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Rehman, Shafiq Ur; Shafique, Farzana; and Mahmood, Khalid, "A Survey of User Perception and Satisfaction with Reference Services in University Libraries of Punjab" (2011). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 624.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/624>

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Library Philosophy and Practice 2011

ISSN 1522-0222

A Survey of User Perception and Satisfaction with Reference Services in University Libraries of Punjab

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Introduction

Despite the processing and propagation of library resources, a key trait of a university library is the services based around personal interaction between users and the library staff. Libraries should make sure that these services show proper levels of customer care and that the information given to the users is useful and at the right level (Loughborough University Library, 2005). Retting (1993) has pointed out that the distinguishing features of reference include a staff designated to provide the service; a collection of reference works accessible to the public in an area set aside for the provision of the service; adequate guides to the library's resources; and a high degree of interaction between the staff and the clientele.

Although in today's world the term reference service encompasses more activities than mentioned by Retting. In this context Mitchell (2008) has rightly said that today's reference librarians are actively engaged with the many emerging new processes by which learning occurs. Further, reference librarians in academic and research libraries are actively engaged with the many emerging new processes not only by which learning occurs, but also by which research is done. To be successful, today's reference librarians need to not only understand but also embrace current and emerging technologies affecting reference functions and the information needs of library users. Indeed, wherever or however we provide

reference service, we are all cognizant of the major changes in libraries – changes that stem from countless cultural, economic, legal and social developments that have impacted, and continue to impact, our work. Similarly King (2005) and Hiller (2001) have mentioned that the information needs and expectations are continuously changing in the rapidly changing information scenario. Libraries need to re-orient their collections, services, and facilities to keep pace with these advancements. User feedback is considered as a more reliable factor in measuring the utility and effectiveness of any library. This is the reason that library user surveys have become widespread in academic libraries during the past twenty years. Surveys have often been used as a tool to assess service quality and user satisfaction. By making user surveys a regular part of the library's functions, librarians can provide a comparative 'snapshot' of usage in various temporal contexts.

Background of the Study

The provision of reference services has been, and still is, at the heart of all libraries in every sector be it academic, public or special. Until the internet changed forever the way we access information, it was the exclusive preserve of the "Reference librarian" to provide information directly to the client (Weddell, 2008). Evaluation of library reference services began in earnest in the late 1960s and early 1970s when budgetary situations required justification of the existence of all services in the library. A close examination of a reference service provides library administration and involved librarians with a clear understanding of how well the service is meeting its intended goals, objectives, and outcomes, how well the service is helping users fulfill their information needs, and whether the expended resources are producing the desired results (Pomerantz, Luo & McClure, 2006). Evaluation of reference services from different point of view serves different purposes. For example Saxton & Richardson (2002), has pointed out that most reference evaluation studies employ either "the query-oriented approach primarily concerned with testing the accuracy of answers to reference" or "the obtrusive user-oriented approach primarily concerned with testing levels of user satisfaction with the service". Similarly Whitlatch (2000) has mentioned four primary features of reference services for evaluation such as "economic feature", e.g. cost effectiveness, productivity measure; "service process", e.g. measures of satisfaction with the service provided; "resources", e.g. measures of quantity and quality of materials, staffing, equipment, and facilities supporting the service; and "service outcomes or products", e.g. measures related to the quality of answers or information delivered. Grossa & Saxton (2002) reported a secondary analysis of a user survey administered in 13 public libraries and examined user ratings of reference services by transaction type. Transaction type is defined dichotomously as self-generated (users transacting questions they have determined for themselves) or imposed (agent users in the library seeking information on behalf of someone else). Users with self-generated questions rated library services lower than did users with imposed questions. Both groups rated the library experience lower than their reference desk experience, and imposed queries were responsible for proportionately higher "first time" use of the reference desk. No significant difference existed between groups for ratings of finding useful information in the library, finding everything wanted in the library visit, frequency of library use, or levels of attained formal education. There were significant differences found for ratings of the reference librarian's service behaviors, user satisfaction with reference service, and frequency of reference desk use.

