Reference desk service: Is it relevant to the undergradutes?

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to assess the relevant of the function and role of reference desk services at Malaysian academic libraries. A number of the twenty respondents were involved from two libraries, which are Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak (PTAR), UiTM Puncak Alam and Perpustakaan Tunku Tun Aminah (PTTA), UTHM Johor. This study requires convenience sampling of an accurate census of active library members. Hence, the result of this study revealed that students express their need for the kind of help provided by the reference desk in terms of how students use and describe the desk service. This study indicated that student at UTHM were prefer online information searching rather than UiTM student. Usage patterns can also be predicted in terms of age, gender, and semester, indicating a way for the library to provide specific outreach to students who underutilized the reference desk. In this regard, the pilot project of this study can be used to seek whether this service is still relevant or not when experiencing declining reference desk questions from library users.

Keywords: Academic libraries; Reference desk; Desk service; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Reference librarians in academic libraries are actively engaged with many emerging new processes. It's not only by which learning occurs, but also by which research is done. Nowadays, 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 or however we (library) provide reference service, we are all cognizant of the major changes in libraries that stem from countless cultural, economic, legal and social developments that have impacted, and continue to impact our work. The provision of reference services has still at the heart of all libraries in every sector, which is in academic, public or special. The Internet era has changed the way of user access and retrieve the information. It was the exclusive preserve of the "Reference librarian" to provide information directly to the client. Pomerantz and Luo (2006) stated, the increasing availability of computers and Internet access within libraries and in

modern society at large. In fact, online services have become among the most heavily used services libraries offer. According to Pomerantz and Luo, reference service that offered by the library, whether at the desk or asynchronous media such as email and chat. It is generally provided in an interactive setting which involves two parties between the librarian and the user to solve user's problem. Tripathi (2014) noted that to establish a long term bonding with their customers, they supposed to provide "right information to the right user at the right time". According to Tripathi, "Right information" is a set of guidelines for information acquisition policy to be adopted by the library.

The raising of the Internet has given challenges to the librarian on duty at the reference desk. 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) and Elmborg (2013) noted 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. A study done by Vondracek (2007) proved that user relatively unaware of librarians' capabilities. He stated that students were unaware the librarians had subject specialties. It is true and to be truth, student unaware of librarian skills because they think that the librarian is a part administrative worker like others in the university who gives and assist student needs.

Iberahim and Nadzar (2011) in their study found that most of the 17.5 percent of the students was very rarely used (at least monthly) the reference desk service. The frequency of inquiries posed (questions or problems) that are considered not very often is higher by 40 percent. This issues 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). Library user is helped by the variety of sources available in the library to meet the information needs. But, in this present era, the library and information profession is facing the challenges so called 'electronic age' and being transformed by technology. So, the advancement in Information Technology (IT) has brought out incredible changes almost every aspect of information services (Maharana & Panda, 2005).

The library and information professional is also facing the challenges of the electronic age and all these developments gave 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 user's satisfaction with the reference desk service, 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 which are (1) to assess user 'level of satisfaction' of reference desk service and (2) to improve reference desk service toward user satisfaction. This study presents the following two research questions to support the research objectives as follows, (1) how satisfied user used reference desk service

provided by academic library? And (2) what should academic libraries apply to meet their user satisfaction?

In this regard, the evaluations about the relevancy of reference desk service at Malaysian academic libraries, therefore, traditionally taken into consideration the points of view of both of these parties such as the accuracy of the answer provided by the librarian and the user's satisfaction with the answer and other aspects of the reference desk service.

METHODOLOGY

This study consisted of approximately twenty convenience sampling users from two libraries, which are 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 visiting the library frequently. The subjects are selected just because they are easiest to recruit for this study and the researcher did not consider selecting subjects that are representative of the entire population. This is the reason why most researchers rely on this convenience sampling technique, because it is fast, inexpensive, easy and the subjects are readily available. Hence, a set of twenty structured questionnaire was developed 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 meant to collect data on the reader's advisory desk service, i.e. Use of Reference Desk, where to go for help, reason for never visiting the reference desk, while Part "C" collected data on the comment and suggestion.

