

Redesigning customer support services for electronic resources: The case of UDSM library

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam library to determine whether or not library customers are satisfied with services related to access and use of electronic resources. A total of 70 postgraduate students filled out an online questionnaire with both open and close-ended questions; however, 53 of the respondents returned the filled-in questionnaires. The findings revealed that most users were at the coursework stage and are mainly interested in various web-based electronic resources for the purpose of answering assignment questions while a few are interested in using subscribed to journal articles to assist with their research work and writing up dissertations. The findings further revealed that while there is generally satisfaction with how librarians offered services related to access and use of electronic resources, a number of challenges were encountered including lack of appropriate communication skills among librarians who handle customers, limited human resources, slow response rates from librarians and problems related to limited number of computers, slow Internet connectivity, electricity power supply. It was recommended that library services related to access and use of electronic resources should be re-designed to enable librarians serve customers better by utilizing appropriate customer-service related skills.

Introduction

Academic libraries are tasked to ensure that users are satisfied with internet-related services when seeking information resources. Due to the changing nature of the digital information environment of the Internet, users' expectations and searching behaviour have dramatically changed. Users are more interested in how libraries provide quality services to meet user needs. Users' expectations have increased DUE TO concerns about the quality of services rendered by librarians. As such, there is a need to re-examine user expectations towards librarians in other words re-define the role of librarians in this endeavour.

Background to the problem

Since the introduction of internet services, many academic libraries in Tanzania have introduced various services to customers. Customers come to libraries to inquire about the availability of e-

resources and how to utilize them. These include the types of electronic resources available (electronic journals, portals and information gateways) and how to locate required information from available resources. Inquiries on how to search for resources, authenticity of and the nature of resources, whether full-text or abstracts, is common in most academic libraries.

A number of libraries such as University of Dar es Salaam have introduced e-reference services to meet customer needs. This is due to rapid expansion in student enrolment and increased usage of IT in core operations such as, teaching, learning, research and management support. The number of networked computers available on university campuses has also increased tremendously. Computer access levels range from 88.4% for undergraduates to almost 90.0% for academic staff (Kiondo 2004).

Despite these developments, there are remarkable differences between levels of investment in electronic resources and level of awareness and usage of these resources. The levels of e-resources usage of some resources remain low (Carnegie evaluation report 2006). This is attributed to, among others, lack of appropriate mechanisms to market existing services, due to a weak bond between librarians in charge and customers at large. It is not clear so far if customers are satisfied with services offered either through face to face walking-ins or e-reference services that libraries such as the University of Dar es Salaam offer.

The types of support offered to users in academic libraries in Tanzania vary depending on the type of the library, nature of the customer and services requested. Customers request support on how to use a particular resource (including search techniques and ways to obtain resources), how to use user names and passwords as well as the availability of alternative sources in case what is requested is not available (Wema & Manda, 2011). Based on the nature of support services offered in libraries and types of support offered, it was felt that imperative to conduct a study to find out if customers are satisfied or dissatisfied by the same in order to determine how to make necessary improvements.

Statement of the problem

Over the past few years, electronic resources usage became popular in Tanzania in early 2000s, customer support to enhance access and usage mechanisms of electronic resources has been provided based on traditional methods including face to face walk in enquiries by users, use of e-mail, telephone calls, use of suggestion boxes , to mention but a few (Manda, 2005). The means to get feedback from users on satisfaction through online forms, questionnaires, direct contact or through e mail exist. In addition various ways of monitoring and evaluating usage of resources and user satisfaction are in place . These include evaluation of usage statistical data supplied by publishers, or collected in-house data from users who visit the reference section at the University of Dar es Salaam (Rosenberg, 2008). What is still not well known is whether or not users are satisfied with services offered with respect to acces and usage of electronic resources. Much as librarians are being trained in customer care services, it is not very clear if the training has helped to facilitate introduction of appropriate library services especially in areas where electronic resources are used. As such, this study was designed to find out users' opinions on whether or not usrs are satisfied with services offered with a view to redesign user services in the usage of electronic resources .

Purpose of the study

The study wanted to find out if customers are satisfied or dissatisfied with services related to access and use of electronic resources at the University of Dar es Salaam library and how best to redesign the services.

Specifically the study was designed to :

- To find out customer support services offered to users at UDSM WILBERT Chagula Library
- To solicit users' perceptions/views on customer support services rendered
- To identify challenges experienced by users when receiving support from librarians
- To recommend introduction of appropriate customer services at UDSM library

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed quantitative data collection methods mostly. Quantitative data was collected using mostly questions that sought answers on baseline statistical information on respondents bio-data, and customer opinions on satisfactions with services rendered. The data thus generated was useful to quantify opinions, attitudes of postgraduate students with regard to accessing and using electronic resources. This data helped to answer the “how much”, “how many”, “how often” and “to what extent” type of questions. On the other hand qualitative data sought to answer problems that customers face in services provision and recommendations of appropriate services.

