eight embossed volumes by the Boston Public Library in 1868 showed the first efforts by public libraries in servicing the blind. Several libraries followed suit. Nevertheless, only in 1897 did a national library programme develop upon the establishment of a reading room with 500 materials for the blind by the then Librarian of Congress, John Russell Young.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, there were at least eighteen public libraries in large cities in the US with services for the blind (Public Libraries, 1904, In, Lovejoy, 1983). In 1931, the Pratt-Smoot Act came to law on the 3rd of March and $100,000 was appropriated for the fiscal year 1932 “to carry out the provisions of the act to provide books for blind adults and the program that would become the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS/BPH) was established” (National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, 2005a).

Not much has been documented about the provision of library services to VIPs by public libraries in Malaysia. “Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia: Satu Kronologi 1966-1996” [National Library of Malaysia: A Chronology 1966-1996], a book about the chronological events of the National Library of Malaysia from 1966-1996 states that on the 27th of November 1996, the National Library of Malaysia held a ceremony to
officiate audio books for VIPs (Jamilah, 1997). In Sabah, library services for VIPs were launched in Sabah State Library in August 1996. Persons who have visual or physical disability are eligible to use this service provided for free. Besides the Sabah State Library, the Sandakan and Tawau Regional Libraries also offer this service in Sabah (Wong, 1999).

1.1.3 Libraries specializing in services for VIPs in Malaysia

The 4th edition of the International Directory of Libraries for the Blind lists two libraries for the blind in Malaysia (Nomura and Yamada, 2000). They are the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) Braille Resource Centre in Kuala Lumpur and the library at St Nicholas Institute for the Visually Handicapped in Penang. There are other libraries specialising in services for VIPs such as libraries in schools for the blind. However, this study concentrated on special libraries which provide their services for the visually impaired public.

The Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) was established in 1951 by the Department of Social Welfare. Some of the services provided by MAB are its educational programmes, rehabilitation courses, vocational training and placement service. It has also established an eye hospital in its quest towards the prevention of avoidable blindness. Its Braille Resource Centre offers services which includes the publishing of Braille books, the loan services of Braille books and talking books, sales of Braille equipment, repair service for Braille machines, loan service of Braille equipment and book scanning service through computer (Malaysian Association for the Blind, 2005).
St Nicholas Institute for the Visually Handicapped is a school for the visually impaired. It was established in 1926 by the Medical Mission in Malacca and moved to Penang in 1938. St Nicholas has a separate library for children known as the Children’s library. Here, besides the usual library services, story telling sessions and games are also held (Habsah, 1994).

The Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB), St Nicholas Institute for the Visually Handicapped, the Sabah Society for the Blind, the Sarawak Society for the Blind, and the Society of the Blind in Malaysia together form the National Council for the Blind, Malaysia (NCBM). This NGO was established in 1986. It publishes a quarterly magazine in English called the NCBM Outreach, and operates the Malaysian Braille Press which produces Braille materials at subsidized rates (Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability, 2005).

1.2 Research problem

It is unfortunate, however, that even though there has been progress in the provision of library services by NGOs to VIPs, not much has been documented about this provision by the public libraries in Malaysia. Although Mariam (1994) mentions that the provision of services for VIPs had always been one of the national library’s long term objectives, it is also acknowledged that the provision of library services for VIPs in this country was mainly left to the NGOs (Shellatay and Mariam, 1996). This should not have been the case as public libraries have great potential to play a very important part in providing services for VIPs.

Malaysia has a National Policy on Library and Information Services in Malaysia that sets out strategies in order to achieve the systematic and planned development of library
and information services in this country (Shellatay, 1994). According to Shellatay (1994), one part of the strategy touches on library services for the disabled and stipulates that “appropriate library and information services commensurate with the needs of the under privileged and handicapped members of society shall be provided”.

NGOs have a long history and expertise in providing library services for VIPs while public libraries have the resources and facilities to reach out to VIPs around the country. Habsah (1994) believes that libraries specialising in services for VIPs and public libraries should work together by co-operating with each other. The libraries specialising in services for VIPs with its publishing facilities can concentrate on production and the public libraries can concentrate on delivering the services to clients through their established outreach units.

