

Reference Desk Service Direction in Digital Age: A Comparative Study

Che Rusuli M.S., Hasman T., Razak A.

Tunku Tun Aminah Library, Research Support
and Postgraduate Unit, Universiti Tun Hussein
Onn Malaysia, Batu Pahat 86400, Malaysia.
Tel: +60127870645
E-mail: msaufi@uthm.edu.my

Norazlin H.

Department of Information Technology, Center
For Diploma Studies, Universiti Tun Hussein
Onn Malaysia, Batu Pahat 86400, Malaysia.
Tel: +60197147554
E-mail: norazlin@uthm.edu.my

Tasmin R.

Department of Production and Operation
Management, Faculty of Technology
Management and Business, Universiti Tun
Hussein Onn Malaysia, Batu Pahat 86400,
Malaysia.
Tel: +6074537852
E-mail: rosmaini@uthm.edu.my

Fikri M. N., Farahin N., Norfaizah J.

Faculty of Information Management,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Perdana
Campus, No. 1, Jalan Pulau Angsa AU10/A,
Section U10, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor.
Malaysia.
Tel: +60379622000
E-mail: faizah_iejot@yahoo.com

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Reference librarians in academic libraries are actively engaged with many emerging new processes not only by which learning occurs, but also by which research is done. Today, reference librarians not only have to understand, but also embrace current and emerging technologies affecting reference functions and the information needs of library users. Wherever the library provides reference services, it is recognized on the major changes in libraries that stem from countless cultural, economic, legal and social developments that have impacted, and continue to impact the library work. The provision of reference services has been, and still is, at the heart of all libraries in every sector be it academic, public or special. Nowadays, the Internet era has changed the way users access the information. It was the exclusive preserve of the "Reference librarian" to provide information directly to the client. Pomerantz and Luo (2006) stated that the increasing availability of computers and Internet access both within libraries and in modern society at large, and online services have become among the most heavily used services the libraries offer. They further asserted that library reference services are still offered, whether at the desk, by asynchronous media, such as email, or by synchronous media, such as chat. It is generally provided in an interactive setting that involves two parties between the librarian and the user to solve user's problem.

However, the raising of the Internet era has given challenges to the librarian on duty at the reference desk service. Recently, statistics from various studies on library anxiety provide additional impetus for this study. A study done by Callinan (2005) at University College Dublin reported that 56 percent of students prefer to ask library related questions of their friends rather than librarians. Brewerton (2003) in his study noted is that librarians tend to imagine their patrons as a "captive audience"? So, no matter the quality of promotional efforts done by academic libraries, these patrons will find and use the services out of necessity. Another study done by Vondracek (2007) proved that user relatively unaware of librarians' capabilities. Vondracek (2007) revealed that students were unaware that the librarians had subject specialties. The students assume that the librarian is a part administrative worker like any other staff in the university who provides and assistance to students.

Iberahim and Nadzar (2011) in their study found that most of the 17.5 percent of the students were very rarely using (at least monthly) the service. The frequency of inquiries posed (questions or problems) that are considered not very often is higher by 40 percent. This issue could affect the future planning of library services to give better service in reader's advisory services to their users (Sobel, 2009). Traditionally, it is a one-to-one service with user and reference librarian (Maharana & Panda, 2005). The user refer to a variety of information resorces available in the library to meet the information needs. The advancement in Information Technology (IT) has brought out incredible changes in almost every aspect of information services (Maharana & Panda, 2005).

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The library and information professionals are also facing the challenges of the electronic age and all these developments give way to a new range of reference services (Singh, 2012). The developments of digital reference are the latest trend in the digital era. Easily accessible digital information has rapidly become one of the hallmarks of the Internet. The present study combines a traditional evaluation of the users' satisfaction with the reference desk services, with details of the user's information use. The purpose of this comparative study was to explore and assess the effectiveness of reference desk service in meeting users' information needs and demand. This was addressed by the investigation of two research objectives:

RO1. To measure users' 'level of satisfaction' towards reference desk services

RO2. To improve reference desk services towards users' satisfaction

In addition, this study presents the following research questions to support the research objectives, listed as follows:

RQ1. How satisfied are the users on the reference desk services provided by the academic library?