Area of study

This study was carried out at the University of Dar es Salaam Dr. Wilbert Chagula library in the Reference Collection that assists customers to access and use electronic resources. The Reference collection was selected due to its central position in serving users who need to use electronic resources both on campus and outside the library campus. In addition, University of Dar es Salaam is one of many public universities in Tanzania that first began to subscribe to various electronic resources which are mostly used by Postgraduate Students.

Sampling methods and procedures

The study employed a purposive sampling technique by purposely distributing questionnaires to 70 Postgraduate Students who visited the Reference Collection of the University of Dar es Salaam library for the purpose of either accessing or making inquiries on electronic resources. It was discovered that, much as electronic resources were available over a campus Local Area Network (LAN), many Postgraduate Students preferred accessing them from the library where it would be possible to interact with librarians for assistance.

Data collection methods



Primary data was collected using a self-administered open and close-ended questionnaire while secondary data was collected from journal articles, published and unpublished materials such as theses and dissertations, books, conference proceedings as well as other secondary sources. The study was also used observations which enabled the researcher to pick students who visit the reference collection and as queries or seek to access electronic resource at the reference desk in the. While secondary data was used to gather facts about usage of electronic resources, customers and other relevant data, questionnaires collected data on electronic resources accessed, nature of information sought by students, opinions on satisfaction with services offered and other relevant information from Postgraduate Students.

A total of 70 questionnaires were distributed to students present in the Reference Collection of the University library. It was considered ideal to distribute more questionnaires to students outside the library; however since most students prefer to use the library for the purpose of accessing electronic resources, a satisfactory number of respondents was realized. Questionnaires were distributed only to students willing to participate since others were either not aware of electronic resources or were too busy to participate.

Study findings

Stages of studies among students

Results from the study indicated that 53 out of the 70, respondents filled and returned the questionnaires. Among them 46 students are Masters Students 7 were working on their PhD theses. Thirty out of the 46 Masters students, are at coursework stage i.e 15 were collecting data and was at the stage of writing the dissertation. Figure 1 below summarizes their results.

This study was conducted at the beginning of the semester; therefore most students were at coursework stage and a few were doing field research.

Types of resources consulted

Respondents were asked to mention types of electronic resources they consult when they visit the library. Figure 1 below summarises the results.