At the 1996 IFLA Conference in Beijing, Shellatay and Mariam (1996) stated that:

“Malaysia has chosen to overcome this challenge [of the provision of library services to the VIPs being left to NGOs] by adopting a policy of mainstreaming library services, programmes and resources to the VIPs. As the information needs of VIPs are much the same as those of the general public, all services provided by the public library should also be made available to people with disabilities.

Mainstreaming or integration refers to the concept that services for VIPs should be provided in the same manner as they are for others. People with visual impairments should not be segregated, excluded and provided special services in isolation. Instead they should be part of the mainstream. They should be included as participants in providing an integrated full service within the library setting.”

Since the above statement was made nearly a decade ago, it would be useful to find out the current situation of library services provided by libraries specialising in services for VIPs in Malaysia, and to find out how far public libraries in Malaysia have moved forward in their provision of library services for VIPs. This would also serve as a
1.3 Research objectives

Consumers have demands which are brought about by their needs and wants. VIPs, just like their sighted peers, have needs and wants pertaining to library services suitable for their use. They need library services in order to access materials or information that they would otherwise have great difficulty or be impossible for them to attain on their own. These materials or information may be used for purposes pertaining to their work, their education, their self-improvement, or for leisure.

Whatever the need, VIPs should have equal access to library services. Thus, “it is inevitable that the blind will be expecting their libraries to provide them with the services which most respectable libraries serving sighted readers offer” (Gashel, 1977). This is more so when it comes to public libraries as VIPs are rightful members of the public. It is then part of the objective of this study to find out about the current provision of library services for VIPs by both the public libraries and libraries specialising in services to VIPs in Malaysia.

Besides finding out the current level of provision of library services for VIPs, the problems faced by libraries in providing library services for VIPs and the factors that facilitated the provision of library services for VIPs need also be investigated. As according to Shellatay and Mariam (1996), “the development of library services to the visually impaired has had its own fair share of challenges, barriers and constraints”. Thus, in order to see that services for VIPs be further developed, the problems faced by libraries today with reference to their provision of services for VIPs should be brought
to light. Also factors which have facilitated the provision of library services for VIPs should be discovered to help facilitate the provision among libraries which currently do not have provision of library services for VIPs.

Public libraries have the responsibility of providing its services to all persons without leaving out any group of person. The IFLA / UNESCO Public Library Manifesto published in 1994 (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 1994) states that: “The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison.”

It is thus part of the objectives of this study to find out if there were any public libraries in Malaysia which did not provide services for VIPs. If there was found to be libraries which did not provide this service, then what were the factors that have brought about this non-provision.

In summarising, the objectives of this study are to find out (a) the current level of provision of library services for VIPs in Malaysia, (b) the problems faced by the libraries with reference to this provision and the factors which had facilitated this provision, and (c) the factors that influenced the non-provision of library services for VIPs.
1.4 Research questions

In line with the research problems and research objectives discussed earlier, the research questions for this study can be broadly divided into the 3 following questions:

1. What is the current status of the provision of library services for VIPs by public libraries and libraries specialising in library services for VIPs in Malaysia, in terms of the provision of materials, equipments, services, and the management of their libraries?

2. For libraries with provision of library services for VIPs, what are the problems faced by them, and what are the factors that facilitated the provision of this service? and

3. For public libraries without provision of library services for VIPs, what are the factors that hinder them from providing this service?

1.5 Scope of the study

For the purpose of this study, the scope included public libraries in the National and State categories (Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, Terengganu, Kuala Lumpur and Labuan), and also special libraries providing services for VIPs (Braille Resource Centre of MAB and St. Nicholas Library). The study did not include all categories of public libraries, such as branch libraries, village libraries and mobile libraries, as the state libraries control most of the libraries in their state.

