

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FRIENDLY LIBRARY: ARE WE THERE YET?

<sup>1</sup>Radia Banu Jan Mohamad , <sup>2</sup>Mohd Kamal Mohd Napiah and <sup>2</sup>Cik Ramlah Che Jaafar

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Senior Librarian

Hamzah Sendut Library, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Main Campus

<sup>2</sup> Librarian

Hamzah Sendut Library, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Main Campus

### ABSTRACT

*The number of international students attending universities in Malaysia particularly Universiti Sains Malaysia has been increasing steadily in recent years. This trend poses a challenge to the academic library in providing a high quality information services to meet the needs and expectations of students. For that reason, this paper aims to examine the usage of library services by international students in Hamzah Sendut Library, Universiti Sains Malaysia, thus focusing on securing a deeper understanding of the relevant issues involving the group such as frequency of library use, participation in library programme and satisfaction with library facilities and services. The study used quantitative approach where questionnaires were distributed to the respondents by hand and through online survey. Survey results present new perspectives on how Library should cater to international students with various needs, expectations and educational background. About 249 international students responded to the survey and most of them have been staying in Malaysia for less than 3 years with average age between 27-39 years old. The respondents claimed that accessing to the reading materials and study areas were among the main reasons for visiting or using the library. It was also found that the respondents participated quite actively in library activities especially in Information Literacy and Endnote class. Majority of international students prefer to communicate with Library in person compared to other ways of communication. Besides that, most of the respondents stated that Library website has been providing them with useful information thus meeting their needs. The implications of this study could be used to further improve library services in meeting the specific needs of the group so as to support the information competence, retention and academic success of international students in USM.*

**KEYWORDS:** *International students, Library services, Library Usage*

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysian's goal of becoming a developing country by the year 2020 has brought a wide spectrum of changes to the nation. Among them is Government's aim to make Malaysia a center of excellence for higher education in the region. Internationalization of higher education is one of the most important initiatives which have been put forward to realize this aim and refers to the policies of the academic institutions to deal with global trends (Pang, 2005). A recent book, Higher Education and the International Student Mobility in the Global Knowledge Economy, reports that "the global knowledge economy and international student mobility are mutually reinforcing one another and changing the higher education landscape worldwide" (Guruz, 2008).

Malaysia, with its reputation for academic excellence, is an international education hub attracting students from many different countries around the world to pursue higher education. Besides that, education has been identified as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) and Malaysia is striving to position itself as a stable, safe and relatively cheap place for international students to study. Recent figure shows there are 87,322 international students in Malaysia (24,617 in public institutions and 62,705 in private institutions). 9,002 of these international students are pursuing PhDs, 11,673 Masters and 35,347 their Bachelor degrees while the rest are attending diploma and certificate-level courses (Chapman, 2012). In collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia is targeting 200,000 international students enrolled in the country's higher education institutions by 2020.

The Universiti Sains Malaysia is one of the 17 public universities in Malaysia. Established in 1969, USM has been chosen as the first university to be conferred the APEX (Accelerated Program for Excellence) status by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2008. Since its inception, the number of postgraduate international students has increased threefold spanning more than 50 nationalities (Dzulkifli and Ramli, 2008). To date, the total populations of USM students are 27,849 and from that, about 2,648 are international students (USM, 2012). Among its transformation plans, the university endeavors to attract international students and accelerate the internationalization of USM to even higher with a wider diversity. This can be achieved through the enhancement of quality services by fostering and encouraging a friendly service environment for students.

To support USM transformation plans, library has to play important role in meeting this culturally heterogeneous group of information needs. Library can assist them through providing high quality facilities and services to better meet their academic needs for academic success. It is important for the library to strengthen itself to be as an intellectual gathering place and a continually evolving information commons specifically for international students. For that reason, this study was carried out to examine the usage of library services by international students in Hamzah Sendut Library, Universiti Sains Malaysia which is focusing on the relevant issues involving the group such as frequency of library use, participation in library program and satisfaction with library facilities and services.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In accordance with the globalisation, Malaysia has become a preferred destination to pursue higher education. Generally, in macro level, students choose to study overseas in order to get new experience, in terms of learning system and culture. They pinioned that the foreign university which was chosen would supply them with quality education way better than their own country. Considering that the fees of studying in other foreign countries has increased, Malaysia has become the best option to pursue higher education for many international students. Malaysia offers quality education with affordable tuition fees and value for money, the moderate cost of living, political stability and experience of different cultures and ethnic groups living in harmony. (Institut Penyelidikan Pengajian Tinggi Negara (IPPTN), 2009).

