

## Review

# Have libraries in private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia lost their original purposes? What else does the evidence say about gender issues?

Keng Lin Soh<sup>1</sup>, K. Jayaraman<sup>2</sup>, Ni Ni Lim<sup>2</sup> and Chu Le Chong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Management, University Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>Graduate School of Business, University Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia.

Accepted 27 March, 2012

**The original purposes of a library as a place for knowledge fulfillment alongside other social responsibilities are perceived to have eroded over the years. This could be due to the emergence and dominance of the ever progressive digital media and has likely changed the availability and mode of access to knowledge thereby affecting library patronage. This paper attempts to validate the above perception of the utilization patterns of library in private institutions of higher learning. It has been observed that students still visit libraries. However, the intentions of their visits are more for general or self utilization purposes rather than for intellectual pursuits. The study has revealed that more than 65% of the students surveyed spent their time doing personal work in the library without utilizing other library services and facilities. This has raised a real concern that libraries are now made places for social gathering and self utilization. Gender has turned out to be non-significant factor in this research.**

**Key words:** Library, self utilization, general utilization, specific utilization.

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian education industry has flourished since 1995 when the government intended to position Malaysia as a regional education hub. Since then, the number of private colleges mushroomed but accompanied by issues of service quality such as a lack of library facilities. The accreditation of Malaysian higher education has been entrusted to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and this body is held accountable for ensuring quality in higher education. Therefore MQA has a set of guidelines called the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA) which must be adhered to by institutions of higher education who wishes to operate in Malaysia. The guidelines on criteria and standards for programme accreditation are divided into nine

areas for evaluation purpose and the library comes under area number 6 of educational resources. For the purpose of accreditation, the MQA requires the availability of suitable library facilities to support the academic programmes offered.

The topic of library utilization has been much talked about naturally by librarians. The user patterns have changed tremendously with the influx of Generation Y students especially those who were born after 1990s. This group of echo boomers and millennials were a bunch of digital natives who have grown up with instant access to the internet (Rhode, 2008) and wanting to interact with the community (McCrinkle, 2002). Therefore, when they visited the library, they chatted with friends instead of read. They were also busy socializing with their friends either through student body activities or busy with Face book in the internet. Quick checks by librarians in Malaysia and overseas have them accepting the fact that libraries

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [klsoh@usm.my](mailto:klsoh@usm.my).

have never been a quiet place since the introduction of broadband. The authors have made an interesting observation that students liked visiting the libraries and the frequency of their visits actually have increased. However, their intentions to visit were more for general or self utilization instead of intellectual pursuits. In view of this, an attempt was made to study the utilization patterns of library by students in private institutions of higher learning.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The library especially the academic library has regarded as the heart of the learning community, providing a place for students and faculty alike to do their research and advance their knowledge (Simmonds and Syed, 2001). Since a library was described as a purposeful and expanded learning centre and a place for intellectual pursuits (Ludwig and Starr, 2005), it should play a major role in supporting the sustainability of higher education and bear the responsibility of social development. In fulfilling those roles and responsibilities, academic librarians must rise to the challenge of providing quality services. Edwards and Browne (1995), Hernon and Calvert (1996), and Nitecki (1996) acknowledged that delivering good library services was more important to the user than the offering of a mere library building.

A measure of library quality based solely on collections has become obsolete (Nitecki, 1996; Sahu, 2006). The traditional method of measuring the number of user patronage of library facilities, the number of circulation transactions and the number of enquiry at the reference counter no longer account for the quality of library services. Nitecki (1996) added that academic library staff should better understand the influences of users' judgments of service quality, the expectations of specific services, and the effective ways to improve the service design and delivery. Librarians should also understand their users not merely as recipients of services offered, but as partners in the development and implementation of services to make higher education and research experiences more successful from the customer's perspective (Nitecki and Hernon, 2000).