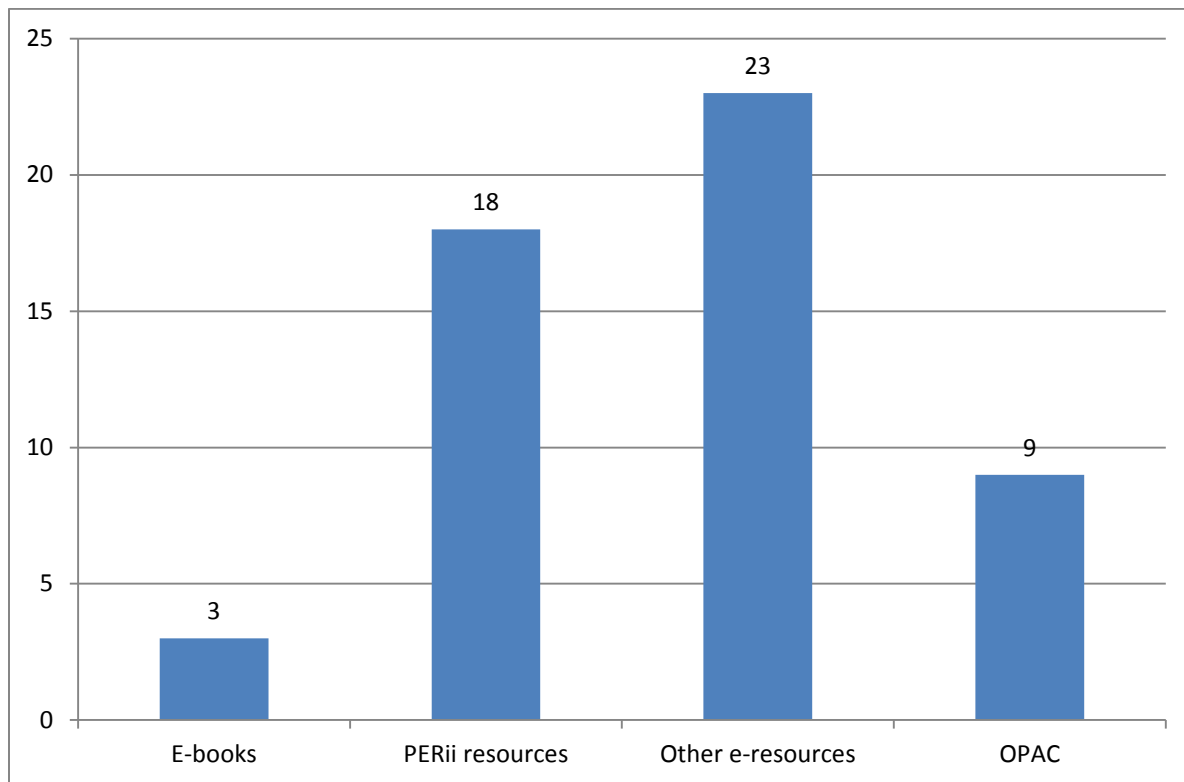


Figure 1: Types of resources consulted

Responses indicate that 23 (43%) out of 53 students said they access other electronic resources other than e-books, PERii resources or OPAC. 18 (34%) said they access PERii resources, 3(6%) said e-books while 9(17%) said the library OPAC. During the study, it was observed that students had used other electronic resources such as journal databases (mostly open access) that are not part of PERii resources and portals such as Tanzania Online and other subject gateways available on the web. PERii resources refers to electronic journal databases that the library subscribes to the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), PERii being a Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information. In addition to PERii resources, the library has subscribed to over 800 e-books covering a wide range of subjects. The library has an online public access catalogue(OPA)that facility at access to books available in library collections.

Purposes for consulting electronic resources

Respondents were asked to point at purposes of using electronic resources. The purpose of this question was to find out whether, by consulting resources, respondents had reasons for getting assistance from librarians. Figure 2 below summarizes their results.

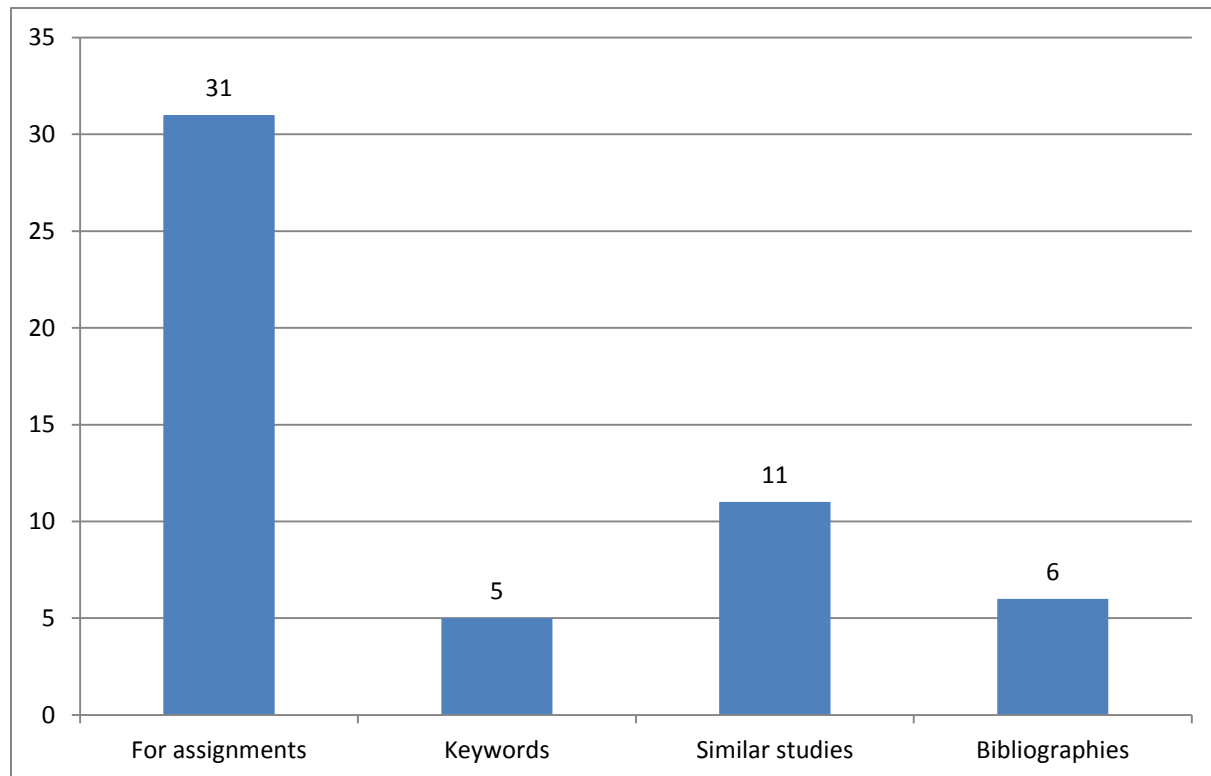


Figure 2: The purposes for consulting electronic resources

Respondents were asked to state reasons for consulting electronic resources. Responses are presented in Chart 3 above. For example in this study, 31(59%) out of the 53 respondents said they consult e-resources in order to complete assignment questions, 11(21%) said to acquire information about similar studies, 6(11%) said for bibliographies to identify useful references and 5(9%) said to find keywords to facilitate in information searches in databases and on the Internet. Since most students are at coursework stage, they prefer to consult electronic resources to complete their assignments. However, others said they use electronic resources to check similar

topics, pick out relevant bibliographic styles and keywords to search for resources on the Internet.

