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Reference Service in Academic Libraries: Accommodation of International Students

Olugbenga Ademodi

Introduction

Due to the author's experiences as an international student, this paper will examine reference service in academic libraries especially as it relates to international students. This become necessary because of the hardship that most of this group of students experience when faced with a new cultural and educational environment which is most times different from what they are used to.

Methodology

After a discussion of the planning process, the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) standards, and the relationship of assessment to the standards, the article will investigate the nature, objectives, and value of reference service in academic libraries along with the special problems associated with reference service for international students. Assessment practices and the particular difficulties associated with assessment will then be explored.

As with all planning, it must take place within the confines of and it must be in the furtherance of the institution's mission. Accordingly, goals and objectives must be set within the parameters of the institution's mission. Important values may also be addressed through the planning process.[2] One such value is diversity which is of special importance to academic institutions with large numbers of international students making up their student body. Such institutions must actively seek to accommodate a diverse academic base in their planning or they will not be effective in reaching many members of their primary user group.

Outcomes assessment also plays a role in this process. Certain sought-after outcomes are incorporated into the goals and objectives. Outcomes are particularized through the establishment of performance indicators or proficiencies. Assessment in regard to these performance indicators reveals whether the library is meeting its goals and objectives.[3] This is of paramount importance to the overall "accountability" of the institution.[4] Insights gained through outcomes assessments may then be used to perfect "library practices."[5]

ACRL Standards

The ACRL standards recommend certain "assessment instruments," such as "surveys, tests, interviews, and other valid measuring devices."[6] The ACRL guidelines for university library services to undergraduate students provide greater

detail. The guidelines propose surveys and testing to determine if library instruction is successful. Given that reference service often involves individual instruction, to some extent general reference service contributes to "producing more information-literate students."[7] Still, determining the exact impact of general reference service and tours as opposed to formal bibliographic instruction upon this outcome would be difficult to assess. Other assessment tools mentioned in the standards and guidelines include "information literacy diaries," and "focus groups."[8]

The ACRL standards also recommend the use of "colleagues at peer institutions" to provide guidance concerning the development of assessment tools.[9] For purposes of improving reference services to international students, it would be helpful to identify peers with sizeable international student populations. These peer institutions would be great resources in regard to their experiences with similar problems concerning international students. The guidelines further suggest a "standard set of assessment tools… that expedite direct comparison with performance at peer institutions."[10] Accordingly, standard survey questions could be designed to determine certain particulars in regard to reference service to international students.[11]

Library Obligation

Specifically concerning services, the library should design a group of services to fulfill the institutional mission and goals and should actively assess these services to ascertain whether performance targets are being met. The standards also set forth specific questions which identify critical aspects of the process such as primary user group expectations, proper utilization of resources, hours of service, better awareness regarding service matters,[12] "quantitative and qualitative measurements" concerning services, and comparison of peers.[13] The guidelines further add in the context of reference services issues such as staff "ratio in the context of the library's mission" and whether "new services… are needed."[14] In terms of reference service to international students, this could be applied to examine the number of staff with backgrounds or training in relation to dealing with international students. This ratio could then be compared with the ratio of such staff employed by similarly situated peers, in terms of their international student bodies.

Turning to the nature of the service, the library at an academic institution has been characterized as the "heart of the learning community" as it affords the supporting services and facilities for the achievement of scholarly endeavors.[15] Today, it is of paramount importance to academic libraries that they afford services of high quality. This is due to the fact that college and university librarians recognize that the library is far more a composite of various quality services extended through computer networks, than merely a brick and mortar location.[16] Given that "use of academic libraries is influenced most by a user's perceived familiarity with a library and its resources," it is the duty of libraries to thoroughly acquaint users with their information resources and to teach them to profitably use these resources.[17] Such orientation is not limited to the brick and mortar location but extends to remote use of resources as well.[18]

Though certainly the primary users that the library is trying to reach with its services are the faculty and students that make up the university community, such institutions sometimes extend their services to reach even members of the general public.[19] While those that are not among the library's core user groups may not warrant extensive efforts on the part of the library to accommodate them, certainly any patrons that make up the primary user group such as international students must be reached through the library's services. Reference plays an important role in reaching such patrons but it often fails if proper training is not undergone and steps are not taken in regard to international students. One reason for this is that international students, aside from language issues, are often unfamiliar with library

services. In many cases they simply do not realize that "a reference librarian's primary responsibility is to answer questions."[20] They are uncomfortable as they feel that they are bothering the reference librarian.[21] Without these steps the library fails in its mission in regard to an ever increasing and sizeable segment of its primary users. The author truly understands this problem on a personal level from his own experiences and is deeply aware how tragic it is that many international students never use the reference librarian who can make all the difference. They needlessly expend a great deal of time and seldom find what they seek.