## LIBRARY UTILIZATION

According to Helfer (2003) a new paradigm for modern academic libraries has emerged. The new digital world has students and faculty making fewer visits to the libraries. However, libraries have continued to serve patrons with a variety of services for traditional and non-traditional reasons. The library

is still a quiet place for study. However, it is also turning into a place to chat with friends, to complete group assignments (discussion room) or to meet with fellow club members for student body activities. Therefore, the library is increasingly recognized as a social focal point and cultural hub of the university. The definition of the library will change as the library physical space is repurposed and its virtual capacity expands in an unlimited way. This would not necessarily do away with the concept of "library as place", as the concept would still be important to students, researchers, and faculty members (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2010). Instead of housing all the physical collections, libraries has emerged as centers for knowledge management and known as places designed to support the full spectrum of activities from knowledge creation to knowledge utilization. Libraries would be responsible for providing online access to a variety of new digital materials such as teaching materials and various documents of their organizations. Libraries are now perceived as places where all members of the community can come together. Apparently libraries have been repurposed as expanded learning centers and are places for intellectual pursuits (Ludwig and Starr, 2005).

According to Carlson (2005), students liked learning through group-learning and social interactions. The OCLC Market Research Team (OCLC, 2005) reported that college students showed the highest rate of library use and broadest use of library resources; both physically and electronically. Carlson (2005) citing Xin (2006) described this type of IT savvy generation customers as knowing their choices of education well and knew choosing what, where, and how they wanted to learn. Spoilt with commercial services that offered great conveniences like Netflix and dazzling choices of locations such as Starbucks, the IT savvy generation customers would expect libraries to similarly integrate value-added services into their busy lives. Inconvenience, slow services and displeasing surroundings have become intolerable barriers to that generation of customers. In response, libraries should transform book space into people space (Xin, 2006). Despite the age of free roaming broadband and Google, academic libraries are used more than ever. This is evidenced by students and staff making 1.5 million more visits to academic libraries in fiscal year 2008 than in fiscal year 2006 (State of America's Libraries Report, 2010)

## GENDER

In relation to gender, some research has been done mostly in the area of medical science. According to Park (2009) several studies have found a difference

by gender in the relationship between obesity and depressive mood. Onyike et al. (2003) asserted obesity was associated with past-month depression in women but not in men. Additional support for gender function as a possible moderator came from a study on genetic variants of the obesity gene. Comings (1990) found that genetic factors were more likely to be involved in obesity among females than males and were causally involved not only in obesity but in its associated behavioral disorders, such as anxiety and depression. A study done by Lioffi (2009) found that women were significantly more impaired in verbal and visual memory compared to men. Women also had marginally higher scores compared to men on measures of anxiety and depression. Kim (2010) showed that there were significant gender differences in the use of technology. On the other hand, females were found to use the library services marginally more than male (Simmonds and Syed, 2001). However, according to Jagboro (2009) there was no gender bias in the usage of library services. Research on gender differences has been confined mostly in the area of medicine and information technology. In this research, gender was studied as a moderator to investigate its impact on areas of library services.

## SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The study was conducted in Penang, Malaysia by distributing questionnaires to library users in private institutions of higher learning from 27 October to 11 November 2010. A total of 362 sets of answered questionnaires were received and analyzed. This total figure excluded the 18 questionnaires which were unusable due to errors and omissions. The respondents consist of 190 (52.5%) males and 172 (47.5%) female students. From the study, most of the students numbering 183 (50.6%) visited the library at least once a week and 94 (26%) of them visited the library at least once a day. Only 6 students or 1.6% visited the library at least once an academic year. This shows the majority of the students visited libraries. Among the reasons for visiting libraries, completing assignments ranked top while borrowing reading materials and holding social meetings were ranked equally in second place. Surfing the internet and reading newspapers, magazines and journals in the libraries in between classes were ranked equally third place. This shows libraries were serving the students more for general utilization purposes. General utilization means the utilization of the library services without specific purpose in mind (for instance, holding social meetings and reading newspapers are considered general utilization). It is probable that students were inclined to hold those

activities in the library because of the air-conditioning and the more comfortable facilities compared to other places such as the canteen or open space in the campus.