Methods used by customers to approach librarians

Respondents were asked to indicate methods they use to approach librarians. Figure 3 below summarizes the results.

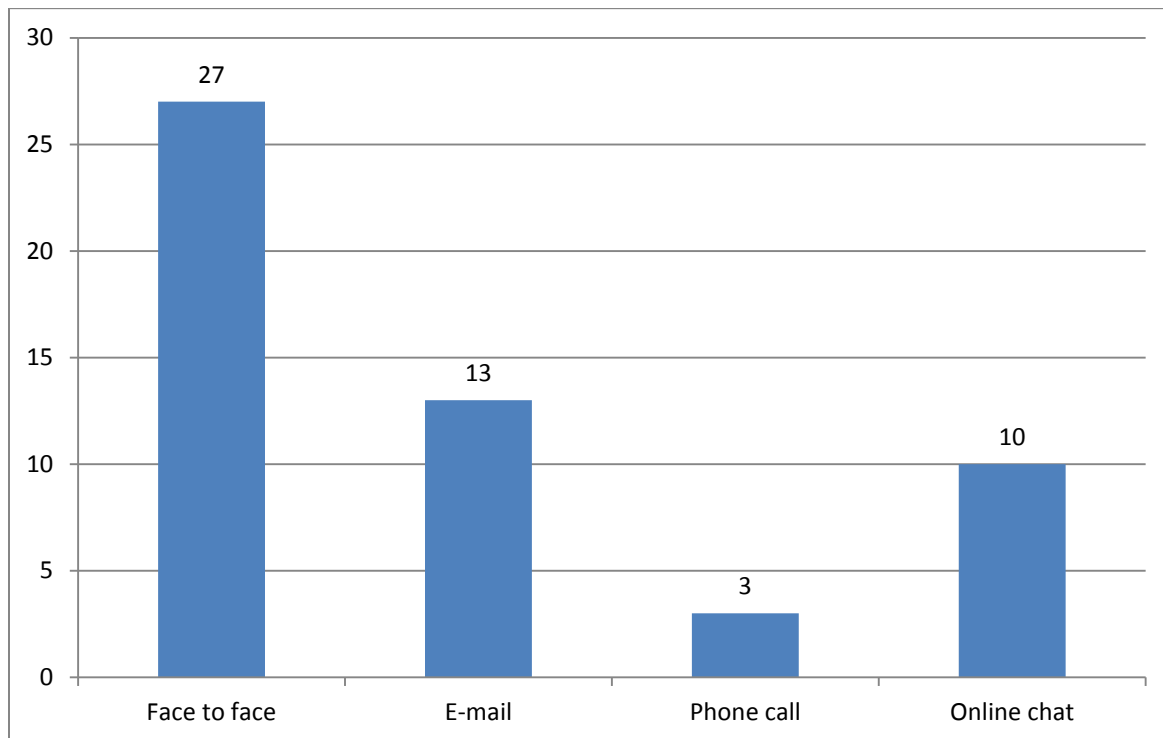


Figure 3: Methods used by customers to approach librarians

Results from the study revealed that 27(51%) out of 53 respondents said they approach librarians face to face while 13(24%) respondents said the contact librarians by e mail and 3(6%) said the use phone calls and 10(19%) use online chats. Face to face interactions were considered the most appropriate due to the fact that other services are either too expensive (such as phone calls) or simply because respondents are not aware of them.

Type of customer support requested

Respondents were asked to mention types of customer support they request from librarians. Figure 4 below summarizes their responses.

