

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REFERENCE DESK SERVICES: THE CURRENT TRENDS IN A DIGITAL AGE



Introduction

The main purposes of reference services are to meet the information research needs and to enable clients to learn strategies for information research and the use of information retrieval tools available through the library (Simmonds & Syed Saad Andaleeb, 2001).

Recent studies show that library trends in reference usage patterns are shifting. The decline in the number of students using the physical library has lessened the need for librarians. In order to get library resources, users do not have to be physically presents into the library building.

This paper aims:

- 1) To provides a unique snapshot of a reference service in an academic library, where both online and offline reference services are taking place.
- 2) To described on how a reference services librarian may have the best influence on the visibility and operational of an academic library.
- 3) By analyzing the trends from the usage statistics, this study can be used as a continuous improvement where reference librarians need to enhance their digital competencies in providing reference desk assistance.

Online Reference Service vs Offline Reference Service

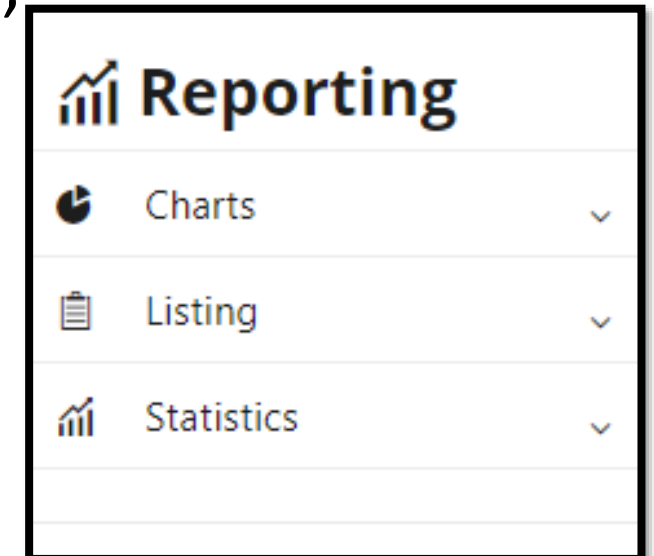
- The field of reference service is vast and dynamic and many new developments have taken place in it during the last ten years. While online reference is well established as a service, the technology employed by online reference is still developing rapidly.
- User trends and patterns have changed and now library user favor the use of electronic assistance, electronic consultation, electronic guidance and electronic library resources compared. According to (Diamond & Pease, 2001) as a strategy, librarians need to improve their methods for providing answers to questions posed in the digital environment.
- Reference librarian on duty should be able to provide equitable reference assistance to all clients regardless of whether the user has come to the library, telephoned, emailed, online chat or used other medium of communication technologies.

Digital Competencies of Reference Librarian

- Developments in computers, microelectronics, and communication technologies have radically changed the library and information environment. Gone are the days of stand-alone libraries, in which a library was judged less by the quality of its resources and services than by the quantity of materials it had available.
- The past few years have seen rapid development in technology supporting collaborative, synchronous reference service, and rapid acceptance of this technology in reference services of all types. According to (Scherrer & Jacobson, 2002) in response to falling entrance statistics and increasing online collections, libraries have reached out to patrons in new ways.
- The perceptions and needs of patrons are important to measures the quality and impact of reference services to meet their information needs. Reference librarian should assist and guide user to define their needs in terms of the type and amount of information required for their purpose.

Methodology

- The study analyzed reference transactions received between **Jan-May 2016** and **Jan-May 2016**
- Location : Library UiTM Cawangan Selangor, Kampus Puncak Alam
- Reference Desk Management Systems (RDMS) reporting ;
 - ✓ **Reference Desk Transactions**
 - ✓ **Reference Desk Session**
 - ✓ **Question Type Analysis**
 - ✓ **Reference Desk Enquiries**



Reference Desk management System (RDMS)

The screenshot displays the Reference Desk Management System (RDMS) web application. The interface features a blue header bar with the system name, navigation links (Home, Staff On Duty, Contact Us), and a user profile for Nurul Diana Binti Jasni. The main content area is titled 'Reference Desk Management System' and 'Perpustakaan Puncak Alam'. It includes a sidebar with navigation options: User, Dashboard, Patron Check-In, Edit Checked-In, KIV, Duty Schedule, Reporting (Charts, Listing, Statistics), and an Activity Feed. The Activity Feed shows a list of recent events with dates and times, such as 'Salam Lebaran 1437H Dar...' on 7/4/2016 and 'MAKLUMAN PENYELENG...' on 6/30/2016. A 'Refresh' button is located at the bottom of the feed.