In the utilization of library facilities 299 (82.6%) were seen as students visited libraries to borrow books. The statistics also shows 259 (71.5%) students borrowed books for course work purposes and 256 (70.7%) students borrowed books for research purpose. However, only 110 (30.4%) students borrowed books for leisure reading. This confirms most students in private learning of higher institutions were very much concentrated on studying, i.e. borrowing books for research purpose. There were 91 (25.1%) students who borrowed books at least once a week, 86 (23.8%) students borrowed books at least once a month and 75 (20.7%) students borrowed books at least once a semester. The borrowing trends on the type of books borrowed has 284 (78.5%) and 177 (48.9%) students borrowing reference books and text books, respectively.

Table 1 clearly indicates that there were 235 (64.9%) students regardless of gender, relaxing in the library because of the air-conditioned environment. There were 235 (64.9%) students visiting the library just for the purpose of utilizing discussion rooms. This is consistent with Carlson's (2005) findings that students preferred to learn through group-learning and social interaction. However, there were cases that students did not utilize the discussion rooms for academic purposes such as for group assignments. Instead, those students used the library rooms as places for group chatting, watching movie or play internet games using their own computer notebooks. About 230 (63.5%) students spent an average time of between two to five hours a week in the library for self utilization.

There was very high expectation from the users in terms of the tangibility of the library especially on the availability of up-to-date equipment such as computers, scanners, detectors, projectors, photocopiers and printers. Student users felt that the slow internet connections, out-dated computers, unreliable photocopiers and low quality printers have affected their intention to use the library for general utilization purpose. They were reluctant to use the OPAC (online public access catalog) to search for library materials as the search would take a longer time using out-dated computers. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Xin (2006) which highlighted that inconvenience, slow services, and displeasing surroundings were becoming intolerable barriers. This research also shows users were not satisfied with the total number of books available in the libraries of the private institutions of higher learning. This is consistent with Sahu's (2006)

**Table 1.** Self utilization of private libraries.

Items	Responds	No. of students	(%)
Relaxation	No	73	20.2
	Yes	289	79.8
Relax because of the air-conditioned environment	No	127	35.1
	Yes	235	64.9
Completing assignments	No	127	35.1
	Yes	235	64.9
Holding group discussions	No	127	35.1
	Yes	235	64.9
Holding meetings with friends	No	97	26.8
	Yes	265	73.2
The average time spend in library	Less than 1 h	53	14.6
	2 to 5 h	230	63.5
	6 to 10 h	48	13.3
	11 to 15 h	17	4.7
	More than 16 h	14	3.9

finding that the students commented negatively on the availability of the latest books. A shortage of main text and references materials has also created inconveniences to students in particular throughout their learning process.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is founded on a research aimed at identifying the utilization of library services namely general utilization and specific utilization in private institutions of higher learning. The findings have brought up a clear message to the management of libraries in private institutions of higher learning that it is time to upgrade library equipment, acquire more reading materials and remove out-dated books. A substantial amount of budget would be needed to purchase the latest computers, install full featured high quality photocopiers, provide high resolution color printers with scanners and install self-check machines to reduce the waiting time at the circulation counters especially during peak period. An even bigger budget is needed in the acquisition of reading materials especially books because the cost of papers and printing has increased tremendously over the years. Libraries become first victims of cost cutting measures especially during the economic downturn when management prepares budgets

(Dodson, 2009). In fact, many libraries faced stagnant or reduced operating and material budgets for the 2009 to 2010 fiscal year, and in the near future additional budget pressures would likely emerge (ACRL Research Planning and review Committee, 2010). However, the management of private institutions of higher learning should also be aware that physical environment and tangible amenities do not by themselves affect the image of the institutions.