FINDINGS

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

Figure 2 presents the result of responses acquired from each university where there go for help when they have a question about finding information. In UTHM, most of the 70% of responses were highly use welcome desk rather than UiTM which is only 10%. However, 40% of the responses at UiTM were likely use circulation desk rather than UTHM. Besides, 50% of responses from UiTM were like to use advisory reference desk rather than UTHM which indicates 30% of usage. Surprisingly, UiTM and UTHM libraries indicate 0% of the other services (i.e. E-mail, Ask a librarian, Chat, FAQ, User Feedback form service and Collaborative Reference Service).
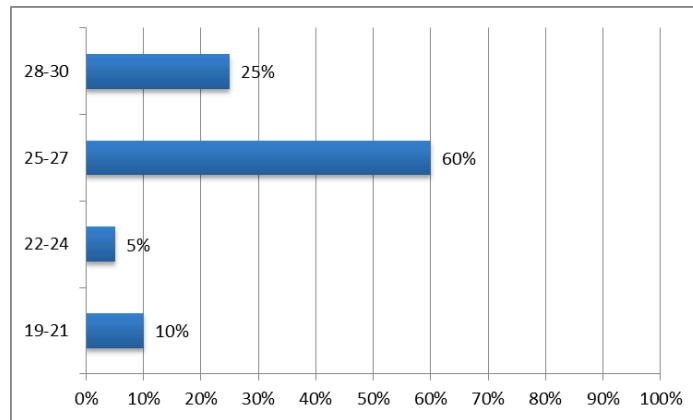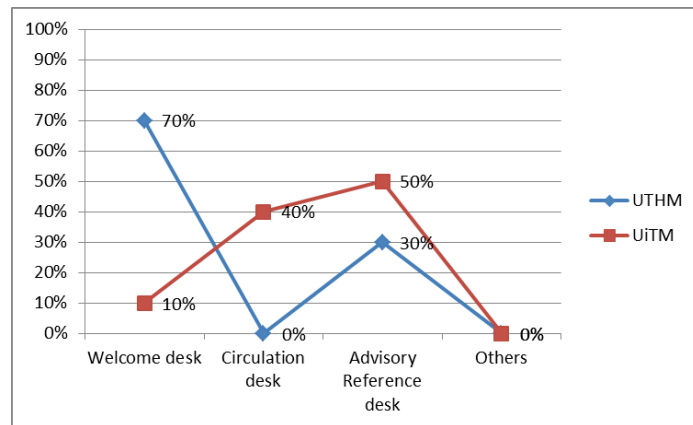
Figure 1: Age of respondents

Figure 2: Where to go for help

Figure 3 indicates the result of respondents for those using Reference Desk. The results show that 80% of UiTM respondents were rated "Yes" in using Reference Desk. But, 40% of UTHM respondents were rated lower. However, 60% of UTHM respondents were rated "No" rather than 20% of UiTM respondents. This is possible because of the information technology (IT) took place in searching information around the globe.

Figure 4 presents the result of respondents which asked their reason for using Reference desk. The results show that both UTHM and UiTM respondents were rated 10% by using once a week. On the other hand, the results show that 80% of UTHM respondents were rated higher using twice a week reference desk rather than 30% of UiTM respondents. Others, the results show that 50% of UiTM respondents were using reference desk services three times a week. However, the results show that both UiTM and UTHM respondents were rated 10% of others using the reference desk service.
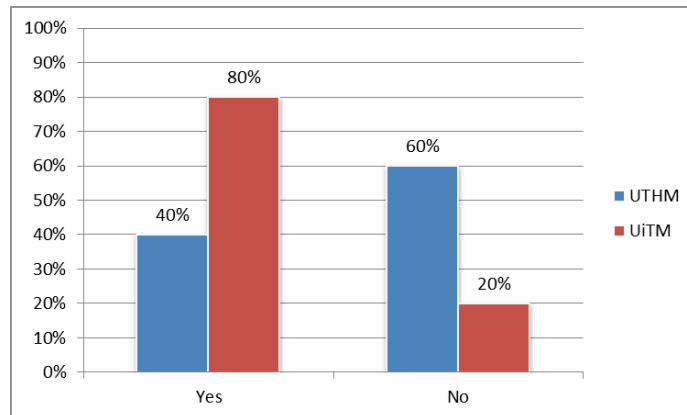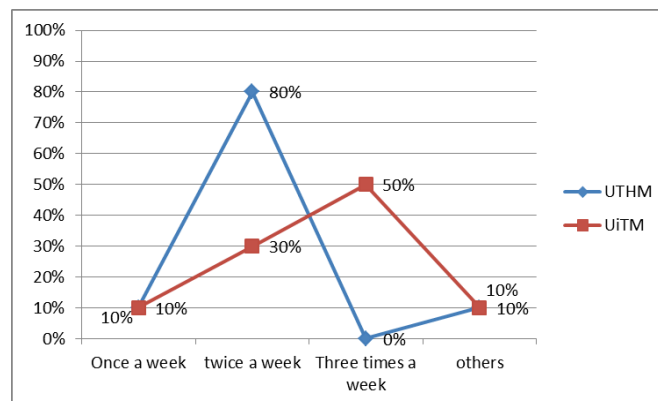
Figure 3: Use of Reference Desk