Senior, et al. (2008) stresses that globalization also means that universities need to equip all their graduates with appropriate attributes for employment and citizenship in a globalised world. Through providing resources, study and social space and teaching information skills, academic libraries can also help to foster an international environment in the library which enriches the experience of both home and international students. It was also mentioned that international students bring cultural and intellectual diversity and, in times of decreased public funding, contribute essential income. Success in attracting large numbers of international students, in particular at postgraduate level, is also a source of prestige for universities by signaling their world class status.

Carroll and Ryan (2005) defines international students as: "...we speak of international students when we mean students who have chosen to travel to another country for tertiary study ... most of their previous experience will have been of other educational systems, in cultural contexts and sometimes in a language that is different from the one in which they will now study."

Chapman (2009) mentions that a high quality student experience at university is the key to the success of the university and its reputation. The quality of the student experience is a measure of the success of the provision of teaching and learning, including library provision. As mentioned, across the world there are now many students who choose to study in countries other than their own thus being an international student can be daunting for such people and the library can provide a safe haven for them as a place where they will feel welcome.

Schaffer, Vardaman and Miller (2010) claims that even though there are specific locales on campus designed for international students to gather, it is the library where they tend to cluster, because it is essentially a "perfect storm" of academic, telecommunication, and social resources, with lengthy hours of operation as well as access to communication tools such as Skype, instant messaging, and e-mail.

Studies focusing specifically on usage of libraries by students are few. Wells (1995) states that, the effectiveness of libraries has often been measured by the volume of library materials available to clients, the amount of use of services and resources, and the apparent or quantified satisfaction of clients. Very little research has taken into account the objectives of the clients.

Currently, due to an increase of enrolment of international students in higher education, many researchers have focused their research on the barriers or challenges that international students faced in usage of academic libraries for meeting their information needs (Liu, 1993; Onwuegbuzie and Jiao, 1997; Kumar and Suresh, 2000; Liestman, 2000; Baron and Strout-Dapa, 2001).

In relation to international students usage of libraries, Onwueigbuzie and Jiao (1997) mentions that libraries represent one area in which international students have to adjust. Hughes (2010) in her study also claims that previous research shows that at their host university, international students may encounter personal or study related

challenges, associated with language variations and unfamiliar social and educational practices. Challenges experienced by international students often extend to their library use and interactions with library staff.

“Students from other countries are accustomed to different library services and varying degrees of access to information...” (Jackson, 2005). In a similar study of incoming international students at Deakin University, McSwiney (2006) also comments on the diversity of students’ previous library experience. Some international students may be used to closed access libraries and to having materials brought to them by library staff. They may need more help in developing as independent learners, finding information for themselves and in using self-service systems. Books and other resources may have a Western or UK-centric perspective which international students may find difficult to relate to their own experience. Length of opening hours throughout the year, including vacations and public holidays, is important to many international students who are often more dependent than home students on the library for access to email and the internet, and as place to study.

Most international students, as indicated by Jackson (2005), in particular the students from East Asia, have prior experience and a well established habit of using libraries as a place to study, though they still need to get used to the organizational differences, understanding signposts, rules and regulations and library communications, such as voice announcements. A recent survey conducted at Durham University showed that 52% of students from Taiwan visited a library at least once a week and over 90% visited it at least once a month. It is important for libraries to create welcoming atmosphere and adjust library space to take account of the differences in learning styles, culture and language. Anxiety in an unfamiliar setting can also deter international students from entering and using the library as a study and social space.

Many of the earlier surveys show that international students lack the necessary exposure to computers to effectively utilize the growing online resources in the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic university library, but Jackson (2005) claims that now that we are fully entrenched in the digital age, more research is needed to determine the library needs of international students. A study to assess new international students’ current library needs that includes the students themselves is critical to the successful implementation of specialized library programs and services.

Li (2006) says “these special customers have offered librarians challenges and opportunities in exploring and addressing information needs of people from other cultural backgrounds...The knowledge and skills gained from helping this customer group will not only benefit the library’s clientele, but will also advance the librarian’s professional development”.