<http://online.ptar.uitm.edu.my/rdms/default.aspx?sat=ppa>

Findings and Discussions

January - May
2016

138
Users

Table 1

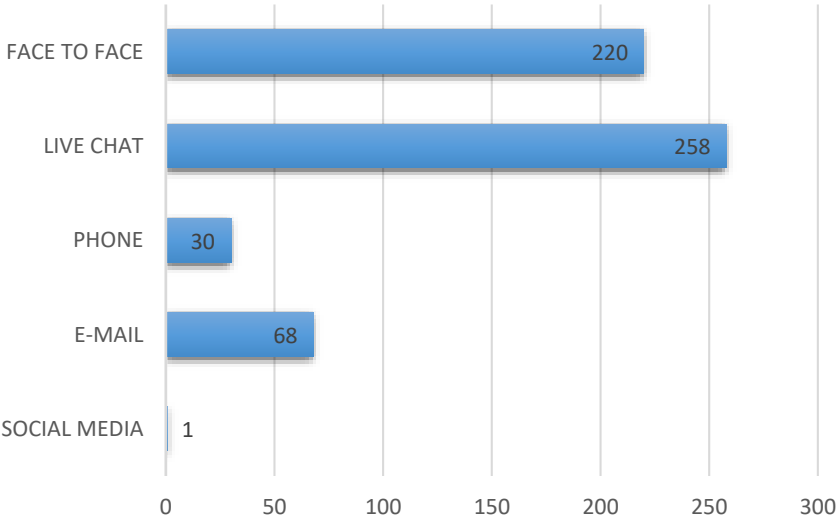
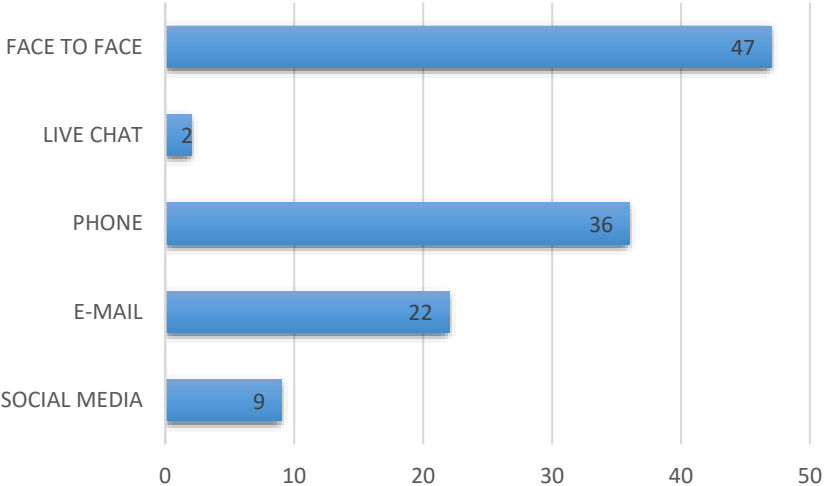
Reference Desk Session

January - May
2017

577
Users

Reference Desk Transaction (Medium)

Table 2



Findings and Discussions

- October 2015, the main Reference Services Desk is located nearest study carrel area on the 3rd floor, PTAR Puncak Alam Library. Starting January 2017, library management had decided to re-allocate reference services desk to a new location at level 2. The new location is located nearest customer service counter and at the entrance to the library. The main intention of the new location is to **promote the visibility of reference desk librarians** and at the same time to contribute **users' awareness** of the services offered.
- Table 1 and Table 2 shows that there has been a marked increase of reference desk session and reference desk transaction. Recent research has suggested when only librarians staffed the reference desks at the strategic location inside the library buildings, they could be held accountable for the quality of service provided (Rusuli, Saufi, Tumari, & Hasman, 2014). This allowing users especially new students to approach only **one desk for assistance** rather than wondering where to go for help. One of the promotion & marketing strategy that had been taken were designing poster, digital signage and information blast via library Facebook and during library orientation/library tour promoting about reference desk services to our users.

