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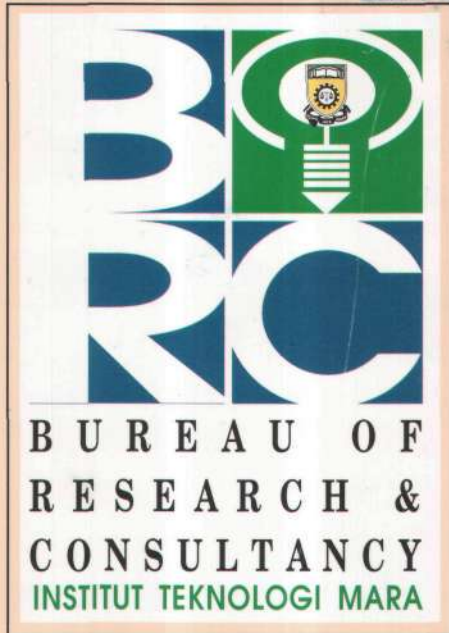
THE USE OF INFORMATION BY THE POLICY-MAKERS IN MALAYSIA AND THEIR AWARENESS OF THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how information is used by policy-makers in Malaysia and their awareness of information and information services. A survey administered to 400 top government officers involved in policy making and, policy formulation, attempts to identify the policy-makers; elicit the types of policies; the role of information in policy-making and formulation; the types and forms of information used; methods of information usage: types of information provided; the policy-makers' awareness of library and information services; and the dissemination of information in the future. Findings regarding the use of information and the role of information, especially those related to the country, show that information is very important and necessary for effective decision-making. There is also an awareness of the need for increased computerized services. Although there is an awareness of the importance of libraries and information centres, more concerted effort should be made to market and increase the potential of information so that the information needs of the policy-makers could be met.

Keywords: Information, information use, policy-makers, Malaysia, awareness, library and information services.

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INTRODUCTION

In all kinds of production, information is equally as important as other factors like capital and staff. Policy-makers play a very important role in the development of a country since they are involved in the formulation of policies for a particular country. For effective decision-making, relevant data and information in answer to the problems, needs and requirements of the policy-makers are highly needed. There are problems in the areas of the imbalanced methodology of acquiring and providing information, especially those affected are at the level of government institutions in Malaysia. Information needs to be acquired, organized, easily retrieved and disseminated to the right person at the right time. B. Dervin supported this concept by saying that "Information needs to be managed and controlled in order to be useful and accessible"[1]. Currently, information is recorded in varied terms and forms and need to be utilised. There is still a lack of awareness about such information and its usage, as well as assistance from professional librarians and information officers, such that these can be beneficial and help to further improve the results of the decisions made, henceforth able to produce the policies much faster.

Policy-makers require current and retrospective information speedily. P. Pratap Lingam clearly stated that "Information is essential, for it is the key to both effective planning and control. The effectiveness of a decision-maker is dependent not only upon his innate professional skills, judgements, etc, but also quality, accuracy and timeliness of the information upon which he bases his decisions." [2]

The concept of the library as a support unit to acquire, store, organize and disseminate information in the government departments has been in existence for a long time. Unfortunately, the development has been rather slow, in terms of its important role; its size; its collection and the status of the staff employed to operate and manage the library, as stated in the "Panduan Perpustakaan di Malaysia: Directory of Libraries in Malaysia".[3] Major government departments had, for a long time, established libraries which are manned by professional library staff, like those in the Prime Minister's Department; the Central Bank of Malaysia; the Rubber Research Institute and many others. As a matter of fact, the number of libraries had been established in the various divisions of the Prime Minister's Department like the Economic Planning Unit; the Manpower Planning Unit; the Prime Minister's Private Office and Socio-Economic Research Unit. These libraries are established based on the needs and objectives of the departments and the country.

The question that arises here is, how do policy-makers acquire information for this purpose? Besides this, it is interesting to study their awareness about various types of information; library services; the potentials of professional library staff and computer-based information services.

This study attempts to gauge the current use of information by the policy-makers in Malaysia. It also attempts to inquire about their awareness of the role of libraries and the potentialities of professional library staff in aiding them in the course of their work.

It was found that there has not been any similar research on this topic conducted in this country and elsewhere. As such the preview was based entirely in the literature available, Lin Zixin stated that there are three kinds of users of information needs in China, i.e. the policy-makers, the planners and the managers.[4] B. Yates touched on the importance and existence of libraries.[5] Hamish M. Russel and Margaret C. Irvine reiterated the importance of current information that are highly relevant to the policies in any country. The key to effective policy formulation is the speedy and timely dissemination of information by the librarians.