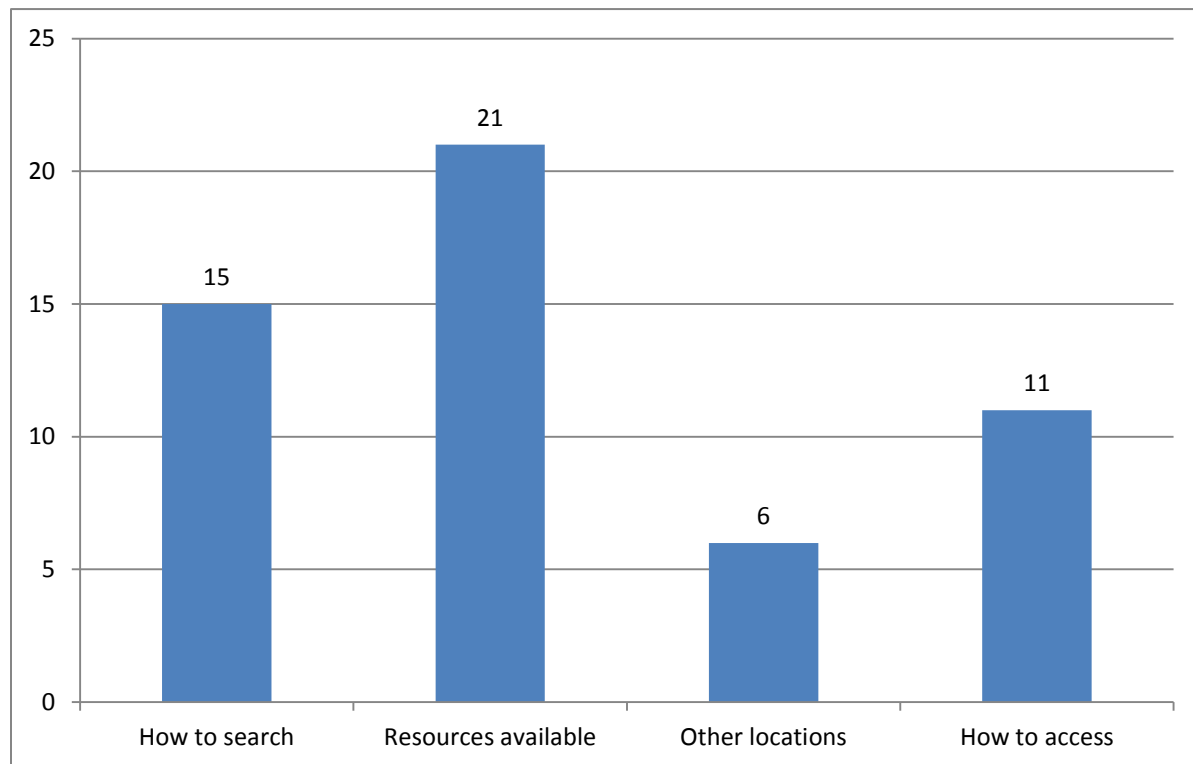


Figure 4: Type of customer support requested

Results from the study revealed that 21 (40%) out of the 53 respondents said the support they request for is related to availability of resources, 15(28%) said they seek for support on how to search for resources, 11(21%) said the ask for support on knowing how to access searched resources and 6 (11%) seek support on where and how to locate electronic resources outside the library. It was further revealed that most respondents approach librarians to request for information on the availability of certain types of electronic resources such as particular journal titles, electronic books and others while others seek guidance on how to search and retrieve materials they need or have identified Others wanted to know where else they could find electronic resources other than the library. Respondents were asked to indicate how long it takes librarians to attend to queries. Most respondents said it does not take long to get responses to their queries, at least two days. They were then asked the extent to which librarians attend to them. Figure 5 below summarizes their responses.