User satisfaction and optimization of resources have become important areas for libraries to maintain awareness of. Many libraries esp. the university libraries are focusing on evaluation of the users' needs and their satisfaction with their services. User surveys can provide useful perceptions of service quality in libraries. For example Texas A&M University libraries conducted focus group studies in 2001 with graduate and undergraduate studies in order to gather specific information related to their satisfaction with and confidence in the assistance

provided at library service points. The sessions revealed that users were generally pleased with the assistance provided them by professional staff at reference desks and that they found librarians to be usually patient and helpful although there were some elements of dissatisfaction identified by the respondents. The findings of such studies are being used to improve library directional tools and to improve staff training for public service staff (Crowley & Gilreath, 2002).

Similarly, Loughborough University Library decided the annual user survey for 2004/ 2005 academic year. The purpose of the survey was to gather a broad understanding of how users perceive the service they receive at the various desks. The focus specifically was on perceptions of the customer care they receive and the level of information provided (Loughborough University Library, 2005). Loorits & Dubjeva (1997) have reported the satisfaction of the users with reference services at Tartu University Library. The results of a user survey carried out in the framework of a Baltic-Swedish joint project at the library in spring 1995, and the statistical data gathered at the same time were analyzed by them. According to them the same autumn another survey was organized to gather statistical data to follow the dynamics of reference services. Similarly Novotny & Rimland (2007) have discussed a service quality study conducted in the Pennsylvania State University Libraries. The Wisconsin–Ohio Reference Evaluation Program survey was selected as a valid, standardized instrument. They presented their results, highlighting the impact on reference training. According to them a second survey a year later demonstrated that focusing on behavioral aspects of reference can improve service quality ratings. Providing quality reference service is not easy, and any approach needs constant evaluation. Close attention to user needs can guide the reference staff about future changes. For example, Fitzpatrick, Moore & Lang (2008) have predicted the future directions of reference service based on the findings of a study such as programmatic information literacy instruction, integration of library resources into the curriculum, and librarians spending more time in academic buildings outside of the library in high-activity locations. Reference service is most effective and efficient when the librarian has a presence at the point of need. In the changing scenario many reference departments have reduced librarian time at the Reference desk. Instead, they are creatively seeking users' multiple points of need online via instant messenger, chat, phone, email, and face-to-face outside the library in classrooms, labs, and cafés. According to Dent (2000) the Interactive Reference Assistance (IRA) project is an example of one such service innovation at the University of Michigan. Keeping the importance of reference services in view many studies are conducted in the developed world, but in Pakistan the situation is not encouraging. Very few studies are conducted to find out the status of reference service in different libraries of Pakistan. For example, Raziuddin (1998) studied different aspects of reference services like reference questions, reference interview, and reference librarians' competencies, kinds of reference sources and impact of computer on reference services. She pointed out that reference services are almost out of practice in Pakistan and very few libraries provide reference services and have reference librarian. Bashir (1977) discussed the reference services in college libraries, while Haq (1993) investigated the reference services in the Quaid-e-Azam Library and emphasized on the improvement of not only reference services but the skills of librarians as well. He mentioned that active and knowledgeable reference librarians along with adequate reference tools are more helpful for library users and suggested the frequent performance evaluation of libraries. Khan (1979), Mirza (1981) and Khan (2006a) described the impact of electronic data processing on reference services and highlighted various computer based reference services in Pakistan. Khan (2006b) probed the 153 students' perception of the reference librarian and how do they approach them for services at Peshawar University Library. Majeed (1998) investigated the public services of Punjab University Library and she presented the status of reference services in the Library. Rafi (2006) conducted an appraisal of reference services offered by Quaid-e-Azam Reference Library. She mentioned that majority of users were satisfied with reference services but there is a need to update the printed reference sources. She furnished various recommendations for further improvement. Similarly, Saddique (2006) surveyed the reference services

offered by the IRC (previously known as Reference Section) of the University of Punjab, Lahore. He investigated the user's perception about IRC. He found that during last few years IRC services have improved but there is a need for more training of staff and the users as well. Extensive information literacy program should be developed for users. Keeping the problems of developing countries like Pakistan in view, Lopes (1992) has rightly pointed out that the setting up reference services and referral centers in libraries in developing countries must be considered as an increasingly important factor in the development of effective libraries and information systems in developing countries.

Problem Statement, Objectives and Methodology of the Study

Review of the above literature reveals a wide gap in the provision of reference services. As the situation of university libraries in Punjab is better than other provinces, so to take a broader understanding of reference services in university libraries of Punjab, a reasonable sample of well established general universities of Punjab was selected for this study. The basic objective of this study was to gather a broad understanding of how users perceive the reference services they receive at their university libraries and their satisfaction with these services.