Figure 4: Reference desk usage

Figure 5 indicates the result of reason students never visiting the reference desk. About 10% of UiTM respondents did not know where the reference desk located while UTHM respondent was rated none. Besides, 10% of UiTM respondents were rated already know about the information. 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 were highly stated that they prefer online searching rather than visiting to get desk service. Therefore, Figure 5 indicates an interesting significance gaps between respondents in PTTA UTHM and PTAR UiTM. In this regard, users at PTAR UiTM did not so much depend on online searching because they learned and understand that information could be retrieved in any format (e.g. Almanac, Cassette, Video Tapes, Newspaper Cutting, etc.) everywhere at any time. This results are the outcomes from the collection, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of data. In fact, the value of this study (e.g. Fig.5) will become a contribution to the body of knowledge, so that, they could further study to perceive why users recently becoming so excited and dependent in using online searching.
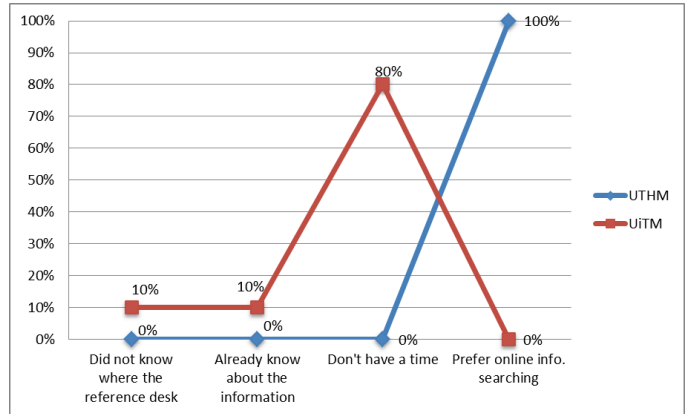
Figure 5: Reason for never visiting the reference desk

Figure 6 indicates the results of the satisfaction level of library reference desk service. 10% of respondents were rated not satisfied by UiTM while 20% were rated by UTHM. However, UiTM and UTHM were rated 80% highly satisfied with their reference desk service. Another 10% of UiTM respondents were rated very satisfied with their reference desk service, however, UTHM respondents were rated none.
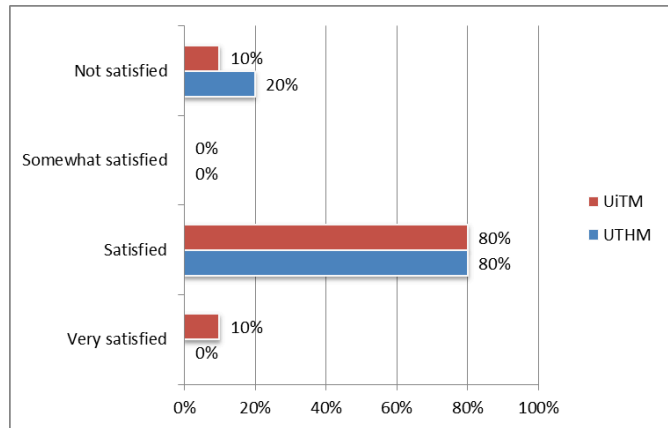

Figure 6: Level of satisfaction

Discussion and Conclusion

The relevancy of reference desk service in the university libraries depends on the customers demand. After presenting the findings, the objectives of the study were achieved. Firstly, respondents from both universities agreed that they do practice using welcome desk, circulation desk and reference desk in finding information. These findings lead to some understanding of the working conditions of para-professionals at information and reference desks (Rieh, 1999). Librarians and desk staff currently need to explore the possibility of desk staff assisting liaisons with creating online subject guides and engaging, in other activities, to give the staff important experience and to assist liaisons with substantial non-liaison duties (Schulte, 2011). Furthermore, customers needing in-depth consultations with a reference librarian (Schulte, 2011), which they want to asked everything when they need help during reference desk hours.

Secondly, the level of user satisfaction presents almost 80% of the respondents both university satisfied with reference desk service. A study done by Garrison (2011) revealed that 80% of reference desk statistics and questions kept through Library Statistics (LibStats) had already informed what other academic libraries were already reporting. 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, policy maker (e.g. Chief Librarian) decision should be made to change the functions and capabilities of reference desk service in the digital age. For instance, the changing function and capabilities of reference desk service from physical into Online/Virtual environment in the technological era to encounter customers demand. It is important to continuously thrive for deriving tools and techniques where the individual user gets the feel of connectivity with their information providers (Tripathi, 2014).