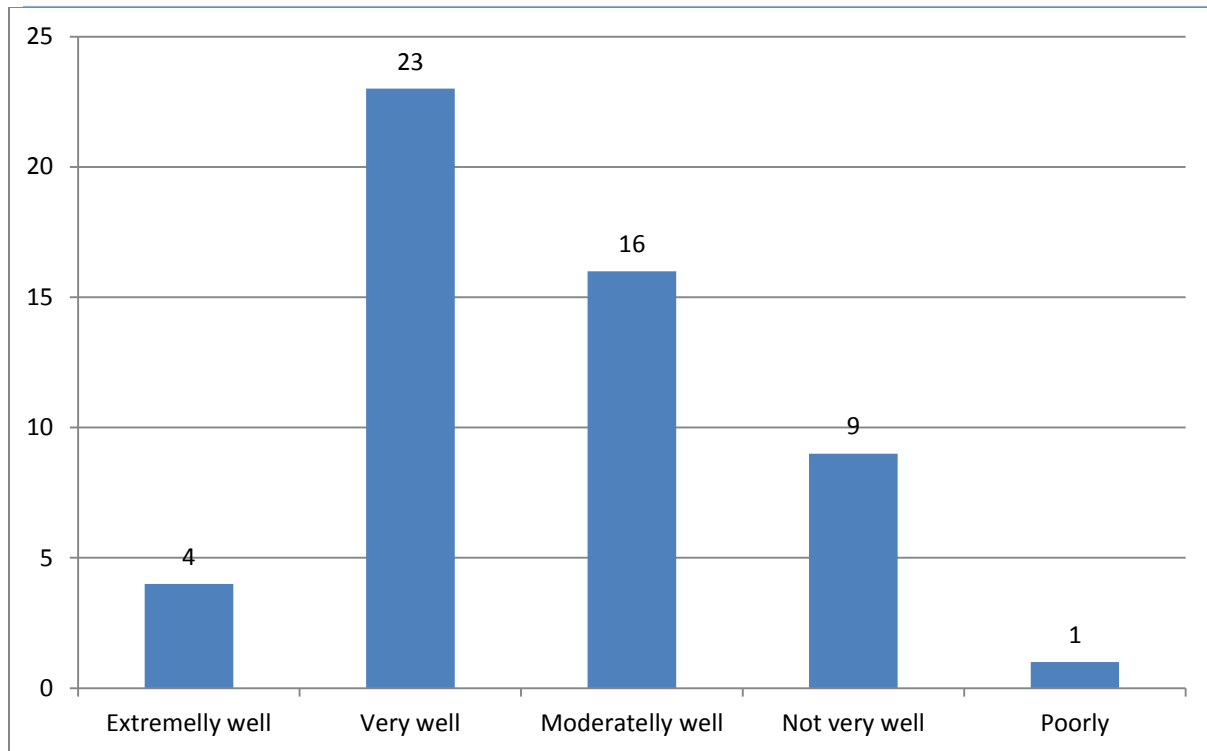


Figure 5: How well librarians attended the queries

Figure 5 shows that out of 53 respondents, 23(43%) said they are well attended to while 16(30%) said moderately well attended, 9(17%) said not very well attended to, 4(8%) said well attended and only one respondent indicated that he was poorly attended to by librarians. Respondents were also asked to indicate if librarians are knowledgeable in the responses they gave. In general most respondents confirmed that librarians are moderately knowledgeable regarding responses they provide to customers. By contrast very few respondents indicated that librarians demonstrated in their responses to customer queries. Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate whether the information given by librarians was clear enough. The intention was to find out whether information supplied by librarians was understood by users. Figure 6 below summarizes their results.

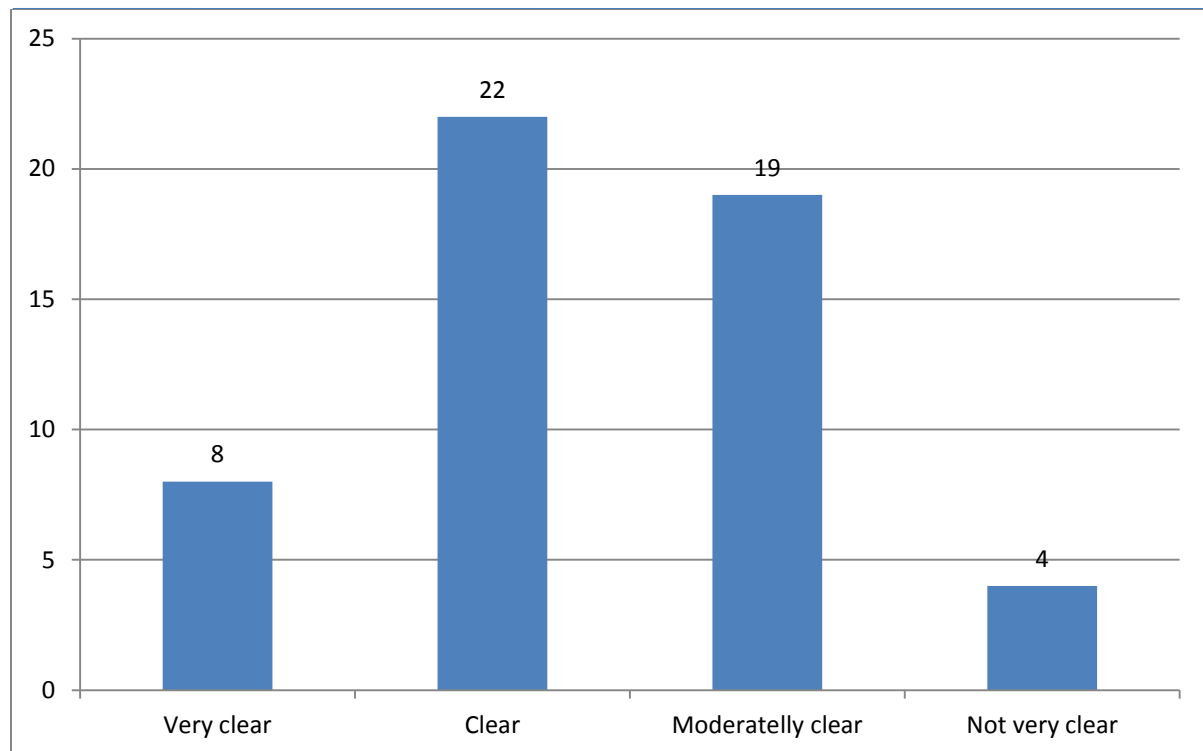


Figure 6: How clear was the information given by librarians.

Results reveal that out of 53 respondents, 22(41%) indicated clear, 19(36%) moderately clear, 8(15%) indicated very clear while 4(8%) indicated not very clear and slightly clear.

Users' experience with customer service offered by the librarian

Respondents were asked to comment on their experiences with regard to information given by users. The purpose of this question was to find out users' opinion on their satisfaction with the type of information given by librarians. Figure 7 below summarizes their results.