Methodology

The survey is limited to all public sector general university libraries (central library/main library) (N=10) of the Punjab province (Pakistan) having a reasonable collection, staff, and separate reference section, as well as a reference librarian. One hundred questionnaires were distributed in each university library selected for the study. The sample from all public sector universities was purposefully selected from library users. To be included in the selection, a library user had to be full time student or faculty/staff member. Additionally, he also has some experience of using library reference services. The questionnaire was distributed to the users during their physical visits to the concerned library. A questionnaire-based cross-sectional survey research design was employed. It was a cross-sectional survey because the data were collected from the subjects at one point in time. This was done keeping in view the time constraints. Out of 1000 questionnaires distributed, 507 filled in questionnaires were returned to the researchers in the usable form. The rate of response was, therefore, 50.7 % in our case which was sufficiently high with regard to a survey research design. All areas of reference services to measure different constructs were combined in the form of a questionnaire (containing 24 questionnaire items/statements). It used a five-point Likert scale. The scale used for each item was from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To assess the reliability and validity of the scale, Cronbach's alpha (α) was executed on the scale. The Cronbach alpha value is 0.911, which is higher than the general standard of 0.80, items suggesting a good reliability of overall questionnaire. The first part also contained demographic questions i.e. status, sex, frequency of library visit, frequency of reference section visit, name of the organization etc. and an open-ended question for gathering further opinion. The questionnaires were received by the authors through mail, email (scanned copy of the filled questionnaires) and personal visits. The data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively to reach at conclusions. Quantitative analysis was done with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-version 16).

Data Analysis and Related Discussion

Personal Profile of the Respondents

Acquired responses reveal that in total 507 i.e., 277 (55%) male and 230 (45%) female users from different university libraries responded against the questionnaire

(Table 1). Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of responses acquired from each university. Most of the responses were received from the Islamia University of Bahawalpur (94, 19%) and then from University of the Punjab, Lahore (89, 18%) due to personal visits by the authors. Of the 507 respondents, 460 (91%) were students, 22 (4%), faculty members and 13 (3%) different staff members of the relevant universities (Table 3). Most of the students were studying in MA/MSc programs (321, 63%), while 125 (25%) did not mention their level of studies (Table 4).

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	277	55
Female	230	45
Total	507	100

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of the Responses Acquired from each University

Rank	Names of Responded University Libraries	Frequency	Percent
1.	Islamia University of Bahawalpur	94	19
2.	University of the Punjab- Lahore	89	18
3.	Government College University-Lahore	60	12
4.	University of Engineering and Technology-Lahore	50	10
5.	University of Gujrat	46	9
6.	Allama Iqbal Open University- Islamabad	43	9
7.	Bahaudin Zakria University-Multan	40	8
8.	International Islamic University- Islamabad	34	7
9.	UVAS- Lahore	26	5
10.	Government College University-Faisalabad	25	5

Table 3: Frequency distribution of Respondents' Status

Respondents	Frequency	Percent
Student	460	91
Faculty	22	4

Staff	13	3
Missing	12	2
Total	507	100

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Level of Studies

Level of Study	Frequency	Percent
MA/MSc	321	63
Missing	125	25
M. Phil	29	6
PhD	18	4
BA-honors/BSc	14	3

Frequency of Library and Reference Section Visits

Table 5 shows the frequency with which the respondents were visiting the library. The response shows a good trend of library visits because most of them were daily (219, 43%) and twice a week (198, 39%) visitors of the library. On the other hand the results show that 172 (34%) respondents were visiting the Reference section of their respective library twice a week and 110 (22%) were visiting it daily. A great number of respondents (106, 21%) were visiting it rarely (Table 6).

Table 5: Frequency of Library Visits

Library Visits	Frequency	Percent
Daily	219	43
Twice a week	198	39
Monthly	31	6
Fortnightly	21	4
Missing	15	3

Table 6: Frequency of Reference Section Visits

Reference Section Visits	Frequency	Percent
Twice a week	172	34

Daily	110	22
Rarely	106	21
Fortnightly	42	8
Missing	40	8
Monthly	37	7

Respondents' Perception and Satisfaction with the Reference Section and its Services

Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics of respondents' perception and satisfaction with the Reference section of their respective university library. They were asked to rate different statements against a five point Likert scale. Some statements were asked repetitively from different angles in order to get the clear feedback. To interpret the results of the study the researchers considered satisfied services those have mean score of 3.5 or above. These statements are categorized and ranked for the purpose of data analysis. The categories and acquired responses are as followed:

Reference Collection

Respondents were agree with the statement that Reference collection is adequate for their information needs (mean=3.67), well-organized and easy to use (mean= 3.57) and appropriate material is available for answering the reference questions (mean= 3.56). On the other hand most of the respondents gave no opinion about the adequacy of print (mean= 3.44) and electronic (mean= 3.17) reference collection.