A UNESCO funded survey which was conducted by Zultanawar, listed the needs of information by the policy-makers, planners, managers as well as the administrators.[7]

OBJECTIVE OF RESEARCH

This research aims to study the use of information by the policy-makers in this country as well as to assess their awareness about information and information services. The main objective is to gather information regarding:

1. the category and characteristics of a policy-maker
2. types of decisions and policies and the role of information in decision-making
3. types and forms of information used
4. methods of information use
5. information services provided
6. awareness about library and information centre services
7. method of channelling and disseminating information in the future

THE QUESTIONS PUT FORTH WERE:

1. Does information play an important role in the formulation of policies in a country?
2. Are the library staff considered important as assistants to acquire information for the policy-makers?
3. Are the library services provided by the libraries of government departments and agencies satisfactory?
4. Are the policy-makers aware of the potentialities of professional librarians in providing every information need?
5. Do policy-makers require current or retrospective information about their organizations?
6. Are the policy-makers aware of the role of other libraries in providing information?
7. Is modern technology required to improve and enhance the library and information services?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The questions, comprising open-ended, close-ended and multiple-choice questions, were divided into eight sections in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to study the use of information by the policy-makers in Malaysia and assess their awareness about information, information services and professional library staff. The questions posed aimed to gather information about the background of the policy-makers; the kinds of policy formulation that they had been involved with as well as their methods of acquiring information. This study requires the identification of who the policy-maker is. The initial procedure involves the identification of government departments and institutions that are involved in formulating policies for the country. Government departments and agencies suitable to be included in this research are listed in such publications like the Malaysia Official Yearbook and Information Malaysia. The questionnaire was pre-tested, and a number of revisions were made to incorporate the comments and suggestions provided by the pre-test respondents. About 400 respondents were selected to represent the population of those serving in the government departments and institutions throughout Malaysia. The criteria of selection used are based on their positions held as top level policy-makers. The respondents comprised cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, chief ministers, parliamentary secretaries, state secretaries and deputy state secretaries, directors and deputy directors, managers and assistant managers, department directors or heads, vice-chancellors, professors and all those who are involved at the top-level management. All questionnaires were mailed or hand delivered to the respondents throughout Malaysia.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The response rate was 55%, i.e. 202 out of 400 responded. All of the responses were from West Malaysia and there was no response received from those in East Malaysia. The result of the study showed that 94% of the respondents answered the question concerning the importance of the role of professional library and information officers; and had agreed that these people are important in assisting the success of decision-making and policy formulating. 70% stated that libraries do not provide all services that are required as well as do not market all those services which ought to be provided for them. This is an important factor, as many of them, i.e. about 70% are aware that professional librarians are able to provide· them with all kinds of information needs. Libraries need to be able to provide all kinds of relevant information for the policy-makers, which includes current and retrospective documents about the organizations. This is based on the finding that 90% of the respondents require retrospective information and 91% require current information. About 72% felt that libraries should be used as important centres for the provision of information for policy-makers. Many of the respondents are aware of the potentials of modern technology, especially the computers, and 73% suggested that there is a necessity to implement computer-based libraries for more effective library services, and 70% responded that there is a need for libraries to access databases in various subject areas within and outside the country.

However, there is a very little awareness about specialised library services. Only 22% had ever been provided with the selective dissemination of information services; 15%

were exposed to the current awareness services; 1% had been provided with interlibrary loan services and 1% were provided with abstracting and summary services. Despite their awareness about the reference and information services provided for by the library, only between 40% to 50% had ever used or been provided with it. Besides the library, the policy-makers were also dependent on their own collections, whether in their own homes or in their offices; or their colleagues as well as data banks. Even though 83% of the respondents stated that during the process of policy-making they acquired the information themselves. 81% of them also stated that they employed their subordinates or the lower category staff to collect the information for them, whilst 46% used the services of their research officers. However, none responded that libraries had been asked to do this job for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The results of the findings show that information is considered as an important factor in the formulation of policies in the country. It also shows that informal information is as important as the formal information in that it can be used as background information; overview and additional information; responses; second opinions as well as for comparative purposes.

This study is useful for the policy-makers and the information officers. There is a variety of types and forms of information and information services that can be taken advantage of in the libraries by the policy-makers. On top of that, professional library staff can assist them in selecting, acquiring and retrieving relevant information for their needs. The information and library personnel, should concentrate on making a concerted effort to coordinate the library services based on the needs of the policy-makers.

IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT:

1. The various types and forms of information should be exposed to the policy-makers. They should be provided with access to all kinds of information and information services which are required in their work.

2. The information collection ought to be centrally located in the library information centre so that it can be organised and used by every staff member.

3. Professionally-trained and qualified library staff ought to be employed to manage the library and provide information and library services.

4. There should be more concerted efforts toward the marketing of library and information services by the library personnel.

5. The budget allocated to libraries should be increased to reflect an increase in size of the collection, size of the library and the improvement of the library and information services provided.

6. Efforts toward the application of modern technology in libraries and computer-based library systems should be emphasised with the expectation of efficient and improved services.

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