This is where the reference service comes in as a knowledgeable reference librarian can efficiently navigate the problems and recommend helpful sources.[22] In this same vein, Joseph Janes has captured the essence of reference service in a quotation from Margaret Hutchins: "Reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons in search of information for whatever purpose, and also various library activities especially aimed at making information as easily available as possible."[23] Though somewhat limited in her perspective by her time frame of 1944, still Hutchins has identified two quintessential attributes of reference service, personal assistance and efforts to render information more accessible; of course, this is not limited to assistance "within the library"[24] today given technological improvements. Hutchins's perspective is reinforced by Janes's recognition of the "service orientation" of reference which he describes as "want[ing] to help people."[25]

Reference service also involves "*determining information needs* and understanding their context."[26] Additionally, this involves working with individuals that "have difficulty articulating or even understanding their own information needs."[27] Reference librarians then use a variety of search techniques and their skill in identifying sources to assist the users with the aim of ultimately empowering them to "be able to do more themselves later."[28]

While this is the nature of general reference work, its scope broadens in the libraries of academia. Janes has stated that in the academic context "users have perhaps the fullest array of questions, information needs, and inquiries."[29] Reference service in academic libraries ranges from in-depth reference interviews in relation to graduate and faculty scholarship across the spectrum of possible disciplines of knowledge to "ready-reference queries."[30] The service must, however, conform to user expectations related to speed and price to suit individual circumstances. This recognition of the user's need of speed and price relates to the value of reference service to the user. For instance, if the user has two weeks to complete an assignment and the librarian recommends a source that will be readily available in three weeks, then the librarian's reference service may be relatively worthless to the user. Further, among the duties of reference librarians is the creation of apparatuses to assist users in their research while avoiding "direct intervention," thereby ensuring them the opportunity to do the work themselves.[31]

Another aspect of reference concerns orientation and tours to communicate what services and resources are available.[32] Janes advocates that reference librarians should "articulate our strengths," "play up our service orientation," and "position ourselves and our services as time savers."[33] This orientation or communication aspect of reference service must not be undervalued because without it reference service may largely be unnoticed.

To better ascertain the value of reference service, it is helpful to draw from the work of a scholar in the United Kingdom, David Liddle. Liddle's article focuses on "best value" which concerns "improvement in service quality and the relationship between quality and cost."[34] Best value is arrived at through "in depth analysis and comparison," "diagnostic activity," and the creation of an "improvement plan, where priorities are established and resources for improvement are allocated."[35] Liddle has identified certain "performance indicators" that determine if a "review" is warranted, such as "cost, perhaps cost per head of population," and "service use,

perhaps visits per thousand population."[36] This is similar to some aspects of the process in academic libraries in the United States. Perhaps libraries in both countries may benefit from a mutual sharing of knowledge, practices, and experiences to better improve the processes of each.

Performance Indicators

While Liddle has identified some general performance indicators, it would be helpful to have more specific indicators or proficiencies tied directly to reference service. Diane Schwartz and Dottie Eakin of the University of Michigan Library have devoted extensive work to the creation of "standards for reference service" that may be helpful in this respect.[37] They began by creating a listing of "qualities associated with good reference service."[38] The qualities were then arranged into categories and prioritized.