Reference Staff

They agreed that the reference staff is competent and helpful (mean= 3.84) and demonstrates good communication skills (mean= 3.58), but most of them did not give any opinion about the statement that the reference staff immediately answers their ready reference questions (mean= 3.44). It seems that they have shown their perception and satisfaction with all the library staff rather than only about reference staff.

Reference Services

The results show that most of the respondents showed no opinion about the reference services of the library.

E-Reference Services

Respondents were also asked about the electronic reference services provided by their libraries. They mentioned that they are strongly agree with the statement that library Web pages are informative, helpful, and easy-to-use and a good source for e-reference services (mean= 4.53). On the other hand they gave no opinion about other statements probing their perception and satisfaction about the E-reference services.

Facilities

The respondents agreed that Reference section's environment (noise level, heating / cooling, lights, furniture, cleanliness, etc.) is conducive to study and convenient to use (mean= 3.88), and approach (mean= 3.86), its opening and closing hours

meet their needs (mean= 3.78) and it is easy to borrow reference material for photocopy (mean= 3.71). On the other hand they expressed no opinion regarding the provision of access to adequate electronic reference sources (mean= 3.28), good Internet facility for searching online reference sources (mean= 3.21) and availability of adequate computers for use of electronic reference sources (mean= 3.06).

Overall Satisfaction

It is revealed from the acquired results that the respondents were agreed that they were satisfied with the overall quality of reference services (mean= 3.6).

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of Respondents Perception and Satisfaction with the Reference Section and its Services

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reference Collection: Reference collection is adequate for my needs	3.67	1.104
Library's reference collection is well-organized and easy to find	3.57	1.178
Library has appropriate reference material for answering reference questions	3.56	1.082
Print reference collection is adequate	3.44	1.058
Electronic reference collection is adequate	3.17	1.140
Reference Staff: Reference staff is competent and helpful	3.84	1.125
Reference Staff demonstrates good communication skill	3.58	2.123
Reference staff immediately answers my ready reference questions	3.44	1.236
Catalog of reference material is easy to use	3.42	1.723
Reference Services: Current Awareness Service (CAS) is helpful	3.33	1.417
Library provides adequate training on the use of reference services and resources	3.13	1.225
Library provides good Interlibrary loan and document delivery services	3.10	1.093
E-Reference Services: Library Web pages are informative, helpful, and easy-to-use and a good source for e-reference services	4.53	24.767

Digital (E-mail & chat) reference services satisfy my need	3.10	2.075
Library answers the digital/electronic reference queries	3.10	1.054
Facilities: Reference section's environment (noise level, heating / cooling, lights, furniture, cleanliness, etc.) is conducive to study	3.88	2.09
Use of Reference section procedure is convenient	3.88	1.019
Reference section is convenient for visitors to approach	3.86	.936
Opening/closing hours of reference section meet my needs	3.78	1.059
Borrowing reference books for photocopying from the library is easy	3.71	1.076
Library provides access to adequate electronic reference sources for research and information	3.28	1.921
Reference section provides good Internet facility for searching online reference sources	3.21	1.344
Adequate computers are available for use of electronic reference sources	3.06	1.341
Over all Satisfaction: I am satisfied with the overall quality of reference services	3.6	2.038

Scale: 5= Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3=No opinion, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly disagree

Overall Satisfaction	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7047.797	9	783.089	3.636	.000
Within Groups	106837.049	496	215.397		
Total	113884.846	505			

Comparison of User Satisfaction with the Reference Services among the University Libraries

Opinions of the users about their satisfaction with reference services among different libraries were compared on a five-point scale. Mean scores of their satisfaction level of reference services about different libraries are given in Table 8. To see the significance of difference between means of satisfaction, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. It is a technique that partitions the total variation – a term distinct from variance and measured by the sum of squares of deviations from

the mean – into components, each of which may be attributed to a definite source of variation (Shafique & Mahmood, 2007). The results of ANOVA show that there is significant difference (at the 0.05 alpha levels) among the means of different universities. The results show that satisfactions of the respondents about different services in universities are different (See table 8).

