

Evaluation and Use of Special Library Collection: The Perspectives of Two Libraries in Malaysia

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Abstract

Libraries generally are regarded as organs through which information is dispersed, knowledge is fetched etc. They occupy an important position in educational institutions, government ministries and agencies, financial institutions, companies and other specialized organizations. One way of ascertaining the strength and weakness of any type of library is to evaluate its collection and usage. This study however evaluates the collection of two special libraries in Malaysia and explores on the perception of users as regard their usage of the libraries. The finding indicates that, both the two libraries keep current and relevant materials. Accessibility is highly pronounced in both the two libraries. But in terms of quality materials users generally complained of not having comprehensive quality materials. Also on the flexibility of the library staff, a large number of the users (74%) complained of not having smooth response and relationship expected from the library staff of one of the two libraries. Staff training is hereby recommended for the library staff so that good relationship can be enjoyed among the two parties. More studies and investigations can be carried out to further find out the conditions of special libraries globally.

Introduction

Libraries are service points where information is preserved, processed and disseminated to community of users. Useful information is disbursed to the clientele in various forms and formats. (f.e. printed and non-printed materials) The expectation of the community of users or clientele of the library services is usually very high. The confidence reposed by the users on these libraries make most of the users not tolerate or withstand failures from the libraries. Therefore it is pertinent for these libraries to struggle and ensure that their collection is boosted and empowered, to be able to handle both simple and complex requests from their users positively and comprehensively. Through this technique users become satisfied and their visits to the library become constant and retained.

The librarian however, must be careful and conscious not to overstep the rules and regulations of the library and the parent body in trying to satisfy the information needs of the users. The librarian should always ask himself; *is the library moving towards achieving the laid down aims and objectives? Is the collection really relevant to the objectives of setting the library? Is the library serving the purpose of its existence? Are the services rendered relevant to the users needs? Are the library staffs assisting the users in accessing relevant and good materials?* Some times the collection may be relevant and very much available, but may not be serving the purpose as expected. The problem may be at the point of delivery; the library assistant may not deliver the needed materials to the users appropriately.

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Instead of the assistants to play the role of channels for accessing the library materials, but rather they become barrier between the library collection and the users as well as the potential users.

In order to determine the extent of usage of information resources available in the library and their relevancy to the community of users, evaluation of library collection becomes necessary and very important exercise to be undertaken. It exposes the actual holdings of a given library. Lancaster (1977) says that, "A library exists as an interface between a particular user population and the universe of bibliographic resources. The objective of the library is to maximize the exposure of the user to the resources. In addition, the library should be organized to minimize the amount of effort required to obtain access to needed bibliographic materials, and to supply such materials as soon as possible when the need for them arises. The effectiveness of any library can be evaluated in terms of how well it satisfies these objectives." Only evaluation can bring into the notice of the stakeholders the rate of performance of the existing collection in answering queries and aiding the users to at least satisfy their immediate information needs. Evaluation of the library resources usually include activities performed in library stocktaking exercise. Using many approaches, evaluation exercise covers the entire library collection. The ability, capability, richness of the collection and easy accessibility to the entire resources of the library, attracts the user's constant visits and prolonged patronage to the library.

However, special library collection is usually different from other libraries. As the name implies, it has special collections for special group of users. The library's objectives are positively related or associated with the objectives of the parent institution. One can say that both the two objectives are intertwined. In other words, the library is aiding its parent institution in the achievement of its sets objectives. However experts in the subject have attempted defining the concept of special library. Reitz [2008] defined it as, "A library established and funded by a commercial firm, private association, government agency, or profit organization, or special interest group to meet the information needs of its employees, members, or staff in accordance with the organizations mission and goals. The scope of the collection is usually limited to the interests of host organization."

The Independent Standard Organization, I SO has also defined special library as, "Independent library covering one discipline or particular field of knowledge or a special regional interest. The term special library includes libraries primarily serving a specific category of users, or primarily devoted to a specific form of document, or libraries sponsored by an organization to serve its own work-related objectives." From the above two definitions it is clear that special libraries differ fundamentally with other libraries. Generally the quality of materials found in these types of libraries varies in accordance with the mission of their various organizations.