Into this transition, Garrison (2011) noted that university libraries have identified several weaknesses with current practices and they are working toward making adjustments to improve the service. These include increased training and cross-departmental communication. 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 regard, Nolen (2010) recommended all questions that asked by library users can become easier to apply in the context of chat or email reference. Therefore, these services allow librarians to enter an extended reference encounter with a patron/user. For example, Chat programs that librarians can walk a user through a complex search, with the user having the opportunity to perform the search on their own, but with the librarian "virtually" nearby in the event that he or she runs into difficulty. As to collaborative live virtual reference, Su (2007) and Light et al. (2014) stated most librarians were aware that in America it became a trend to provide reference service through instant message depicted in Figure 7. In fact, Su (2007) noted that some of them have already learned how to use IM software (e.g. MSN) and practiced communicating with friends and students through IM. However, most respondents thought that face-to-face service was still not replaceable. This study suggests that Malaysian academic libraries should execute this system to be more interactive and always keep in touch with their users when needed.

In this context, it is inevitable for a library to provide richer information diets to their customers for fulfilling their information needs. This reality is very well felt by the developed world and in those countries reference and information services have seen revolutionary changes to meet the new challenges of the digital age. This study investigated the overall user's perception and satisfaction with reference services in university libraries between UTHM library and UiTM library. This study urges to assess user 'level of satisfaction' of reference desk service in Malaysia. The researchers hope that this study will further motivate the future research. This comparative study result suggests that user needs and demands should pay attention for the improvement of present level of user satisfaction.
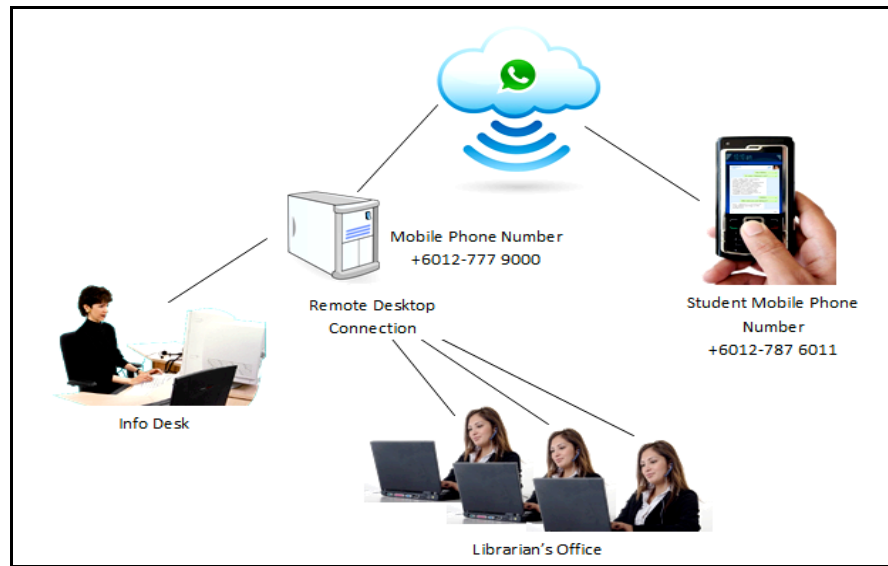
Source: Hong Kong University Science and Technology (HKUST) reference service

Figure 7: Reference service through instant messaging

Keeping this reality into view, the survey was an initial step for finding the status of such activities in the largest Province of Malaysia. On the basis of the findings of the study, some recommendations are made, which are as follows:

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 usability.
3. The reference staff should be trained for future service development in maintaining a high level of user 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/report research should be conducted at the macro and micro levels on different aspects of reference services.
7. Both universities should pay special attention in online or virtual training so that they (librarian) becoming more knowledgeable.

As a conclusion, this study suggests that both university libraries should emphasis on developing an assessment technique, measures, standards and IFLA/ALA guidelines so that librarians could provide better digital reference service to their users. It is hoped that this comparative study can be used to assess the relevant of a physical reference desk or as a springboard for considering other multi-tasking options when experiencing declining reference desk questions. Hence, this study open for discussions among librarians around the world to improve their research to discover the relevancy, reliability and sustainability of reference desk service in the digital world. Contributions

found in this study will be useful for the improvement library facilities and the betterment of the library profession to serve as a contribution to the body of knowledge in the relevancy of reference desk service offered in the library facilities.

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