Findings and Discussions

January - May
2016

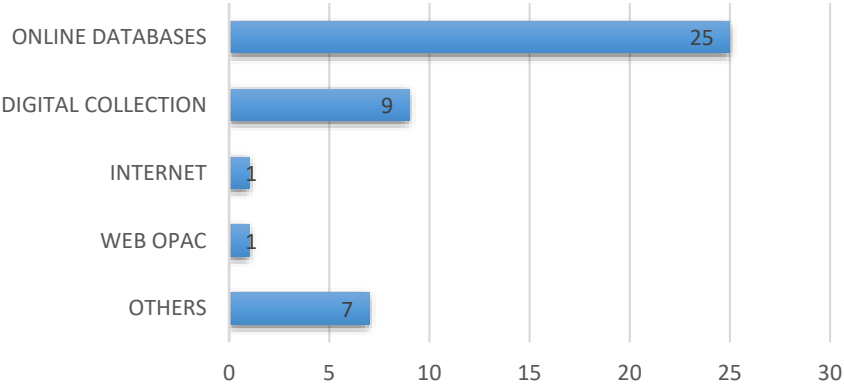
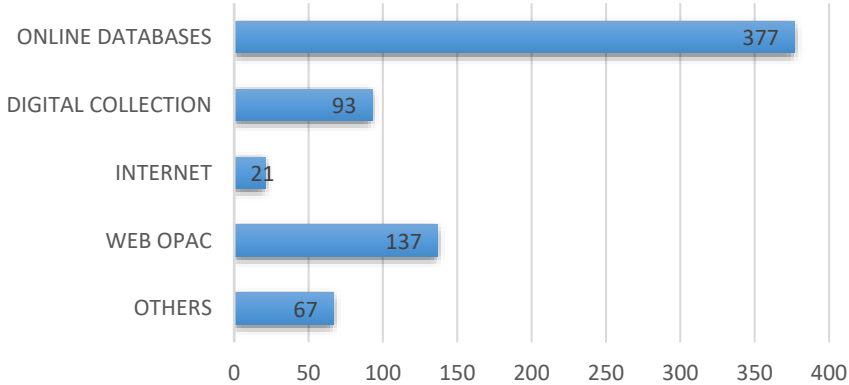


Table 3

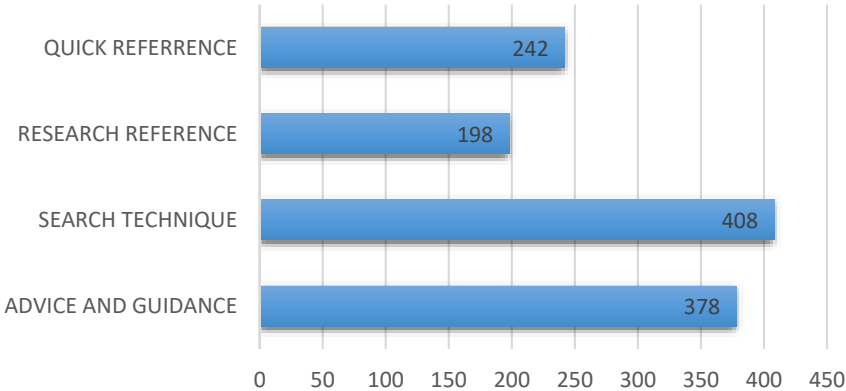
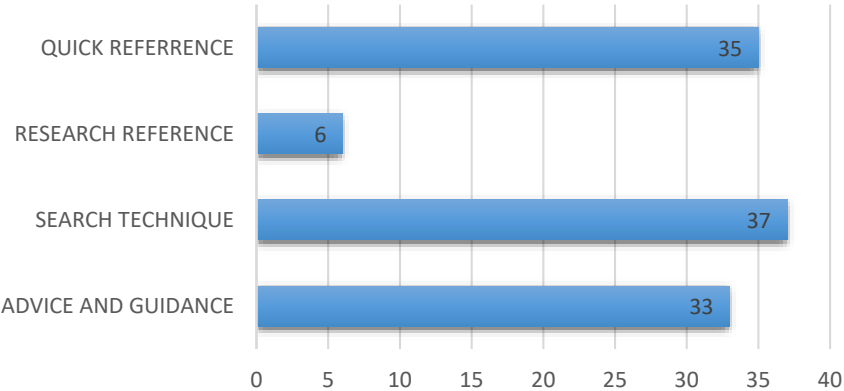
Question Type Analysis

January - May
2017



Reference Desk Queries

Table 4



- Findings reveals that **library users are lacking information and knowledge** about **online databases subscribed** by the library (see Table 3). This data will be used in improving information literacy skills classes and hands-on session. All academic libraries in Singapore are involved in implementing a variety of information literacy programmes customized to the needs of specific groups of students, ranging from first year undergraduate to PhD students and faculty (IFLA, Mei 2017).
- Analysis of Table 4 : There is an increase number of Reference desk queries assist by the reference librarian such as search technique, advice and guidance, quick reference and research reference. Findings indicates there is a crucial need to have **reference librarians with expertise** in the areas where questions are **most often** asked (**searching techniques, searching strategy and searching skills**)
- The use of digital facilities in reference services could lead to better reference services where librarians of today must be **ICT adequacy** for effective reference services which will reveal their inadequacy to use and operate in the digital environment (Abubakar, 2012). The study shows that in a digital age environments, future reference services must respond to information needs and **utilize appropriate technology** in offering many ways to communicate with their users.