## **METHODOLOGY AND SURVEY**

Total number of USM students as 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 is 27,849 students. Among those number, 2,648 of them are international students, with 379 undergraduate students and 2,269 postgraduates. In order to enhance library services to cater to international students, library has come out with a survey to study the usage of the library by international students. Starting 6<sup>th</sup> Dec 2012 until 6<sup>th</sup> January 2013, 249 students of Universiti Sains Malaysia were surveyed. Questionnaires were distributed manually and online via email to USM International Students.

The study was divided into two parts; the first part will identify the demographic information of the students covering country of origin, level of study, years of staying at Malaysia, age group and gender. Part two sees the pattern of library usage by international students including visit frequency, reasons for visiting the library, participation in library activities, counters that are frequently approached, popular way of communicating, usefulness of library website and also an open ended question on how library could improve its services.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Demographic information**

Among 249 respondents, (62.86%) were male while (37.14%) were female. As to country of origin 163 (65.46%) were from Middle Eastern countries, 34 (13.65%) were from Asian countries, 23 (9.24%) were from the Indian region, while 5 (2.01%) were from African countries, and the rest of 24 (9.64%) are from other part of the world such as Canada, Columbia and Switzerland. In terms of level of study, most of them (66.94%) are pursuing Doctoral programme, followed by Master programme (29.84%) and only 8

(3.23%) respondents are doing Undergraduates study. This is due to a big ratio of Postgraduates International Students (2,269) in USM as compared to Undergraduates (379). Majority of the respondents (82.26%) have been staying in Malaysia for at least 3 years or less showing that they are quite new to the country environment. Age group of the students ranging from the youngest at 21 years old and below with only 3.24% to the oldest at 50 years old and above (3.24%), while majority of the students at the age of 27-39 years old (68.42%). The profile indicated that most of the international students in USM are matured students from Middle Eastern countries.

### **Pattern of library usage**

The second part of the survey reveals important information on how international students use the library. Frequency of library visits show 20.08% of them visit on daily basis, 28.92% students visit library weekly, monthly visit (22.89%), occasionally (26.51%) and only 4 students (1.61%) never visit the library at all. Majority of the respondents stated the main reasons of visiting the library were for the purpose of checking out books and utilizing the study area (represent 79.6%). While the rest of the students come to the library to use computers (11.90%) and discussion room (8.50%). Besides that, few students come to refer to theses collection and activate library membership.

Responses on the participation of the students in library program show most of them have attended information literacy skills or endnote classes and databases demonstration. However, only 12 students (6%) participated in Library Clients' day / Students' day program and unfortunately 25 (10.04%) students never participated at all in any of library's activities.

Survey also identified the counter which international students approach when they need help. The most approachable counter is circulation counter, followed by reference counter and i-counter. Furthermore, survey has identified that few students get confused with different types of counters available in the library. From the feedback, the students claim that: he/she had approached 'lost and found' counter which is actually i-counter, someone else referring to information desk which is also i-counter and few others simply put 'front counter' and 'I don't remember the name' that might be referring to any counter.

The survey has identified several communication tools which international students prefer to use when dealing with the library. More than half of international students (53.69%) who participated in this survey prefer interpersonal communication as their way of communicating with the library, while 41.39% of them will communicate via e-mail. The rest of respondents chose telephone, texting and facebook as the medium of communication with the library.

Library website plays an important role in disseminating information about library as well as providing valuable resources online. Hamzah Sendut Library website is using English language as the medium to interact with the users. According to international students who participated in this study, 203 (84.23%) of them found library website has provided useful information and meet their needs. While the rest (15.77%) don't think the library website fulfill their needs.

Response upon overall satisfaction on library shows that 72.07% of respondents satisfied with the current library provision. Another 23.89% are neutral and small percentage of 4.04% shows dissatisfaction with the library. The reasons for dissatisfaction somehow could be found through the open ended question on how Library could improve its services to the customers. The responses to this question could be divided into 4 categories namely collection, services, facilities and technology.

Collection: Most of the respondents asking for more update collection, while others complaining about books with the status of 'available' shown in the system, unfortunately unavailable on the shelf.

Services: Students repeatedly note about the difficulty in bringing their stuff without bag, because according to them, eco bag doesn't suit to bring heavy items. Students also raise up the issue of noise in the library especially among local students who tend to do discussion in an open study area.