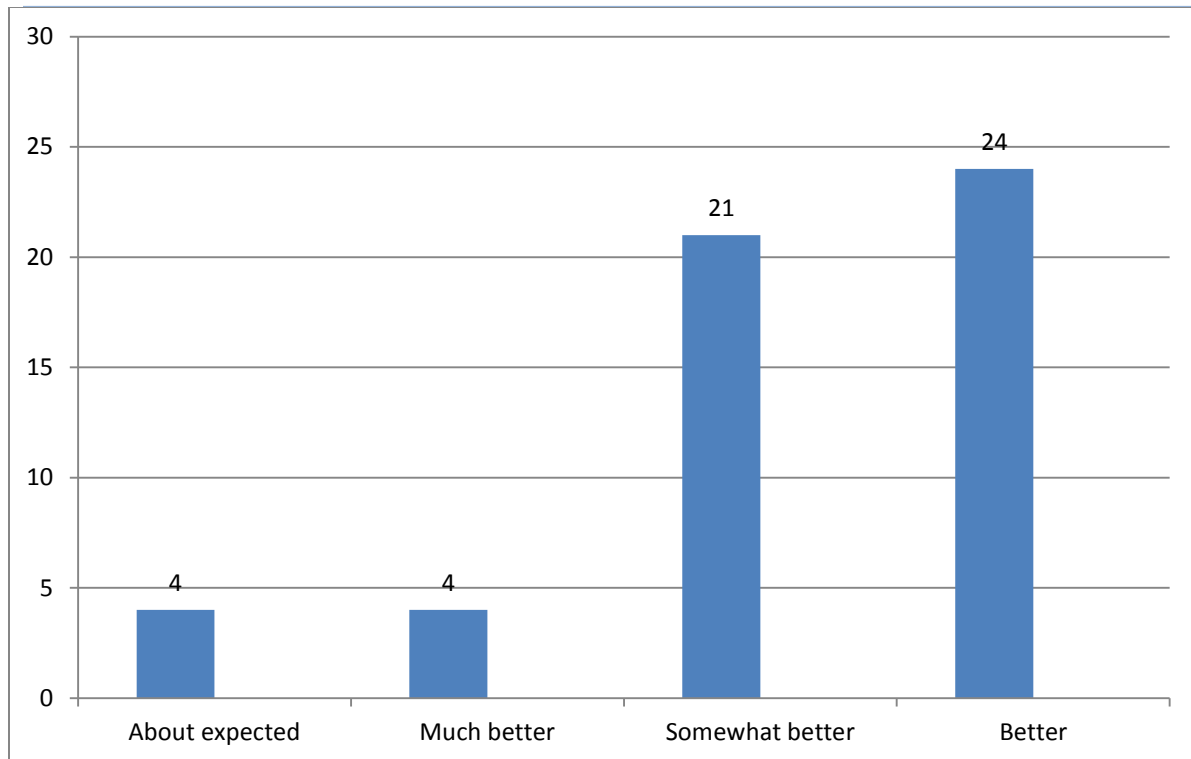


Figure 7: Users' experience with customer service offered by librarians

Results from the study indicate that out of 53 respondents, 21(40%) were of the view that that the information was somewhat better, 24(45%) said better, 4(7%) said much better while 4(7%) said t the information was about expected. Generally it was felt that the information given was what the respondents expected from librarians.

Problems experienced by users regarding customer services at UDSM library and suggested measures for improvements

Respondents were asked to comment on problems they experienced while seeking assistance from librarians. The purpose of the question was to find out problems that customers experienced from librarians when seeking information from reference librarians.

Respondents identified a number of problems, including lack of appropriate communication skills among librarians in dealing with customers, staffing shortages, slow response rates from librarians to customer queries and inadequate number of facilities such as computers, slow Internet connection, frequent electricity power cuts , as shown by a number of customer comments below:

“Communication problems: Librarians do not have good communication skills to handle customers”

[Respondent 12]

“There is no orientation for post graduate students on how to use e-resources. I get some instructions at mid of semester on Peri resource available at UDSM by then I had already done my assignment and missed some relevant information”.[Respondent 7]

“Most of the time librarians are not close to users so as to enable them to assist customers help. This is because those who are at the service desk are overwhelmed due to staffing shortage who are also overwhelmed by the number of patrons at the reference desk of inquiry. Due to this, when users fail to get what they want they usually go away from the library and look for other alternatives”. [Respondent 3]

At some points, respondents commented that the service is not a problem but the infrastructure lets it down:

“Sometimes when we are about to complete our searches we experience power cuts” [Respondent 5].

“Some materials found in East Africana Collection such as Dissertations are not in the database system of then UDSM Library OPAC”. [Respondent 8].

“Failure to access some electronic resources due to requirement of passwords”.[Respondent 2].

In addition to the challenges, respondents gave out various suggestions as follows:

“In all areas or stations where electronic service are provided a librarian near to provide services

Librarians should stop being passive, instead they but to be innovative on in different ways so as to improve the quality of services. This does not need much training but it is a matter of professionalism.”