The categories and qualities were as follows:

- Behavioral characteristics
- Approachability
- Sense of willingness
- Attitude - friendly – not condescending or didactic
- Ability to communicate
- Acknowledgement of patrons who are waiting
- Determination to do a good job.
- Ability to effectively deal with problem personalities
- Positive response/attitude towards questions
- Alertness to patrons needing help but not asking for it
- Knowledge
- Knowledge of resources and collections
- Knowledge of alternative resources
- Knowledge of when to refer
- Knowledge of the university and the medical campus
- Communications or networks with other libraries
- Subject knowledge
- Knowledge of correct use of all reference tools
- Knowledge of university and university library policies
- Reference skills
- Thorough investigation of a problem
- Ability to know when only a short answer is appropriate
- Provision of search strategy to patron
- Systematic approach
- Awareness of not knowing the answer, and when to refer
- Development of methodology for answering "unanswerable" questions
- Clear, logical thinking
- Ability to use all resources available including print, computer and telephone
- Ability to buy time when you need it
- Investigative know-how
- Knowledge of our resource and time limitations
- Intuitive knowledge when answer given is correct
- "Quick on the draw" (ability to answer questions fast)
- Effectiveness in interviewing getting to the user's real question[39]

While this group of attributes is a good starting point, it is not definitive. Due to the nature of reference work it would be difficult to have a truly definitive list. Certainly, items should be added that address international students such as knowledge of the problems that international students face in using library services and the ability to competently assist international students given their special needs.

From the categories were derived "service objectives" for reference work.[40] The objectives then served as the foundation for the creation of standards. The

standards were as follows:

- Reference librarians convey an attitude and manner that encourages users to seek assistance
- Assistance is provided at the appropriate level of need
- Reference librarians have a thorough knowledge of resources and collections
- Reference librarians are able to plan and execute effective search strategies for complex or extended reference questions
- Library services and policies are understood and described to users whenever appropriate[41]

The five standards are helpful, but it would probably be a good idea to establish a separate standard dealing with service to international students given the uniqueness of the matter and the special training involved, especially if the mission and goals of the institution reflect clear aims to reach out to this group.

Having the standards though is not enough, as "indicators of performance" must be established to determine if the standards have been met.[42] Accordingly, Schwartz and Eakin developed performance indicators that corresponded to the standards. For instance, they established the following list of performance indicators in relation to the standard concerning "assistance…provided at the appropriate level of need":

- Determines the real question continues questioning to be sure the problem is
- understood
- Makes certain that the persons knows how to use the sources to which s/he is being
- referred, provides needed instruction in the use of sources (Sources include the card
- catalog, union list, indexes, and other reference tools)
- Suggests alternative sources including other libraries or nonlibrary sources
- Suggests services when appropriate and offers pertinent information about them,
- even if not directly requested (ie ILL, database searches, book recommendations)
- Answers questions within time requirements of user[43]

The problem with the indicators is their inherent "subjectivity," but they are a very useful initial contribution to this process.

Further strides have been made by academic librarians in Victoria, Australia, who have created an incorporated body known as Cooperative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries. This entity assists its libraries in a variety of ways including the creation of a "Reference Interest Group" that established the "Working Party on Performance Measures for Reference Services."[44] The Working Party developed a "report provid[ing] a 'snapshot' of reference work as perceived by the reference librarians, and convey[ing] the idea of the complexity involved in providing a service which involves a multiplicity of roles and a wide variety of skills."[45] The initial "reference categories" and corresponding "key performance indicators" were as follows:

Category of Reference Activity	Key Performance Indicator
Academic liaison/subject liaison	Integration into academic community Promotion of resources and services Use of service User satisfaction
Collection management	Matching resources to user needs

	Participation of users in selection process User satisfaction
Database searching	Provision of relevant information System availability Use of databases User satisfaction
Reader education	Appraisal by peersand managers Participation in teaching programmes User satisfaction
Reference desk	Effective teamwork Institutional commitment to staffing Intellectual accessibility of service Physical accessibility of service Provision of relevant informationUse of service User satisfaction
Staff development and training	Organisational and institutional culture Organisational support for training sessions, conferences and continuing education Participation in research activities
Staffing policies	Team culture

Key Performance Indicator

Ibid.

[46]

These categories were further refined through “focus interviews with reference staff.”[47] What is especially significant about the process employed is that a “multiple constituency model” was used to incorporate feedback from various groups concerning performance.[48] Such groups included “library managers” and “reference staff” as well as students.[49] Including the user’s perspective in the process is very significant and the methodology employed by the Working Party reveals that their work was carefully thought out.