Literature Review

Special libraries by their nature, their collection and services must reflect their parent bodies' aims and objectives. This means that they must always get ready to protect the interests of their patrons through the provision of relevant, qualitative information and services. Fordharm (2008) says that, "Special library is usually created for the specific purpose of providing accurate and current information for a particular set of patrons and therefore must contain materials considered to be of quality and be able to access them in sometimes demanding circumstances." The statement above, exhibit the basic purpose for the existence of an ideal special library. Critically the survival and effective functioning of special library depend on the nature of policy guiding the activities taking place in the library. Gorman and Miller,(1997) commented that the policy, "Organizes and guides the processes of acquiring and providing access to materials and information sources, integrating these in to coherent collections, managing their growth and maintenance, and making decision about preservation, withdrawal and cancellation." This statement clearly shows that, special library can only function well if the professionals are deeply involve in the policy making body of the library.

Gardner (1981) explained further on the importance of having a policy guideline. He says that the policy is designed.....” To clarify objectives and to facilitate coordination and cooperation, within a library or library system and among cooperating libraries.....if it is well done, it should serve as a day-to-day working tools that provides the necessary guidelines for carrying out majority of tasks within the area of collection building.” Nevertheless, is not the provision of policy guidelines that matters much, but effective implementation of the guidelines to be able to reach the desired goals. Generally special libraries needs to be aware of these policies, examine the policy in relation to their daily services, collection and future plans of the parents’ institution on them.

However, it is quite important to evaluate the user’s perspectives in terms of their usage of the collection available in the library. This will shed light on whether the library collection is really serving the information requests and needs of the users. Brophy (2006) says that, “Satisfaction is generally acknowledged as a prime criterion for judging quality and a great deal of time and effort is expended on measuring it across all industries and services.” The statement above is a general statement applicable to all types of libraries. But some people do not attach much importance to the evaluation of the users to find their level of satisfaction, with the collection and services. they caste doubt on the answers given by the users. Among these people is Schmidt (2007) who said that,” There are problems associated with asking the user whether he is satisfied with the.....service provided.” I don’t see any problem as Schmidt envisaged above; what ever answer you received from the users, as a researcher, evaluator, system analyst or inquirer, you are expected to accept it wholeheartedly without any bias, predetermined or expected answers or replies. In research, it is highly recommended that the researcher must wait for the research to take its natural course without altering the findings or twisting the findings to suit ones personal views. The researcher should be as independent as possible from the variables or subjects of the study, so that manipulations, bias and concocting of data to suit self imposed results, could be avoided.

Therefore it is quite important, relevant and very informative to evaluate the perceptions of the users for the advancement, modification and development of the collection and services. Poll (2007) opined that, “For all types of special libraries the assessment of users needs and wishes and users satisfaction with the collections and services offered will be a most important issue. A survey for special libraries in the UK and Ireland in 2006 showed that, users’ surveys were the most used instruments for evaluation. For special libraries serving a defined clientele, user surveys will be more effective than for libraries serving the general public.” The whole idea of any form of a library is to render information services to a defined community of users; It is pertinent for a library to evaluate the users to find out their feelings and perceptions about the collection or stock of the library they use. The result of the evaluation will have a two-way impact. The library will effect some changes as a result of the views and perceptions of the users. On the other hand the users will monitor and wait to see an enhanced collection and services.

Furthermore, Nicholas (2007) categorized evaluation of special libraries in to three manifolds;” Client satisfaction, collections and usage and strategic alignment are three standard categories of measurement used in evaluating special libraries services.” I am in line with Nicholas categorization because, the three elements she mentioned are considered to be the basic approaches in evaluation of special libraries globally. Collection, user satisfaction and usage can equally be applicable in the evaluation of all forms of libraries that have all forms of users and collection. She also reported that (2007)” A management cliché used by John Brockman et al categorized the foregoing,

He said; if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it. This of course contains a largeelement of truth as it speaks to the need for measurement and evaluation in the management of library services and resources.”

Similarly Connie (2007) gave a clear statement on the general benefits derived by the library, organization, users and potential users as a result of evaluation exercise.”

Collection evaluation is concerned with determining strengths and weaknesses of a collection of library materials in terms of the level of intrinsic quality, the extent to which that collection supports and furthers the library’s missions and goals, and the value of that collection to the library’s users and potential users.” From the above statement one easily understands that evaluation of collection in a given library is very important to all; major decisions of the library are taken using the results of the evaluation exercise. The evaluation exercise supposed to be of continuous process. The world of knowledge is not static; therefore people can change at any given time and this affect people’s information seeking behavior and the rate of their usage of information sources will also change.