RQ2. What should academic libraries apply to meet their users' satisfaction?

In this regard, evaluations of the success of an advisory service was taken into consideration from the point of views of both of these parties. Accuracy of the answers provided by the librarian was considered to determinants of user's satisfaction with the reference desk services.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population of the study consisted of twenty users from two libraries, ten (10) respondents from Tun Abdul Razak Library (PTAR), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Shah Alam and ten (10) respondents from the Tunku Tun Aminah Library (PTTA), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia Johor who visit the library frequently. This comparative study requires random sampling of an accurate census of active library members. Hence, a set of twenty structured questionnaire that was developed was based on the established exit survey (e.g. Sobel, 2009; Curry and Copeman, 2005; Iberhim and Nadzar, 2011) to set a measurement standard to variable construct. The structured questionnaire applied in this study consisted of 3 parts with only 18 questions. Part "A" dealt with the demographic characteristics of respondents, such as university, gender, age group and academic status. Part "B" listed questions that were meant to collect data on the reader's advisory desk services, while Part "C" collected data on the comments and suggestions.

IV. FINDINGS

The total of 100 percent of respondents were from two different university libraries, which comprised of ten from Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) and another ten respondents from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM). Overall, most of the students shown in Figure 1 were from the age 19-21 (10%), 22-24 (5%). However, the age range of 25-27 were the highest, that is 60% of the respondents who participated while the second highest were from the age of 28-30 which is 25% of the respondents who participated.

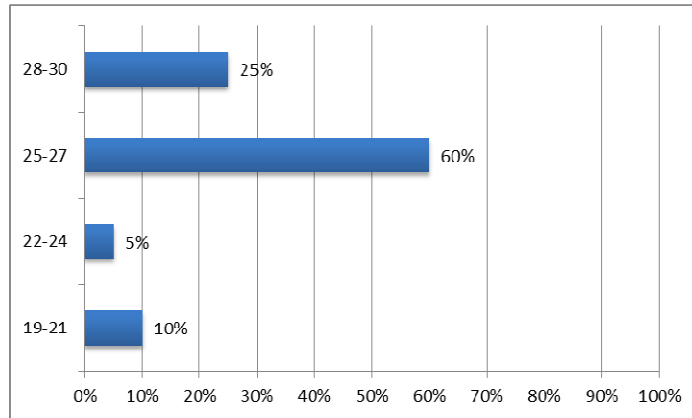


Fig.1: Age of respondents

Figure 2 presents the result of responses received from each university on where they go for assistance when they are faced with a specific information need. Almost 70% of the UTHM responses that they use welcoming desk service, compared to UiTM which rated at only 10%. However, 40% of the responses at UiTM used circulation desk rather than UTHM. Besides, 50% of responses from UiTM preferred to use advisory reference desk rather than UTHM which indicates 30% of usage. Surprisingly, the results revealed that 0% respondents from UiTM and UTHM libraries used other services (i.e. E-mail, Ask a librarian, Chat, FAQ, User Feedback form service and Collaborative Reference Service).

