COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REFERENCE DESK SERVICES: THE CURRENT TRENDS IN A DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies show that library trends in reference usage patterns are shifting. User preference for using online resources is increasing and becoming more predominant in many Malaysian academic libraries. The decline in the number of students using the physical library has lessened the need for librarians. In order to get library resources, users do not have to be physically presents into the library building. User trends and patterns have changed and now library users favor the use of online assistance, consultation, advisory and guidance to meet their information needs. Changes in user query have impacted the way the library provides services, but traditional reference services will still remain as the core of information services. This paper aims to 1) provides a unique snapshot of a reference service in an academic library, where both online and offline reference services are taking place; 2) to described on how a reference services librarian may have the best influence on the visibility and operational of an academic library. By analyzing the trends from the usage statistics, this study can be used as a continuous improvement where reference librarians need to enhance their digital competencies in providing reference desk assistance.

Keywords: Reference Services, Information Services, Reference Librarian, Digital Competencies

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The main purposes of reference services are to meet the information research needs and to enable clients to learn strategies for information research and the use of information retrieval tools available through the library (Simmonds & Syed Saad Andaleeb, 2001). Recent studies show that library trends in reference usage patterns are shifting. User preference for using online resources is increasing and becoming more predominant in many Malaysian academic libraries. The decline in the number of students using the physical library has lessened the need for librarians. In order to get library resources, users do not have to be physically presents into the library building.

User trends and patterns have changed and now library user favor the use of electronic assistance, electronic consultation, electronic guidance and electronic library resources compared. According to (Diamond & Pease, 2001) as a strategy, librarians need to improve their methods for providing answers to questions posed in the digital environment. Changes in user query have impacted the way the library provides services, but traditional reference services will remains as the core of information services among academic libraries. Librarians need to explore the needs of their user, to ensure they are effectively reaching users who are no longer seeing the needs of coming to the library.

 In the academic setting, librarians could build good collaboration with faculty and provides reference assistance and guidance for students with many approaches which not necessarily are effectively served at a reference desk (Buckland, 2008). A good understanding of library services and engagement will enable faculty members to use the library more effectively as a learning resource for their students. This study provides a unique snapshot of a reference service in an academic library, where both online and offline reference services are taking place. This papers described on how a reference services librarian may have the best influence on the visibility, functionality and operational of an academic library. Stated by (Okoli, 2005) librarians of today must be ICT adequacy for effective reference services which will reveal their inadequacy to use and operate in the digital environment.

Objectives

This paper aims to 1) provides a unique snapshot of a reference service in an academic library, where both online and offline reference services are taking place; 2) to described on how a reference services librarian may have the best influence on the visibility and operational of an academic library. To address this need, by analyzing the trends from the usage statistics, this study can be used as a continuous enhancement where reference librarians need to enhance their ICT competencies in providing reference desk services in a digital reference environment.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Online Reference Service vs Offline Reference Service

The paradigm shift from stand-alone libraries to library and information networks, available via the Internet, can provide end-users with connection to Internet-based services. Moreover, we are surrounded by automated, digital, and virtual libraries as well as by networked data, specialized networks, and library networks. The field of reference service is vast and dynamic and many new developments have taken place in it during the last ten years. A decrease in directional questions and mediated searching and an increase in in-depth reference and consultations were observed where ready reference questions have remained a consistent proportion of all questions asked (Mastromatteo, 2009). In spite of increasing online access to both information resources and library services, more users' access reference services at the library reference desk than they do online.

As mentioned by (Groote et al., 2007) the total number of reference questions has disproportionately decreased despite the availability of online services, indicating a large gap between the questions once asked at the reference desk and the questions now asked either online or in person. While online reference is well established as a service, the technology employed by online reference is still developing rapidly. Reference librarian on duty should be able to provide equitable reference assistance to all clients regardless of whether the user has come to the library, telephoned, emailed, online chat or used other medium of communication technologies.

2.3 Digital Competencies of Reference Librarian

Developments in computers, microelectronics, and communication technologies have radically changed the library and information environment. Gone are the days of stand-alone libraries, in which a library was judged less by the quality of its resources and services than by the quantity of materials it had available. The introduction of end-user search systems beginning in the late 1980s initiated a wave of change at the traditional reference desk as users began to use library services in new ways (Kelley & Orr, 2003). Library users often approach the search for information without a clear concept of what they need. Reference staff should assist and guide to define their needs in terms of the type and amount of information required for their purpose.

