

Assessment of reference service through model transformation of information and learning commons (ILC) in Jimma University Library System

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ABSTRACT

Traditional reference service does not reflect the great diversity of users, their information needs and seeking behavior nor does it reflect changes in information sources and in the management and organization of libraries. The information and learning commons (ILC) have become a focal point and solutions for those challenges and user satisfaction. We examined existing reference service desk utilization in Jimma University Library System JULS, and identified information and learning commons model concepts in order to adopt it. A cross-sectional study was conducted to a sample of 478 library users who were at different academic status in Jimma University (JU). The data were entered and cleaned using a statistical software SPSS version 16.0. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the mean scores of five categories of user's profession. And, T-test was employed to compare the mean score of current service and perceived service of ILC. The findings of this study revealed that the respondents were relatively more satisfied with perceived benefit or usefulness of transformed service (Mean= 4.123), followed by perceived services of ILC (Mean= 4.030), and neutral by current reference service usage satisfaction (Mean= 2.87). The overall mean score difference between perception of current reference service utilization and ILC services are significantly different at the 5% level (P-value < 0.05). Comparison of satisfaction on current reference service among the five respondents profession/statuses was significantly different at 5% significance level (P-value = 0.025). Comparison of satisfaction on perceived services of ILC among the five respondents statuses are significantly different at the 5% level (P-value = 0.012). The current reference service should be transformed in new service model and the study motivates further research on the topic in other institutions of Ethiopia.

Keywords: Reference service; user satisfaction; Perceived services; Library services; Information /Learning common, Ethiopia.

1. INTRODUCTION

While all units and functions in libraries are experiencing the consequences of technology in one way or another, information commons is the area where users most directly see the effects of technology. The essence of information commons rests on the interaction process between librarians and users [1]. Reference librarians are variously referred to as 'mediators between the user and the information', and 'navigators of information superhighway' [2]. The

defining characteristic of traditional reference service is answering questions provided by users. Other activities carried on in the reference department or service are supportive of (or distractions from, depending on one's point of view) this central function. This model symbolizes the value that reference librarians place on personal service and on tailoring service to the needs of customers at the time they are experiencing difficulties in finding and accessing information. However, many librarians argue that this model for reference service does not reflect adequately

the great diversity of users (and potential users), their information needs, and their information seeking behavior nor does it reflect changes in information sources and in the management and organization of libraries.

The roles of librarians are not static but are constantly evolving. From the previous researches [3], the role of reference librarians today need to be more teaching centered rather than stereotyped service centered. This can be seen in academic libraries where teaching and guiding students is the primary responsibility of reference librarians. The librarians would not be able to perform their duties well if they do not have sufficient knowledge, training on appropriate and up to date methods of library instruction and practices. Lack of knowledge to effectively design and deliver new service such as electronic reference service (live chat, e-mail or web-based service) affect / forces all types of learners to come to the library physically.

Mainly users come to library reference section in order to read, study and get help but today they also come to check e-mail, read newspapers, play games, have a cup of coffee, write papers, and listen audio lectures. And they also visit the library reference section to be with other people, classmates, and professors, to interact and exchange ideas [4]. However, lack of the above mentioned services in the current reference section of JULS makes users not to visit the section regularly and being not satisfied by the service they receive from the reference section of the library. The libraries reference section should have always been community places, formerly spaces for quiet contemplation, but now much noisier.

Since 1974, enrollment at the tertiary education level in Ethiopia has tripled, and 10 institutions of higher learning have been established [5]. Some of these institutions may have libraries or reading rooms, but complete information is not available. Well-established institutions such as the Alemaya University of Agriculture, the Polytechnic Institute, and the Jimma Junior College of Agriculture all have modest book and periodical collections; library service is minimal with "no reference services and user education limited to an initial library tour" [5]. This research deals with improving the efficient and effective accession of needed information that helps greatly in achieving the national policy of Growth and Transformation in the education sector as well as in the overall socio-economic development endeavor of the country.