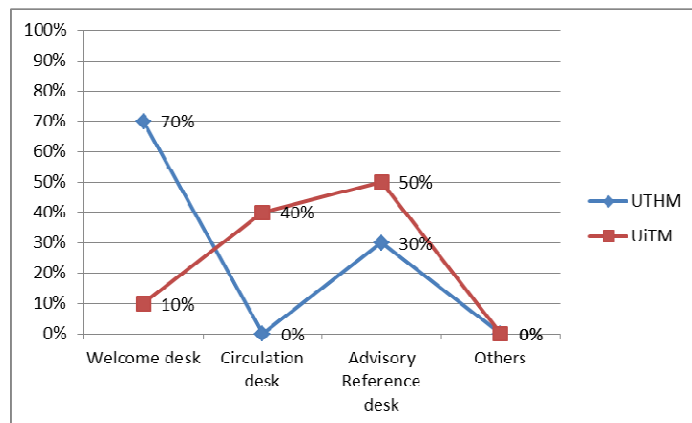


Fig.2: Where to go for assistance

Figure 3 indicates the result of respondents who used the Reference Desk. The results show that 80% of UiTM respondents were rated “Yes” in using Reference Desk. However, 40% of UTHM respondents rated lower. Sixty (60%) of UTHM respondents rated “No” compared to 20% from the UiTM respondents. This may be due to the fact that presently, it is possible to get access to global information via information and communication technology (ICT) in searching information.

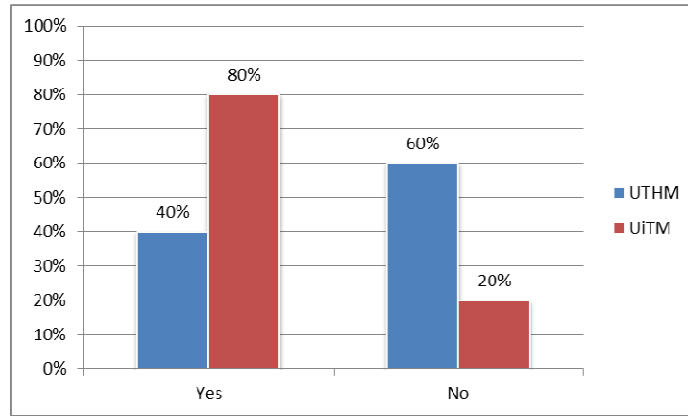


Fig.3: The Use of Reference Desk Service

Figure 4 presents the result of respondents' reasons for using the Reference desk. The results show that both UTHM and UiTM respondents rated only 10% use the reference desk service once a week. On the other hand, the results indicated that 80% of UTHM respondents rated higher use of the reference desk, that is twice a week reference desk, compared to 30% of the UiTM respondents. Others, the results show that 50% of UiTM respondents were using reference desk services three times a week. The results also show that both UiTM and UTHM respondents rated 10% in 'others' for using the reference desk service.

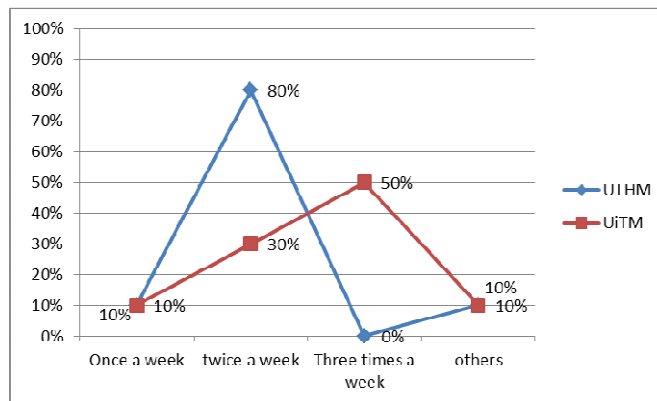


Fig.4: Reason for using the reference desk service

Figure 5 indicates the reason as to why the students have never visited the reference desk. About 10% of UiTM respondents did not know where the reference desk was located while UTHM respondents were rated as none. Besides, 10% of UiTM respondents indicated that they already knew about the location of the desk. However, 80% of UiTM respondents rated higher because they claimed that they don't have a time to use reference desk. As such, 100% of UTHM respondents stated highly that they preferred online searching rather than approaching the reference desk for information services.