The respondent profiles shows 26 and 50.6% of students visited the library at least once a day and at least once a week respectively. This is a very good sign and it shows that students still viewed library as a must visit place among their personal list of must visit facilities in private institutions of higher learning in spite of the shortcomings of libraries. This finding is consistent with the research finding of U.S.A. academic libraries, where despite the Google age, the usage of libraries actually increased to 1.5 million from year 2006 to year 2008 (State of America's Libraries Report, 2010). This finding of the library as a must visit place is also supported by Helfer (2003). According to him, the new digital world might see students and faculty making fewer visits to the library but the library would continue to serve as a place for meeting social and cultural needs and would remain an important research and cultural core of the university. Carlson (2005) found students preferred to

learn through group-learning and social interaction and it is most likely for this reason students would continue to make library visits in this digital age but for a different purpose. The Online Computer Library Center, OCLC Market Research Team (OCLC, 2005) reported that college students have the highest rate of library use and broadest use of library resources, both physical and electronic (Xin, 2006). This report therefore has lent credence to the findings of this research.

The respondent profile shows 82.6% of the students who visited the library borrowed books and 78.5% borrowed reference books. Despite the competition from internet access to greater information and the provision to online databases and e-books by all participating libraries, the statistics show students of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia still enjoyed the physical collections of the libraries. The libraries in these institutions still served their patrons in a very traditional way where circulation of books was a very active transaction performed by the library staff. This finding is consistent with Umberto (2003). This renowned writer and critic remarked that new technologies would not necessarily replace books if library services were to be improved upon which is similar to the introduction of cars that has not eliminated bicycles over the years. Bicycles have been transformed its design and utility and thus perceivably attracted greater persons than ever before. An interesting finding has emerged in this research showing more than 65% of the students spent their time doing personal work in the library without utilizing library services. To these students, the library was a suitable place to fulfill their personal work. 230 (63.5%) students spent an average duration of between two to five hours a week in the library for self utilization. Self utilization is considered doing personal work in the library without utilizing library services. It was mentioned earlier that students visited the library at least once in a day or in a week and this is very encouraging because it shows the library has remained a favorite place to visit. However this finding would also mean students were not fully utilizing the library services as they should.

Therefore the role of a library is now extended to as a place for non-intellectual pursuits such as social networking. Students visited libraries also because of the comfort provided by air-conditioners. They visited libraries to relax, carry out assignments, holding group discussions and meetings with friends. In view of this, libraries need to be divided into two separate areas. One area would be for discussion and another for reading with quietness fully observed. This is to serve the different needs of the group of users who genuinely would like to study in libraries. The role of

gender has turned out to be non-significant factor in this research as the study found out that both male and female students preferred to spend their time doing personal work in the library without utilizing library services. This finding is a departure from the perception that female students are supposed to be more discipline than male students and should have been using the library utilizing library services.

This research which included some face-to-face interviews has also unearthed and confirmed the following. Libraries should keep users informed on exactly when services will be performed and when books and services will be made available. In addition, library staff should give equal treatment to all library users regardless of user status. As an example, enquiries from staff or students should receive equal attention. The operating hours of libraries are pertinent to providing equal access because users come from different background as some users do work during the day and could only visit libraries after office hours or during weekends and holidays. Therefore, it is recommended that libraries should operate 24 x 7 with a skeleton staff during off-peak hours. Libraries should also organize academic related or literacy activities to attract more students to use the library in addition to their preferred activity of self utilization. However the willingness of the library staff to provide help and prompt services to customers would be a very critical factor to encourage students to use library services that are underutilized.

There are few limitations in this study. Firstly, the demographic variables cannot be generalized as representative of all students in private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The data was collected in five private institutions in Penang Island because of time constraint. Secondly, the study has left out technology factor during the research process. Technology now plays a very significant role in every aspect of the library services. From circulation and online public access catalogue (OPAC) to online databases, all services provided by the library are related especially to information technology. According to Freeman (2005) new information technology has acted as a catalyst transforming the library into a more vital and critical intellectual center of life at institutions of higher learning.

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