Suggestions Provided by the Respondents

The analysis of the free-text comments also provides more qualitative information from the users' perspective. Of the 507 respondents, 274 (54%) provided their suggestions for the improvement of reference and other library services. Most of them recommended for the provision of more facilities and reference services (n= 99), acquisition of new and updated reference material for all subjects (n= 84) and provision of more reference services as mentioned in the questionnaire. Other important suggestions were that the reference librarian and other reference staff should be competent, well trained and should be able to answer all the queries of the users. They recommended the provision of good ICT facilities and online reference services as well (See table 9).

Table 9: Frequency Distribution of Suggestions Provided by the Respondents

Rank	Suggestions	Frequency
1.	Library should provide more facilities and reference services	99
2.	New and updated reference material should be acquired by the library in all subjects	84
3.	More reference services should be started as mentioned in the questionnaire	83
4.	Reference librarian should be competent	71
5.	Reference staff should be well trained and answer all the queries of the users	61
6.	Internet and other ICT facilities/need good Internet speed	58
7.	Online reference service should be started	57
8.	Environment of the section should be conducive for research and study	33
9.	Proper reference services should be started. Our library has no proper concept of reference services	27
10.	Reference material should be processed and arranged properly	26
11.	More print/e-journals should be subscribed by the section	23
12.	OPAC should be provided in the reference section as well	13
13.	Reference material should also be issued to the users	11

14.	Reference services should be of international standard	11
15.	More trained reference staff should be appointed	9
16.	User education programs should be started	8
17.	Departmental libraries should also provide reference services	6

Findings

The study reveals that although respondents have shown their overall satisfaction with the reference collection, staff, facilities and services provided by their libraries but they did not rank highly satisfied to any category of reference service. Out of 24 statements 14 falls in the category of satisfaction level, but a review of responses against other similar statements and provided suggestions/comments indicate that in some cases they gave their opinion about the overall library collection, staff and services etc. rather than about reference section in particular. Although most users do not have clear understanding of the complexities of library systems, in order to implement customer-based changes, library administration must accept user perceptions as valid statements of how patrons feel. Some suggestions provided by the users were interesting such as regarding the provision of reference services mentioned in the questionnaire i.e., chat reference etc. Any how this is a significant finding that the respondents have valued the investment in reference services by their university libraries. The level of user satisfaction with these investments is also satisfactory.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We are living in the information age, where information explosion and customer care are one of the major challenges. In this context, it is inevitable for a library to provide richer information diets to their customers for fulfilling their information needs. This reality is very well felt by the developed world and in those countries reference and information services have seen revolutionary changes to meet the new challenges of information age. This study investigated the overall user's perception and satisfaction with reference services in public sector university library of largest province of Pakistan. This is first effort to investigate the user's satisfaction with reference services in Pakistan. The researchers hope that this study will further motivate the future research on the topic in Pakistan. The Reference services are often criticized due to lack of customer focus and input. This study result suggest that concerned authorities should pay attention for the improvement of present level of user satisfaction . Keeping this reality in view the survey was an initial step for finding the status of such activities in the largest Province of Pakistan. On the basis of findings of the study some recommendations are made, which are as followed:

1. Libraries should pay special attention on the provision of good collection, staff and services in their reference sections.
2. New ICT based services i.e., Electronic or virtual reference services should be introduced by the libraries.
3. Consideration should be given on future service development. The reference staff should be trained in maintaining high level of customer satisfaction in face to face services.
4. University libraries should consider the features of "user friendliness and helpfulness" while designing online or electronic services for their users.

5. The concept of customer care training should be introduced at the library schools and libraries as well.
6. Library instruction program should target undergraduate students who are most in need of assistance in the use of different library resources and services.
7. Such studies should be conducted more frequently. Other provinces of the country are also needed to be studied.
8. User satisfaction survey research should be conducted in Pakistan at the macro and micro levels on different aspects of reference services.
9. Library schools should pay special attention on training the future reference librarians by giving them the assignments of long and short range questions and electronic reference services.
10. Findings of the study should be considered by the relevant individual university libraries in particular and other libraries in general for improvement of their reference services.

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