Facilities: Some students express their dissatisfaction regarding the label/signage provided in Malay language, without giving any alternative language. The issue of temperature in the library is among the problem faced by the students, especially in the new library building. Several respondents suggest the management to provide water dispenser inside new library or providing a café for having hot drinks.

Technology: Complaints with regard to old computer and software, interrupted wireless connection, insufficient plug point for laptops and difficulty in getting into the online databases.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The essence of the international-friendly library is its creation of a welcoming and supportive environment for overseas students - one that facilitates their social adjustment and academic progress. Through the study, library finds out several recommendations or characteristics to be considered when dealing with international students.

The international students friendly library should play an important role as a:

### **Contact**

According to the finding, international students (53.69%) prefer to communicate face to face with the library staff. Therefore, the over-riding need for professional development in cross cultural awareness could be incorporated into customer service training of the library staff. Training should include:

- i. Recognition and avoidance of racist attitudes and stereotyping
- ii. Understanding cultural diversity
- iii. Recognition of the particular social, physical and emotional difficulties faced by international students.
- iv. Responding appropriately to different social customs and attitudes.
- v. Developing understanding and respect for different learning styles and traditions
- vi. Practical means of overcoming language barriers (training on improving the English language and interpersonal communication skills)

### **Information hub**

Eventhough most of the students have attended library programme namely information literacy skills classes, endnote and database demonstration, but 10% of the respondents never attended any library program at all. Therefore, a more serious effort on marketing, promotion and outreach for international students should be conducted to ensure that international students are aware of what the library offers and understand how it can help

them with their studies. Several efforts could be considered in approaching this agenda such as:

- i. Library induction course for international students and library tour
- ii. Library material which has an international focus or displays with an international element at university induction events can be very effective in attracting international students.

According to international students who participated in this study, (15.77%) do not think that the library website had fulfill their information needs. This could be catered by having:

- i. A simple, friendly and informative library web site or specific library web pages aimed at international students which includes: welcome messages in different languages, international students' orientation programmes, introductory library guides and audio tours in different languages, targeted information skills sessions, resources sections detailing foreign language newspapers, books and other media, links to dictionaries, translating services and other writing skills materials and glossaries of library terminology.
- ii. Series of podcasts in a variety of languages as a way of helping international students to learn about the library, what it can do and how it works.

In an open ended question posed to the respondents about overall satisfaction of the library, it was found that some international students shows dissatisfaction with the library in terms of collection. Recent research suggests a correlation between library collection development and international students support. Libraries can make available foreign language materials, such as newspapers and novels, to appeal to this group of students.

### **Referral center**

Survey also identified that circulation counter (43.07%), is the most approached counter when the international students are in need of help as compared to other counters such as reference and i-counter. From the results it shows that international students lack of conceptual awareness of library services. Kumar and Suresh (2000) found that the reference librarian role is unclear to most international students because they do not

know that a reference librarian's primary responsibility is to answer questions, and international students feel they are troubling the librarian with their queries.

Effective referral service could be easily adopted by library counter staff in order to enhance the delivery system of library services to international students. Mendelsohn discovered that quality reference involves a relationship between the user and librarian within a "Cycle of Dimension of Service" which involves willingness (to assist user); knowledge (how to assist user); assessment (of user's need), and action (physically moving with the user, getting up from behind the desk). According to Mendelsohn (1997), this Cycle assists in meeting the user's needs, teaches a research process, facilitates user independence, and ultimately results in quality reference service.

## **CONCLUSION**

An international-friendly library should be an ideal place to meet overseas students' need as 'an informed intermediary', through provision of information and referral services, with campus-wide offices and community links collaborating together to cater to this group of students.

Actually, international students face quite similar problems as local students in most of the cases with regard to the library. The difference could be the pattern of library usage. From this study, library is able to identify clearly the pattern of library usage among international students and also their needs, thus giving us ideas on how to successfully engaged with them in future undertakings.

It was also noted that most of the suggestions about facilities, collections, resources and staff that came out of the study would be helpful to any library patron regardless of language or cultural background. Paying attention to most of the points raised would not require the creation of new services devoted to a small segment of library users and would result in improvement of those already in place for all.

Throughout the years, library has been interacting with international students in a positive and negative situations. Those experiences, together with information that have been gained from the survey for sure will help the library in determining or enhancing

some activities to better suit the needs as well as improving our service provision to international students.

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