Due to the “value-added nature” of reference, Cotter perceived that “use of solely quantitative measures with such services is limited in assessing their effectiveness.”[50] Accordingly, it has been recognized that both “qualitative and quantitative methods are necessary to evaluate fully the complexity of the reference service.”[51] Cotter attributes the “reluctance to adopt qualitative measures” to the problems with choosing proper indicators.[52] Furthermore, she observed that “the complexity of measuring reference services, where a number of possible outcomes may or may not meet the expectations of users, obviously makes the task of attaching performance measures for this type of service even more difficult, whether qualitative or quantitative.”[53] The Working Party chose to concentrate on the “critical success factors” that are related to “practice.”[54] These factors were identified through “focus group interviews.”[55] Focus group interviews are a technique recognized in the ACRL standards and guidelines.[56]

While qualitative techniques are very valuable, most libraries tend to use primarily quantitative techniques in assessment of services. Reference related statistics are

kept in most libraries but statistics alone yield an incomplete picture. Kuruppu has even stated that "relying solely on these statistics to assess the effectiveness of a library service may be very inadequate and risky.[57]

Surveys are the "predominant quantitative method used in library evaluations" and they are recognized as a proper assessment technique in the ACRL standards.[58] In this type of research it is important to use a proper sample and to incorporate "nonusers" as well. While they are inexpensive and time-savers, they involve a "disconnect between the type of questions asked in surveys, the respondents' understanding of the questions, and the investigators' interpretation of responses."[59] A useful approach to improve surveys may be to employ "a qualitative method… at the beginning of a project to help develop a questionnaire for a subsequent survey."[60]

The significance of qualitative information is that it is "more contextually detailed than quantitative data, because the researcher can obtain a description of overall activities surrounding the phenomenon, in terms of time and social circumstances."[61] The ACRL standards in question five under "outcomes assessment" even seem to embody a tacit expectation that quantitative and qualitative techniques will be employed.[62] Further, Kuruppu explains that qualitative techniques are "more suitable than quantitative" for assessment involving intricate aspects of reference service such as "user behaviors, information-seeking and perceptions."[63] Just as the Victorian Working Group considered students as well as staff, Kuruppu also recognizes the importance of incorporating both perspectives. The ACRL standards also include "information literacy diaries" among the lists of appropriate techniques. Such diaries involve a technique that is qualitative in nature and comes under the heading of "observation."[64] The observational techniques are advantageous when compared to surveys in that they are "a more reliable measure of how people actually behave, whereas questionnaires record how people intend to behave, or think that they will behave, independent of a particular situation."[65]

Interviews are another qualitative technique, recognized in the ACRL standards, that can involve one person or an "entire focus group." While they are costly in terms of both time and money, they yield information that is difficult to obtain in surveys through "open-ended questioning by trained and neutral interviewers" that can "determine what the interviewee considers important" and permit the interviewee to provide surrounding details.[66] This technique may be particularly useful in dealing with international students because "neutral questions that are open-ended yet structured" has been advanced as a helpful method for obtaining feedback from international students during reference interviews.[67]

Focus groups can save time because multiple interviewees can be interviewed at once. It may be helpful to use online "chat rooms" to obtain more candid responses due to the "greater anonymity" of such tools.[68]

While the various techniques have their advantages and disadvantages, the best approach is to use "triangulation" which involves the employment of "both qualitative and quantitative methods."[69] The various methods work "to verify the integrity of the data being collected" and operate "to ensure the reliability of the results."[70] Thus, the various quantitative and qualitative techniques serve each other in a sort of cross-checking function.

Conclusion

Reference service is a complex, multi-faceted undertaking. The Victorian Working Group has made considerable strides in identifying performance indicators to assist in particularizing the objectives of reference service. Moreover, the Working Group has also made significant contributions in its recognition that multiple perspectives on the service including those of the user should be incorporated and in its observation that both qualitative and quantitative techniques need to be employed

in assessing such an endeavor. The ACRL standards serve as an instructive guide to appropriate techniques and seem to envisage the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative methods which is clearly better from the standpoint of triangulation and reliability of results. Further, the complexities of reference service could not be adequately assessed with surveys and statistics alone; instead, focus groups and observational techniques such as diaries should be employed to contextualize the complex data. The qualitative techniques are especially important in obtaining data from international students which suffer from a variety of barriers of understanding even beyond language. More work still needs to be done to establish standards and performance indicators in regard to reference and especially in regard to international students. This needs to be followed up by further triangulated studies of these issues to yield more and more accurate information regarding the quality of services to aid the planning process on an ongoing basis.