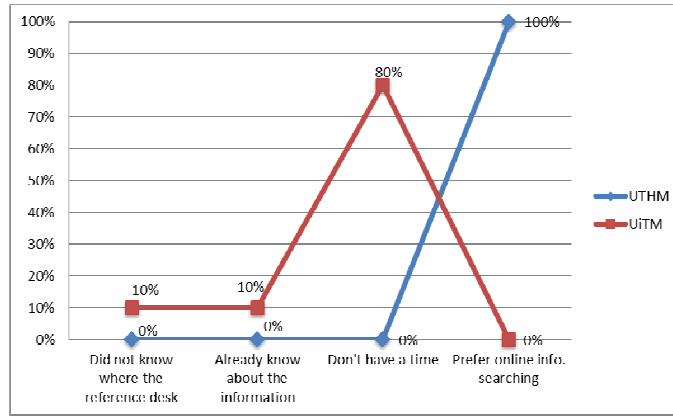


Fig.5: Reason for never visiting the reference desk

Figure 6 indicates the results of the satisfaction level of library reference desk services. Ten (10%) respondents UiTM while twenty (20%) from UTHM rated as not satisfactory. However, both UiTM and UTHM rated 80% as higher satisfaction with their reference desk services. Another 10% of UiTM respondents rated as very satisfied with their reference desk services. The result indicates that the student was pleased and satisfied with the reference desk service that offered by both university libraries. Furthermore, librarian skills (e.g. Searching techniques, Information retrieval, etc.) in coaching and fulfill customer demands are expected.

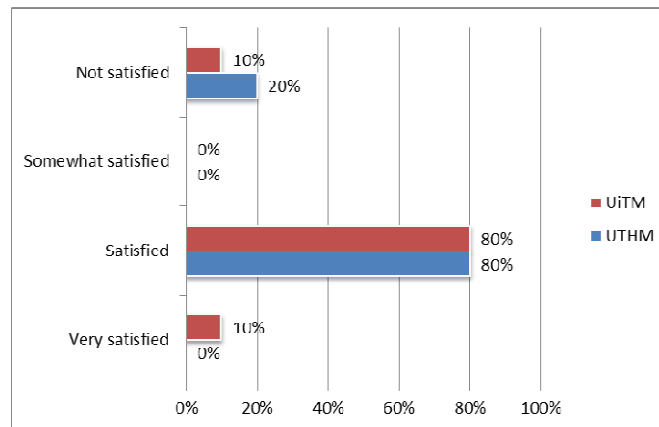


Fig.6: Level of satisfaction

V. SIGNIFICANT/CONTRIBUTIONS

The success or failure of the reference desk services in the UiTM and UTHM university libraries depends on the customers demand. The result from the study found that almost 70% of respondents were highly used welcome desk rather than 40% of the respondents were used circulation desk and 50% of respondents were using reference desk offered by the university libraries to get information. However, these findings lead to some understanding of the working conditions of para-professionals at information and reference desks (Rieh, 1999). Librarians and the staff at the desks need to explore the possibility providing liaisons and creating online subject guides and engage, in other activities, to ensure the staff acquire important experience and to assist liaisons with substantial non-liaison duties (Schulte, 2011). Furthermore, more customers are in need of in-depth consultations with a reference librarian (Schulte, 2011), during reference desk hours. However, librarians and library management should continue to keep abreast with the changing reference services (i.e. Online and Virtual), amidst the technological era to encounter customers demand.

Secondly, in terms of the level of user satisfaction, it was found that almost 80% of the respondents from both universities were satisfied with reference desk services. A study done by Garrison (2011) revealed that 80% of reference desk statistics and questions has been reported through Library Statistics (LibStats). The majority of transactions could be answered by well trained staff and student assistants and library had already shifted to staffing the majority of desk hours with student staff (Garrison, 2011). At this point, managers' decision should be made to changing the functions and capabilities of reference desk services in the digital age.