User perspective evaluation is always very informative; because users have different ways of approaching the library collection and as such they tend to have different experiences. Even the problems they encountered in their utilization of materials may significantly be attributed to their different approaches, understanding and individual differences. The result of the evaluation will greatly assist the librarian in assessing the relevancy and quality of the collection which is secured and organized on the perceived information needs of the clientele. The guidelines for the evaluation must be quite relevant to the subject matter, flexible and easy to handle with clarity and organization.

In trying to evaluate user’s perceptions as regard library collection and usage, a new effective method is now put in place, which is purely based on user’s perceptions. It is Popularly known as, LibQUAL +. Brophy (2006) say that, “On a more positive note, LibQUAL+ has certainly enabled meaningful comparisons to be made between libraries, at least at the level of overall user satisfaction.” In another place he added that, “While to date LibQUAL+ has been largely confined to Academic libraries, Public libraries have been active in assessing customer satisfaction, and other aspects of customer experiences, for many years.” Many people accused and condemned this method for the simple reason that it is based purely on the perceptions of the users and not the library. Therefore the method is user-centric rather than library-centric. I have the feeling that they have a very weak argument. This is because; right from the inception of the method it has been designed to take care of the user’s perception. What are the bases for argument? Why the criticisms? It is not surprising if the aspect of library is not treated as expected; it has to be bias and tilted towards the perceptions of the users. The perception of the users seems to be very complex and difficult to be fully understood. This method aid evaluators and researchers to have a more organized and comprehensive approach in the study of users perspectives. This method has been used in Europe to study user’s perceptions, in a number of libraries and it yielded a lot of fruitful results. This method could also be applicable in our own situation irrespective of the type of the library.

It is very important for libraries to be conducting evaluative study from time to time focusing on the collection and the library patrons; because they (users) occupy a very crucial position in the library. Quality, relevancy and currency of the library materials can only be determined significantly through the perceptions of the users, because they are the users of the library holdings and can contribute significantly towards this issue.

The collections of the two earmarked libraries are going to be evaluated; the perceptions of the users are also going to be evaluated appropriately.

Objectives of the study

1. To evaluate the collection in order to find the extent to which they fulfill the desired goals of their parent institution.
2. To examine the users perspectives on the collection of the libraries.

Methodology

In the choice of the appropriate method for this exploratory research, survey research method was found to be very relevant and therefore adopted. The instruments utilized for the research are questionnaire and personal discussion. A total number of forty two (42)

Questionnaire was disbursed to two libraries. Therefore each library was given twenty One (21) copies. In response to the researcher, Twelve (12) copies of the questionnaire were returned from the Petronas Petroleum Resources Centre (PPRC) library; and all were found to be useful. Also twenty (20) copies were returned from Forestry Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) library and all were found to be useful. Discussion was also held with the librarians of both the two libraries on the issue of collection and use of their libraries resources. The result of the analysis was presented using percentages.

Summary of Findings

Two libraries were earmarked for the study, they are as follows:-

1. Petronas Petroleum Resources Center Library.(PPRC)
2. Forestry Research Institute Library. (FRIM)

The two libraries responded positively, and the summary of findings is as follows:-

(1) The findings, as it relates to the size and nature of the collection of the library, the (FRIM) forestry library exhibited that they have 355 volumes of materials. According to the librarian, these materials are mostly dedicated to various aspects of forestry researches. This indicates clearly that, the collection is done in line with the objectives of the institution. Also the collection reflects the information and research needs of their users. The materials are relevant, current and in conformity with the general requirement of the forestry institute. On the user's perspectives, 95% of the respondents testified that they have easy access to the library materials. Also pertaining to currency of the materials 52% believed that the materials are current and therefore good for their researches. The same 52% was recorded as their perception on the relevancy of the materials to their various researches. Also 47% have the perception that the materials housed by the library are of good quality, while 26% was recorded as the extent to which they received attention and assistance from the library workers when ever they visit the library. The greater number 74% of users expressed lack of attention from the staff.

(2) The (PPRC) petronas library could not supply the researcher with information concerning the size of their collection. The information received from the librarian's office is that all their materials are relevant, current and good. The library also conforms to the requirements of operation as outlined by the parent organization. Their materials are on petroleum and petroleum products.

However on the users' accessibility to the materials, 55% responded that they have easy access to the materials available in the library. On the currency of the materials, 54% testified that the materials are current for their researches. Also 82% perceived that the materials are very relevant to their researches and information needs. On the quality of the materials, 45% agreed that the materials are qualitative in terms of satisfying their queries and information needs that relates to their job performances. The users of this library expressed their feelings concerning the assistance they always received from the library staff. On this issue 54% commended the staff of the library on the help and assistance they always receive from them.