However, one respondent was very positive when he suggested services should be expanded to all users at the university:

“Electronic resources are good and current in nature, I appreciate the customer services provided at UDSM library on using e-resource but they need to extend time on provision of this services to cater for the needs of all users across campus”.[Respondent 15].

Based on these comments, it is clear despite the challenges, users do appreciate the electronic services offered by University librarians at UDSM

Discussions of key findings

Face-to-face service provision by librarians

Results from the study reveal generally that the most common approach generally used by customers to approach librarians is face to face interaction. This traditional approach, even though being supplemented by virtual reference services, is still important as it draws attention to librarians the need for quick and direct response to queries by customers. Other studies on customer services for librarians reveal that face to face approach is useful in making customers determine whether or not a librarian is friendly and approachable, as opposed to online services. Face to face approach helps librarians to convey trust in customers especially when they send their requests and get expected results (Rajesh, 2003). However, with regard to the University of Dar es Salaam library, the issue had to do with the absence of e-reference services than simply the librarians' quick delivery of services face to face, or trust. The library had just implemented an online reference service whose usage rate is not significantly satisfactory. This calls for further investigations on whether there is a need to further improve such services for the purpose of effectively serving library customers and in meeting their needs

Resources mostly consulted by customers

It was further revealed based on the results of the study that library users consult a wide range of electronic resources other than those available under the e PERii programme, electronic books and the library's OPAC. This happened unintentionally due to the fact that other resources such as PERii were either not very well marketed, and people lacked knowledge of their usage or sometimes because the subscribed resources were not more up to date compared to other resources. Despite their presence, resources such as PERii registered low usage among users than other Internet resources such as free journal databases, digital repository materials or websites (Wema & Manda, 2011). University of Dar es Salaam had subscribed to more than 800 electronic books but at the time of this study these resources were no longer accessible to users. Therefore it is very possible that electronic books accessed by users were either those from Google or other digital repositories that offer free electronic books to users. The library has



implemented an integrated OPAC system which however, registered low usage by customers. This has also been a common problem in other universities (as observed by other authors such as Ruzegwa, 2011) who argues that the use of OPACs could be constrained by various factors including visibility of search features, accessibility, usability and navigation. Other factors inhibiting the use of OPACs include lack of awareness of their presence, irregular power supply, Internet connectivity problems as well as poor search skills (Fabunmi & Asubiojo, 2013). It is not surprising therefore, to find that the same challenges also hampered usage of OPAC by customers who accessed electronic resources at the University of Dar es Salaam library.

Challenges experienced by users when receiving support from librarians

Despite good attendance of customers by librarians' and despite positive customer opinions on types of services offered by librarians at the University of Dar es Salaam, a number of challenges were noted. These included lack of appropriate communication skills among librarians dealing with customers, limited human resources, slow response rates to customer queries from librarians and inadequate number of computers, slow Internet connectivity, unreliable electricity power supply and others. Some of the aforementioned challenges can have a negative impact on service delivery in libraries leading to customer dissatisfaction and dysfunctional behavior (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). However, it should be noted that due to the nature of their work, not all librarians have the requisite customer care skills. In view of this it is recommended that in order to establish an effective customer service plan in libraries, there should be a well-established customer-driven systems managed by customer-friendly members of staff (Hong & Mia, 2007). Due to challenges noted in various libraries resulting from poor facilities management, intermittent services, weak communication, imbalances in relations among parties and socio-cultural factors, librarians are urged to take a different approach in enhancing customer services in libraries. These include understanding socio-cultural differences among customers that might otherwise affect relations, being transparent and accountable. They should also train themselves on appropriate customer care services that are important in accommodating customers from different cultural backgrounds (Smart, 2013).

Conclusion and recommendations

Generally, study findings revealed a positive attitude among customers towards librarians when they approach librarians to request for service with regard to accessing and using electronic resources. Librarians performed their work of service provision and equally attended with professionalism. Customers also appreciated their quick response to queries. Generally customers were satisfied with services offered by librarians. However, a number of challenges were identified by customers ranging from lack of customer care skills among librarians to poor Internet connectivity, insufficient number of computers and low level of awareness among users on available electronic resources.

Based on the findings above, there is a need to re-design customer care services in libraries. Libraries should introduce more efficient customer support services. These should be in place bearing in mind the varying socio-cultural diversities among customers. This study revealed that a number of customers were not aware of available electronic resources such as PERii and the library OPAC. As such there is a need for libraries to market their available resources so as to attract wider customer community usage of these resources which may in turn optimize their usage. Due to a lack of customer care services skills among librarians, coupled with poor communication skills and slow responses in dealing with customer queries, it is that customer-related skills should be taught to librarians to enable them serve customers well, also bearing in mind socio-economic diversities among user communities they serve.

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