Although Jimma University library system has made few advances and changes in library service, the reference services were not fully accessible by users. Hence, this study was aimed to assess the current or existing reference service desk utilization in JULS and introduce information and learning commons model concepts. The findings of this study help academic librarians in Ethiopia to exploit the latest information and communication technology, improve library

operations and satisfy users advanced information need. Moreover, it transforms their service philosophy collection-centered library to the user-centered library with the information and/or learning commons at the heart of this movement.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study design and data collection:

A questionnaire-based cross-sectional survey was employed between September 2012 and May 2013 in Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia. This study was distributed to a sample of 478 above second year undergraduate students, postgraduate students, academic staffs, librarians and managers of Jimma University. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted for undergraduate students, postgraduate students and academic staffs using proportional sample size to the actual student & staff population of each college. However, purposive sampling techniques for managers and librarians were employed to select the sample size. Participants to this study were from college of Agriculture and veterinary medicine (JUCAVM), college of business and economics (BECO), college of natural science (CNS), college of public health and medical science (CPHMS), college of social science (CSS), Institute of education and professional development studies (IEPDS), and Institute of technology (IT). The participants were chosen based on the criterion that they were the main users of libraries in the university.

2.2 Data Analysis:

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the analysis of data using a statistical software SPSS version 17.0. Mean ranking, median and standard deviation were used to describe the data structure and distribution. The Cronbach alpha value is above 0.82, which is higher than the general standard of 0.73 for each item suggesting a good reliability of overall questionnaire [6] indicating that all dimensions are reliable and can be used for further analysis. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the mean satisfaction scores among the respondents at five different academic statuses. To determine satisfaction difference by current reference service and perceived services of ILC, we have applied t-test.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Respondents' characteristics

Of 478 respondents, 414 (87%) were male and 64 (13%) were female. Most of the respondents 461 (97%) were between the age group 18-30 years. 403 (84%) were undergraduate students, 35 (7%) were postgraduate students, 23 (5%) were academic staffs, 7 (2%) were managers and 10 (2%) were librarians.

3.2 Current usage frequency and perception of respondents

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the respondents in believing library have reference service and their usage is weekly. Regarding the library reference section usage and regularity of visit, most of them agreed with

library have reference service 400 (99.9%) and, library use about once a week 165 (41%) and library use Two/three times a week 130 (33%). On the other hand the result shows that 69 (almost all) were responded library have no reference service and most of them not use at all 38 (55%) and about once a week 17 (25%). This result indicates that the reference service of the library gives very poor service and it is difficult to say library have reference service but they directly or indirectly use the services that are provided by the library reference section. Among those who didn't use the reference service at all and who use once/twice a week are asked their reasons of why not use regularly.

Most of the respondents responded that because of lack of resources 216 (72%), which includes lack of adequate resources, lack of competent and supportive reference staff, lack of appropriate facilities like computer support and internet. 58 (20%) of respondents responded that lack of suitable service environment which includes lack of proactive reference service, poor setup and environmental conditions like noise level, heating/cooling, lights, furniture, cleanliness and 24(8%) responded that all above mentioned options as their basic problems that hinders them to use the reference service.

Table 1: Current reference usage frequency of total respondents in JU.

Usage frequency of reference service weekly	Library have reference service		
	Yes	No	Total
Not at all	79 (20%)	38 (55%)	117 (25%)
About once a week	165 (41%)	17 (25%)	182 (39%)
Two/three times a week	130 (33%)	13 (19%)	143 (30%)
Four times a week	9 (4%)	0 (0%)	9 (2%)
Every day of the week	17 (2%)	1 (1%)	18 (4%)
Total	400 (100%)	69 (100%)	469 (100%)

3.3 Current reference usage satisfaction by respondents on reference service

The overall reference usage frequency mean (2.87) indicates that the level of satisfaction towards the current library's reference service is just neutral. The

individual measures indicate that the respondents are slightly satisfied with only five aspects of the reference services offered by the library reference section which is based on their highest frequency. And, they are not satisfied with seven aspects of the reference service.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Respondents Satisfaction with the current Reference Section and its Services