According to (Scherrer & Jacobson, 2002) in response to falling entrance statistics and increasing online collections, libraries have reached out to patrons in new ways. These many changes have encouraged additional reevaluation of traditional reference services and initiation of new programs and services. Although different models of reference services have been studied exhaustively in libraries, there has been no empirical examination comparing both models of reference services

(traditional and virtual) at an academic library. The perceptions and needs of patrons are important to measures the quality and impact of reference services to meet their information needs. From current trends, academic library can develop user education program that highlighted several areas that were lacking by their user.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study will report the finding from the usage generated from reference service by analyzing the detailed data from the usage generated of reference questions at library UiTM Cawangan Selangor, Kampus Puncak Alam in four category which includes; Reference Desk Transactions, Reference Desk Session, Question Type Analysis, and Reference Desk Enquiries. The study analyzed reference transactions received between Jan-May 2016 and Jan-May 2016.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

TABLE 1: Reference Desk Session

No.	Months	Reference Desk Session
1.	January-May 2016	138
2.	January-May 2017	577

TABLE 2: Reference Desk Transaction (Medium)

No.	Months	Face to Face	Live Chat	Phone	Email	Social Media	TOTAL
1.	January-May 2016	47	2	36	22	9	**138**
2.	January-May 2017	220	258	30	68	1	**577**

Table 1 and Table 2 shows the results of reference desk session and reference desk transaction from January-May 2016 and January-May 2017. It shows that there has been a slight increase in the number of reference desk session and reference desk transaction. Since October 2015, the main Reference Services Desk is located nearest study carrel area on the 3rd floor, PTAR Puncak

Alam Library. Since January 2017, library management had decided to re-allocate reference services desk to a new location at level 2. The new location is located nearest customer service counter and at the entrance to the library. The main intention of the new location is to promote the visibility of reference desk librarians and at the same time to contribute users' awareness of the services offered. Recent research has suggested when only librarians staffed the reference desks at the strategic location inside the library buildings, they could be held accountable for the quality of service provided (Rusuli, Saufi, Tumari, & Hasman, 2014). This allowing users especially new students to approach only one desk for assistance rather than wondering where to go for help. One of the strategy that had been taken were also designing poster, digital signage and information blast via library Facebook promoting about reference desk services to our users.

TABLE 3: Question Type Analysis

No.	Question Type	Jan-May 2016	Jan-May 2017	TOTAL
1.	Online Databases	35	377	**412**
2.	Digital Collection	9	93	**102**
3.	Internet	1	21	**22**
4.	WEB OPAC	1	137	**138**
5.	Others	7	67	**74**

TABLE 4: Reference Desk Enquires

No.	Reference Queries	Jan-May 2016	Jan-May 2017	TOTAL
1.	Quick Reference	35	242	**277**
2.	Research Reference	6	198	**204**
3.	Search Technique	37	408	**445**
4.	Advice and Guidance	33	378	**411**

As Table 3 shows, the most frequently asked reference questions by type were about online databases (412) and WEB OPAC (138), digital collection (102), others (74) and internet (22).The findings determined that library users are lacking information and knowledge about online databases subscribed by the library. This data will be used in improving information literacy skills classes and hands-on session will stressed more on online databases and WEB OPAC. According to the analysis of the Table 4, reference desk enquiries assist by the reference librarian were search technique (445), advice and guidance (411), quick reference (277) and research reference

(204). This indicates there is a need to have reference librarians with expertise in the areas where questions are most often asked.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Since many years the concepts and practices of reference services have been expanded and evolved significantly. The study shows that in a digital age environments, future reference services must respond to information needs and utilize appropriate technology in offering many ways to communicate with their users. The use of digital facilities in reference services could lead to better reference services where librarians of today must be ICT adequacy for effective reference services which will reveal their inadequacy to use and operate in the digital environment (Abubakar, 2012).

Based on the findings study, several recommendations or guidelines are put forward:

- Librarians need to more fully explore the needs of their local target user populations to ensure they are effectively reaching users who are no longer coming into the library.

- Universities libraries should ensure adequate digital facilities for effective reference services. In addition, trainings, information sharing and hands-on session emphasize on reference and ICT skills should be given to enable them perform their duties effectively.
- As a continuous improvement, reference librarians need to enhance their digital competencies in providing reference desk assistance. Reference desk librarians should be trained to becoming more competent and knowledgeable.

- More research is needed on the preferences of both traditional and online library users, in order to find the most effective balance of on-site, outreach, especially on digital reference services. Future research could focus user feedback on the quality of answers provided in digital and traditional reference services.

As a conclusion, the reference librarian in a digital age is now faced with the challenging task of developing their ICT skills, social network use skills and other adaptive skills that will make them relevant in information services provision. In addition, communication between reference librarians and user in a courteous and encouraging manner in providing accurate and efficient reference assistance to all clients whether online or offline is still vital for the provision of enhancement and improving reference services.

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