The new library in the digital environment will also provide users with a different desk model (Garrison, 2011; Polger & Okamoto, 2010), consisting of several smaller pods that will allow working collaboratively with students. In this regards, Nolen (2010) recommended inquiries from the library users that can easily be communicated through the chat or email reference services. These services enable librarians to provide an extended reference encounter with the patrons. For example, in the Chat programs, librarians can guide a user through a complex search, with the user having the opportunity to perform the search on their own.

Today, people are living in the digital age, where information explosion and customer demand become the major challenges. In this context, it is inevitable for a library to provide '*richer information diets*' to their customers in fulfilling their information needs. In other countries, reference and information services have undergone revolutionary changes to meet the new challenges of the digital age. This study suggests libraries should pay attention to user needs and demands for the improvement the level of user satisfaction. Based on the findings study, several recommendations or guidelines are put forward:

1. Both libraries should pay special attention to the user's needs and demands in reference desk service;
2. Electronic or virtual reference services should be introduced by the libraries to increase the information services;
3. The reference staff should be trained for future service development in maintaining a high level of users' satisfaction especially face to face services;
4. Both university libraries should consider the features of "User friendliness and helpfulness" while giving online or electronic services for their users;
5. University library programs such as Information Skill Class should target undergraduate and postgraduate students who are most in need of assistance in the use of different library resources and services;
6. User satisfaction survey/ research should be conducted at the macro and micro levels on different aspects of reference services;
7. Both universities should pay special attention on online or virtual training so that they (librarians) becoming more competent and knowledgeable.

This study suggests that both university libraries should emphasis on developing an assessment technique, measures, according to standards guidelines so that librarians could provide better digital reference services to their users. It is hoped that this study can be used to improve or enhance a physical reference desk or as a springboard for considering other multi-tasking options when experiencing declining reference desk questions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to acknowledge his PhD supervisor for guiding this paper. The author also wishes to thank the editor for extensive assistance in the final revision of the paper to be published.

Keywords: Academic librarian, Reference desk, Library, Information Technology, Information Searching

REFERENCES

- Brewerton, A. (2003). "Inspired! Award-Winning Library Marketing," *New Library World* 104 (7-8): 270.
- Callinan, Joanne E. (2005). Information-Seeking Behaviour of Undergraduate Biology Students: A Comparative Analysis of First Year and Final Year Students in University College Dublin," *Library Review*, 54(2): 86-99.
- Curry, A., & Copeman, D. (2005). Reference service to international students: A field stimulation research study. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31(5): 409-420.
- Garrison, J. A. (2011). What Do We Do Now? A Case for Abandoning Yesterday and Making the Future. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 1-14.

- Maharana, B., & Panda, K. C. (2005). Virtual Reference Service in Academic Libraries: A Case Study of the Libraries of IIMs and IITs in India. 1-14.
- Nolen, D. S. (2010). Reforming or Rejecting the Reference Desk: Conflict and Continuity in the Concept of Reference.
- Polger, M. A., & Okamoto, K. (2010). " Can't Anyone Be a Teacher Anyway?": Student Perceptions of Academic Librarians as Teachers.
- Rieh, S. Y. (1999). Changing reference service environment: a review of perspectives from managers, librarians, and users. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 25(3): 178-186.
- Ruth Vondracek, "Comfort and Convenience? (2007). Why Students Choose Alternatives to the Library," portal: Libraries and the Academy, 7(3): 277-93.
- Singh, N. K. (2012). Digital Reference Service in University Libraries: A Case Study of the Northern India. *International Journal of Library and Information Studies*, 2(4): 1-17.
- Sobel, K. (2009). Promoting Library Reference Services to First-Year Undergraduate Students. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 48(4): 362-371.
- Schulte, S. J. (2011). Eliminating traditional reference services in an academic health sciences library: a case study. *Journal of the Medical Library Association: JMLA*, 99(4): 273.
- Zubaidah Ibrahah & Fauziah Mohd Nadzar. (2011). Service quality and user satisfaction of the reader's advisory desk service: a case study of University Putra Malaysia Library. *Journal Information and Knowledge Management*, 1(1): 37-54.