Current satisfaction of users by reference service	(1) #(%)	(2) #(%)	(3) #(%)	(4) #(%)	(5) #(%)	Mean	Median	SD
Adequacy of reference materials	29(6)	151(32)	160(33)	123(126)	15(3)	2.88	3.0	0.95
Arrangement of reference collection	27(6)	133(28)	102(21)	182(38)	34(7)	3.13	3.0	1.07
Reference staff are helpful	51(11)	137(29)	100(21)	168(35)	22(4)	2.94	3.0	1.12
Time of reference librarian respond users question	51(11)	145(30)	92(19)	156(33)	34(7)	2.95	3.0	1.17
CSA	60(13)	118(25)	130(27)	144(30)	26(5)	2.91	3.0	1.12
Reference section bibliographic instruction	46(10)	163(34)	102(21)	137(29)	30(6)	2.88	3.0	1.12
Library training on use of reference service	55(11)	135(28)	128(27)	128(27)	32(27)	3.0	2.0	1.13
Reference section environment conduciveness	61(13)	168(35)	111(23)	134(28)	4(1)	2.69	3.0	1.04
Opening & closing hours of reference section	27(6)	89(18)	87(18)	185(39)	90(19)	3.46	4.00	1.16
Reference section internet facility	47(10)	208(43)	108(23)	90(19)	25(5)	2.66	2.0	1.06
Adequacy of available computers	58(12)	247(52)	95(20)	59(12)	19(4)	2.44	2.00	0.99
Library web page informativeness, helpfulness	41(8)	201(42)	118(25)	104(22)	14(3)	2.68	2.0	1.00
Overall quality of current reference service	52(11)	166(35)	111(23)	135(28)	14(3)	2.78	3.0	1.07

Note: (1) extremely satisfied (2) not satisfied (3) neutral (4) satisfied (5) very satisfied
Differences in perceptions of current reference service utilization and ILC services among respondents; # is number, % is percentage

To compare the overall satisfaction on perceptions of current reference service utilization and ILC services among respondents a paired sample t test was carried out. The result shows that on average, the overall mean

score difference on perception of current reference service utilization and ILC services are significantly different at the 5% level (p -value < 0.05) with overall mean difference 1.25.

3.4 Perceived benefit / usefulness of transformed services

Table 3 presents the mean, median, and mode scores of the four statements which collectively and individually manifest the respondents' satisfaction on the perceived value /usefulness of ILC services. The overall mean (4.123) indicates that the overall level of satisfaction

towards perceived satisfaction on usefulness / benefit of ILC services is satisfactory which means it is likely useful and beneficiary to users. Based on the individual mode score 4 for all aspects of statements, majority of the respondents are satisfied with all dimensions of statements on perceived benefit/usefulness of the transformed ILC services.

Table 3: Perceived benefit/usefulness of transformed services of ILC for users.

Item	VU #(%)	U #(%)	N #(%)	L #(%)	VR #(%)	Mean	Median	SD
The ILC service delivery will enable me do job quickly	4(1)	27(6)	73(15)	202(42)	172(36)	4.07	4.0	0.9
The ILC service will make my job easier and enjoyable	2(1)	15(3)	73(15)	228(47)	160(34)	4.11	1.0	0.8
The ILC service system will enable users enhance teaching, learning	2(1)	15(3)	64(13)	209(44)	188(39)	4.18	4.0	0.81
The ILC service will enable my job to be of quality	4(1)	16(3)	71(15)	208(44)	179(37)	4.13	4.00	0.85

#(%): number (percentage)

3.5 Differences in Perceived Benefit/usefulness of ILC among respondents academic statuses

One way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Table 4) was performed to compare the perceived Benefit/usefulness of ILC among respondent statuses. The result shows that on average, the levels of mean

score satisfaction on perceived benefit/usefulness of ILC among the five statuses of respondents are not significant (i.e. the five statuses of respondents such as undergraduate, postgraduate, academic staff, librarian and managers have not different significant mean score in perceived benefit) at the 5% level (p -value < 0.05).