Recommendation

Based on the study, several recommendations are put forward:

- Librarians need to more fully explore the needs of their local target user populations to ensure they are effectively reaching users who are no longer coming into the library.
- Universities libraries should ensure adequate digital facilities for effective reference services. In addition, trainings, information sharing and hands-on session emphasize on reference and ICT skills should be given to enable them perform their duties effectively.
- As a continuous improvement, reference librarians need to enhance their digital competencies in providing reference desk assistance. Reference desk librarians should be trained to becoming more competent and knowledgeable.
- More research is needed on the preferences of both traditional and online library users, in order to find the most effective balance of on-site, outreach, especially on digital reference services. Future research could focus user feedback on the quality of answers provided in digital and traditional reference services.

Conclusion

- As a conclusion, the reference librarian in a digital age is now faced with the challenging task of developing their ICT skills, social network skills and other adaptive skills that will make them relevant in information services provision.
- Reference services librarian may have the best influence on the visibility, functionality and operational of an academic library. The existence of reference librarian are still relevant in helping those who would come physically to the library and at the same time able to provides e-reference services.
- Communication between reference librarians and user in a courteous and encouraging manner in providing accurate and efficient reference assistance to all clients whether online or offline is still vital for the provision of enhancement and improving reference services.

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HUBUNGI :



DR KHASIAH BT ZAKARIA

TIMBALAN KETUA PUSTAKAWAN KANAN
BAHAGIAN PERKHIDMATAN
PERPUSTAKAAN

E-Mail : khasiah_z@salam.uitm.edu.my

Telefon : +603 - 3258 4006

Fax : +603 - 3258 4259

ADA PERTANYAAN

eJURNAL PANGKALAN DATA
PENCARIAN BAHAN DALAM TALIAN
eBOOK WEBOPAC
ENDNOTES MENDELEY

HUBUNGI :



NURUL DIANA BT. JASNI

PUSTAKAWAN KANAN
UNIT PERKHIDMATAN AKADEMIK

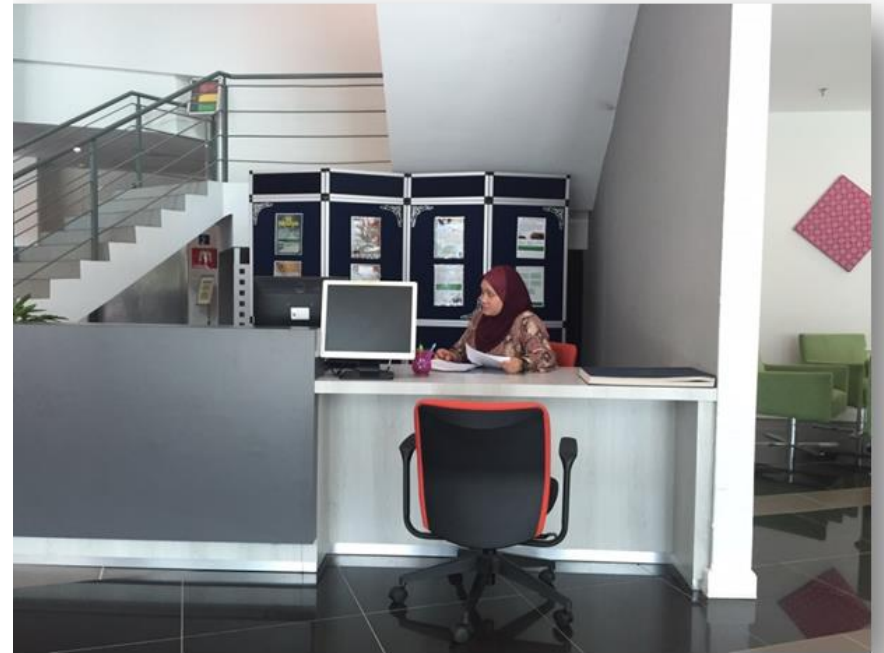
E-Mail : diana875@salam.uitm.edu.my

Telefon : +603 - 3258 4257

Fax : +603 - 3258 4259



REFERENCE SERVICES |
ask a librarian



Thank You ...



Nurul Diana Jasni



diana875@salam.uitm.edu.my



603-3258 4257 / 6012-344 33 62