Notes

[1] LL.B, 1997, Obafemi Awolowo University; B.L, 1999, Nigerian Law School; LL.M., *cum laude,* 2004, Master of Laws in Intercultural Human Rights, St. Thomas University, M.L.S., 2009, Texas Woman's University; and J.S.D (Candidate, St. Thomas University School of Law). Olugbenga Ademodi worked as a Public Services Researcher at St. Thomas University School of Law Library in Miami, Florida. from 2005 to April 2010. He is currently working on his J.S.D. in Intercultural Human Rights at St. Thomas University School of Law, through which he is exploring the status and rights of indigenous peoples in Nigeria. Olugbenga have participated in conferences and workshops in both Nigeria and the United States; He belong to organizations such as AALL and SEAALL. In 2008, his article entitled "The Open Source Road to Web 2.0 for Nigeria: A View of Two Worlds from the Outside" was published in the Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology.

Notes

[2] ACRL College and Research Task Force, "Standards for Libraries in Higher Education: The Final, Approved Standard, *College & Research Libraries News* 65, no. 9 (October 2004): 537-38.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 538.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] ACRL Undergraduate Librarians Discussion Group, "Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students," *College & Research Library News* 66, no. 10 (November 2005): 733.

[8] Ibid., 733-34; ACRL, "Standards," 537-38.

[9] ACRL, "Standards," 538.

[10] ACRL, "Guidelines," 734.

[11] ACRL, "Standards," 538.

[12] Ibid., 537-39; ACRL, "Guidelines," 732-34.

[13] ACRL, " Standards," 538-39.

[14]ACRL, "Guidelines," 734.

[15] Patience Simmonds and Syed Saad Andaleeb, "Usage of Academic Libraries: The Role of Service Quality, Resources, and User Characteristics,"

Library Trends 49, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 626.

[16] Ibid., 627.

[17] Ibid., 631.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Tony Oulton and Shelagh Fisher, “Using Libraries,” *Library Management* 16, no.5 (1995): 20.

[20] Dr. Ann Curry and Deborah Copeman, “Reference Service to International Students: A Field Stimulation Research Study,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31, no. 5, (2005): 410-11.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Oulton, 23.

[23] Joseph Janes, “Academic Reference: Playing to our Strengths,” *Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 4 (November 2004): 533.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 533-34.

[26]Ibid., 534.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 534-35.

[32] ACRL, “Guidelines,” 734.

[33] Janes, 535.

[34] David Liddle, “Best Value-The Impact on Libraries: Practical Steps in Demonstrating Best Value,” *Library Management* 20, no. 4 (1999): 206-12.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Diane G. Schwartz and Dottie Eakin, “Reference Service Standards, Performance Criteria, and Evaluation,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 12, no. 1 (March 1968): 4.

[38] Ibid., 4-5.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 5-6.

[43] Ibid., 6.

[44] Rosemary Cotter, “Performance Indicators for Reference and Information Services,” *International Association of Technological University Libraries Proceedings*, ns 6 (1998), http://www.iatul.org/ doclibrary/

public/Conf_Proceedings/1996/Cotter.doc (accessed May 16, 2010).

[45]Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] ACRL, “Standards,” 537; ACRL, Guidelines,” 733.

[57] Pali U. Kuruppu, “Evaluation of Reference Services – A Review,” *The Journal of Academic* Librarianship 33, no. 3 (May 2007): 370-71.

[58] Ibid.; ACRL, “Standards,” 537.

[59] Kuruppu, 371-73.

[60] Ibid., 370.

[61] Ibid.

[62] ACRL, “Standards,” 537-38.

[63] Kuruppu, 373.

[64] Ibid.; ACRL, “Standards,” 537.

[65] Kuruppu, 373.

[66] Ibid., 374; ACRL, “Standards,” 537-38.

[67] Curry, 411.

[68] Kuruppu, 375.

[69] Ibid., 376.

[70] Ibid.