Table 4: Difference in perceived benefit/usefulness among respondents status ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Overall means for Perceived Benefit/usefulness of ILC	3.551	4	0.888	1.927	0.105
Between Groups	3.551	4	0.888		
Within Groups	217.916	473	0.461		
Total	221.468	477			

This study collected information from 478 respondents using structured questionnaires and interview to examine the existing reference service and the need to transform to new ILC. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for analysis and testing of hypothesis. The overall satisfaction level of users by current reference service as studied in this research was 2.87 out of 5, which is under neutral level of satisfaction. Other studies also showed the most obvious and commonly recognized weakness of the traditional reference service model. However, study conducted in Pakistan revealed that the overall level of satisfaction by their current reference service varies from this result which is 3.6 [7], but which was reported satisfactory. This variation may be because of difference in available staff, collection, services and facilities in reference section with compare to Jimma University library reference section. Previous study [8] noted another disadvantage: the traditional reference desk model makes it impossible for users to continue the consultation as the search progresses because of the pattern of staff rotation at the desk.

This study revealed that the overall level of satisfaction towards perceived services of transformed ILC by all

respondent status is satisfactory. After opening their new information commons, print circulation increased by 2% (following five years of steady decline) and reference queries saw a 5.8% increase, use of building overall increase 40.56%. The most dramatic increase comes in "searches in electronic resources" which rose remarkable 56.21. This result suggests that the respondents increase the use of regularly and overall satisfaction by services of information and learning commons. Its most striking findings are that 84.3% of undergraduate feel the learning commons has helped them successfully in complete academic assignments and most are visiting several times a week (45.7%) or daily (12.9%). Relatively low level satisfaction accorded to current reference service utilization is yet another indicator of how commons were far from the traditional one. Also the perceived benefits /usefulness of transformed service study confirm that there will be a significant benefit of using it. The perceived benefit / usefulness of transformed services for the library users is also significantly discussed in other studies which shows generally increased to use service delivery, including "individuals reporting that the learning commons (as opposed to other parts of the library) was

now their primary destination for research,” and “respondents reporting improved study skills.

A Comparative study to assesses the difference in perception of current reference services utilization and perceived information and learning commons services among respondents’ statuses was done using a paired sample t-test. It showed that on average, the overall mean score difference on perception of current reference service utilization and ILC services are significantly different at the 5% level (p -value < 0.05) with overall mean difference 1.25. This result shows that there is difference in satisfaction level between the current reference service utilization and perceived services of ILC by users. This result implies that users of library are demanding cohesive and proactive reference services which support and satisfy their teaching & learning process through professional staff support, getting service at multi - level service point with inclusion of ICT support. A previous research reported that [9] information search process theory individuals seek “meaning” rather than “answers,” therefore a traditional bibliographic paradigm which focuses on locating sources and information is not adequate to address the process of learning from information. Because in other studies the result shows that users professionally supported and receive service at multi - level of service point are highly satisfied than those of users got service by paraprofessional staff and at one desk service points. The comparative study of nonprofessionals and professionals [10] showed that, out of 20 libraries, paraprofessional staff achieved a success rating of 60 percent or above in 4 libraries while professional librarians achieved 60 percent or above in 10 libraries. In their study, a larger percentage of users who received assistance from paraprofessionals responded that they did not receive what they asked about the reference desk (6.9%) than those who were helped by professionals (3.4%).

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the overall user’s perception and satisfaction on current reference services usage and transformation of it through information and learning commons in Jimma University. Based on the finding of this study, the current reference services were criticized due to lack of customer focus and input.

This study result suggests that concerned authorities should pay attention for the improvement of present level of user satisfaction through adopting ILC. Jimma University should be determined and motivated to bring a paradigm shift of integrating library space planning and various learning needs weighed along with operational considerations of space and technology. This multi-method learning and studying platform is well imagined change maker on how librarians, faculty and management will plan and implement future academic libraries. The current reference service should be transformed in new service model, and the study motivates further research on the topic in other institutions of Ethiopia.

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