This study also did not include academic libraries such as university libraries and school libraries. This is in order to stay more focused on libraries which provided services to the public at large, and not on libraries which only provided services to a certain category of people such as university students or students of a particular school.
1.6 Significance of the study

It is unfortunate that sometimes the demands of VIPs were taken lightly due to the fact that they only constituted a small portion of the population. No study like this could be located in the public domain and thus not much is known about library services for the VIPs in this country. Most of the previous studies conducted on library services for VIPs were conducted in developed countries.

It is hoped that this study would help bring about a change in this country to help ensure that even though VIPs are a small minority of the population, their needs must still be addressed. Each and every VIP should be given the opportunity to excel and be a contributing member of society. One of the ways of achieving this is by providing for the information needs of VIPs, as called for by a Government official, “people with disabilities (PWDs), like all other citizens, should have full access to all information so that they can develop their full potential and participate on equal terms with others in society” (Mohamad, 1994).

In line with Malaysia’s Vision 2020, towards a more caring society, the needs of VIPs must be looked into. The needs of the less fortunate must not be overlooked in the quest towards becoming a developed nation. It is hoped that through the recommendations of this study, the situation of library services provided for VIPs both in the special libraries and in the mainstream public libraries will continue to be improved as the country develops.

1.7 Limitations of the study

This study was exploratory in nature. It explored the current status of library services for VIPs, the problems and facilitating factors in the provision of library services for
VIPs, and the factors that hindered the provision of library services for VIPs. These are explored within the limits of its sample size.

In selection of the sample for special libraries serving VIPs, the International Directory of Libraries for the Blind (Nomura and Yamada, 2000) was used. This directory was published in 2000, thus any changes since then was not taken into account.

Another limitation would be its sample for public libraries. Even though it was mentioned that the state public libraries control most libraries in their state, this study did not obtain information on the services provided by these other libraries in the state library.

Also the information obtained from the questionnaire replies from the libraries was assumed to be accurate and only minimal verification of information was done.

Thus, even though the results of this study may be generalised, there are limitations. In spite of the limitations, the findings of this study have provided insights into the provision of library services for VIPs in this country.

1.8 Definitions

Braille

Braille is a form of tactile print which consists of raised dots. It is three dots high and two dots wide. Braille is read by using one’s fingers to feel the raised dots.

Braille Translation Software

This is a software that converts text on a screen into Braille.
Closed-Circuit Television Systems / CCTV

This system is used to magnify by using a camera on the image and then magnifying the image on a monitor screen.

DAISY

DAISY is the acronym of Digital Accessible Information System. It is a technology which allows CDs which are DAISY formatted to have such features such as navigation by page or by chapter, the placing of bookmarks, the increase of the reading speed of the text, etc.

Large print books

Large print books are printed books with larger size printing. The minimum size for large print materials is 14-point type.

Magnifiers

A device that can make things appear larger.

Magnifying lamps

A magnifying device that helps reduce glare.

Refreshable Braille Display

This device creates Braille characters of the text displayed on the screen by raising and lowering an array of pins on its display unit.

Screen magnifiers

A magnifying device that magnifies screens such as computer or television screens.
Screen readers

This is a software application that translates text on a screen into speech.

Talking book / magazine / newspaper

Talking book / magazine / newspaper is the audio recorded version of the book / magazine / newspaper.

Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs)

Visually impaired persons consist of persons who are blind or have low vision.

1.9 Organisation of the report

This report is organised into 5 chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction. It gives an overview of library services for VIPs with some emphasis on the situation in Malaysia. It also presents the research problems, research objectives and research questions. This chapter states the scope, significance and limitations of the study.

The second chapter is the review of literature. Here literature on library materials, library equipments, library services, and library management is reviewed. Literature on problems and facilitating factors in the provision of library services for VIPS, and literature on the factors that hinder the provision of library services for VIPs is also reviewed.

The third chapter is on the research methodology. This chapter details the research method, the selection of the sample, the research instrument used, data collection and the method of data analysis.
The fourth chapter presents the results of the survey and the analysis of the data collected. The final chapter provides a summary and discussions of the findings, the recommendations and conclusion of the study.