Discussions

In the issue of evaluation of library materials, it is necessary for the library to make its stand known to the community of users that, it wholeheartedly supports the parent body for the betterment of the organization or agency. Van House and Childers (1993) said that, "Planning and evaluation address both internal and external needs." They further buttress this point in their research on the evaluation of public library in (1994) that, "Internally, they help library management to set priorities, design programs and services, and allocate resources. Externally, the library has to explain its mission continually and demonstrate its value to community to justify its tax support."

Collection: - The Forestry library maintains a sizeable collection which supposedly serves their users. Usually the nature of special library collection is small. This is because the library serves a particular group of people within the larger society. In this library the collection is dedicated to various aspects of forestry research, which is the main objective of the establishment of the institution. The stronger the collection, the more the library is likely patronized. However the Petronas library could not afford to release information on the size of their collection. No any reason was given regarding their denial to give this vital information for the research.

Currency: - On the currency of library materials both libraries have the same range. According to the users of the library, 52% from FRIM and 54% from Petronas, confirmed the extent of the currency of the materials that constitute the collection of these libraries. This information indicates that the two libraries provide current materials and information to their clientele. One could say that the two libraries are living up to the expectation of any special library globally. The existence of current materials in these libraries further indicates that both the libraries and their parent bodies exist in peace and harmony. Special library can only exist and prosper if the parent body takes good care of the library, not only in the remunerations of the staffs but, in the growth and development of the collection as well.

Generally one can say that, the materials found in these libraries are current and therefore serving the purpose of the users; as well as the parent bodies. This is because one of the aims and objectives of the parent bodies is to educate and informed their employees according to the needs of the organizations. This action likely brings about high input and effective performance by their employees.

Relevancy: - In terms of relevancy of library collection of the two libraries, a sharp difference was recorded between them, FRIM library and PPRC library. The former has 52% while the later has 82% respectively. What could have been the cause of the difference? It could be attributed to the organizations commitment in making the library strong and effective. The gap could be due to the level of awareness of the users in terms of library usage. What ever is the reason for the differences, the two libraries succeeded in housing their collections with relevant materials for their users consultations.

Accessibility: - The users of two libraries have access to the library materials without any hindrance. Users' accessibility to library materials clearly determines the relevancy of the materials to the community of users. Lack of accessibility indicates irrelevancy of the materials. Accessing the library materials gives an opportunity for the users to critically examine the collection, and make suggestions on how the collection can be improved. Also the users can advice the library personnel and the parent body on the best way to manage the library based on their perceptions.

Quality: - On the issue of quality of the materials the two libraries operates in almost the same frequency, FRIM library 47% and PPRC library 45%. These are the expressions and feelings of the users of these libraries. Quality materials tell a lot about the organizations that own library. The set objectives can only be achieved when quality materials are fully utilized in the library.

However there is need to improve on the quality of the materials in the two libraries because none of them scored up to 50%. Lack of the improvement could be dangerous, and this could likely affect the nature of trainings and services offered by these institutions.

Flexibility: - Here both the two groups of respondents testified that the staffs of the library are flexible and accessible without many problems. But there are differences between the two libraries. In FRIM library 26% was recorded as having cordial and good relationship with the staff of the library, while a great number of users 74% expressed lack of satisfaction in their relationship with the library staff. Also 54% was recorded in PPRC Library. This is a clear indication that the staff of FRIM library needs to undergo on the job training. This will definitely boost their morale in their job performances. Their relationship with library users will improve greatly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Effectiveness of any library can be measured through evaluating the collection of that library. This approach exposes a lot of information concerning the conditions in which the library operates. In a google scholar document (2009), it has been reported that, "Collection evaluation is a continuing formal process for systematically analyzing and describing the condition of a library's collection and to indicate areas needing improvement. Evaluations are conducted to provide several kinds of important information to libraries." The extent of usage of these materials by the users can also be examined and determined through this method.

The two Malaysian special libraries studied, could be said to have been rendering their services satisfactorily. And a greater number of the users are satisfied with these services. The materials found in these libraries are current, relevant and accessible. The only complain received is in the area of quality of the materials and flexibility of the library staff in terms of rendering assistance to the library patrons. A lot need to be done to solve these two problems. However the following recommendations for improvement of the system are hereby proposed:-

- (1) On the job training of the library need to be embarked. More especially on public relations activities.
- (2) More efforts need to be exhibited in the provision of quality materials in the collection of these libraries.

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