The Role of the Academic Library in Facilitating Research: Perceptions of Postgraduate Students

Diljit Singh
Library and Information Science Unit
Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology,
University of Malaya, Malaysia
E-mail: diljit@um.edu.my

Abstract

Research is taking on increasing importance in universities and colleges. It is thus appropriate for academic libraries in these institutions to re-examine how they can play a more relevant role in facilitating research. The aim of this study was to examine the views of one group of stakeholders, the postgraduate students, on the role of the university library in helping them with their research. A paper-based questionnaire was used to gather information from 36 postgraduate students. The findings suggest that students are generally satisfied with the resources and services provided by the library, but needed more help in certain areas of research, and that the library could be more proactive in providing assistance. Interestingly, students indicated they would be willing to pay a higher library fee if the library could help them more with their research. This opens up exciting possibilities for increased services.

Keywords: Academic libraries; Library services, Role in research; Graduate students

1. Introduction

The traditional role of university and college libraries has been to support teaching and learning. These academic libraries derived their mission from that of the parent organization, the university or college, and the focus was on undergraduate education where learning was important. The academic libraries provided books and other printed materials, and later electronic materials, and space for students to study. The libraries also provided services, such as compiling bibliographies, reference services and information literacy classes, for students and academic staff to help them find the materials they needed.

Today research plays an important part in almost all universities and in many colleges. While teaching and learning are still important, research is becoming increasingly emphasized. Universities are making larger allocations for research, they being ranked on their research output, university staff are being assessed on the number of research papers published, and the research infrastructure is also being improved. Most universities are also increasing their postgraduate population, where a research project is generally a requirement for completion of the degree.

The question then arises, what is the role of the academic library in an environment where research is emphasized? How does the role of the university library change, if at all, when the parent institution increases its emphasis on research? How do the various stakeholders view the role of the library, in relation to research?

The issue is not just one of local interest. A CURL-SCONUL Joint Task Force on E-Research, at one of its workshops, asked the question, "What is role of university libraries in supporting e-research?" (Consortium of British Libraries in the British Isles, 2006)

To examine this issue, a study was carried to examine the views of one group of stakeholders – the postgraduate students – on the role of the university library in helping

them with their research. Postgraduate students, in most cases, carry out a research project as part of their degree requirements. In carrying out their research, most postgraduate students will invariably use the library, either physically or through remote access, at some stage of their research. Thus this study was intended to find out the perceptions of postgraduate students on the role of their university library, on what role it currently played, and what they would like it to do. This is an exploratory study, which represents the beginnings of a larger study looking at the role of academic libraries in facilitating research.

2. Brief Literature Review

The literature is rather limited on the changing role of academic libraries with an emphasis on research. Much of the literature still focuses on providing access to resources and providing services that facilitate access to the resources, such as interlibrary loans, information literacy programs, and reference services.

Nonetheless, many documents refer to the role of university libraries in facilitating research. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) Strategic Plan 2003-04 refers to improving access by the students and staff of Australian universities to the information resources that are fundamental to the advancement of research. Among the goals in the Strategic Plan are to maximize the potential of libraries to contribute to research (Council of Australian University Librarians, 2003).

The recent Roundtable Discussions on Technology and Change in Academic Libraries, convened by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) also touched on the academic library which conveys its integral role in supporting higher education's core missions of research and education (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2006).

Universities can offer a variety of services in supporting research. They can build up their resources to gather more research information and journals information for helping young professors and PhD students publish their works (Fan, 2005), in addition to providing a variety of services.

Closer to home, the University of Malaya Library's mission is "to be the premier academic library providing excellent collections and information services in support of the University of Malaya's mission". This is in furtherance to the university mission "to advance knowledge and learning through quality research and education for the nation and for humanity".

Clearly, university libraries have a role in supporting research. But what is this role? How does one group of stakeholders, the postgraduate students, see this role in research?

3. Methodology

To address the question of the perceptions of postgraduate students on the role of the university library in facilitating research, a paper-based questionnaire survey was designed based on previous related surveys. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 5 postgraduate students and revised based on their comments. The revised 25-item questionnaire was then distributed through snowball sampling to 65 postgraduate students in the Klang Valley. A total of 36 students returned the questionnaire, giving a return rate

of 55.4%. However, two of the respondents had not started on their research, and thus were unable to fully describe their experiences of the library's role in research.

4. Findings

Of the 36 students, 22 (61.1%) were male and 14 (38.9%) were female. A total of 18 students (50%) were from Malaysia, while the other 50% came from seven other countries. Thus the students were equally divided between Malaysian and international students. The 36 students came from 4 different universities, with University of Malaya represented by 25 students (69.4%) The students came from 10 different departments and faculties ranging from communication to statistics, with the largest number (8) coming from computer science. A total of 23 students (63.9%) were studying at the Masters level, while the remaining 13 (36.1%) were in their doctoral programs. Of the 34 students who were working on the research, 7 (19.4%) had completed their projects, while the other 27 (80.6%) were working at various stages on their research projects.

The 34 students responded to seven questions relating to their research background and resources available to them. In terms of prior experience at conducting research, 13 (38.2%) indicated they had some research experience before starting on their current project, 17 (50%) indicated they were clear about the requirements of their research project, and 15 (44.1%) felt they had the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct research. A large majority (82.3%) indicated their Supervisor provided them with appropriate guidance for their research, 55.9% indicated the university had provided them with a suitable place for research, and 73.6% indicated they had adequate technical facilities (computers, software, equipment, Internet, etc.) for their research, and 55.9% indicated they had the necessary resource facilities (books, finances, administrative support, etc.) to carry out their research.

Thus it would appear that the students were satisfied with their Supervisors, with the place and the resources for their research. However, they had limited background of research, and were not very clear of the requirements for their research.

The students also gave their views to 11 questions through a 5-point Likert scale on the role of the university library in research. On a scale of 1 to 5, the highest mean score (4.26) was that the library should help the students in their research. The respondents were generally satisfied with the resources (books, journals, databases, indexes, etc.) provided by the library (mean score: 3.68), and with the services (e.g. information skills classes, inter-library loans, etc.) provided by the library (mean score: 3.47). They were also generally satisfied with the help provided by the library in developing their research topic (mean score: 3.09), in conducting their literature review (mean score: 3.35), and in collecting data (mean score: 3.06). However, they were not satisfied (mean score: 2.56) with the help provided by the library in analyzing their data, and in writing up their research (mean score: 2.88). In general, the respondents felt that the library had not been proactive (mean score 2.88) in providing them with research assistance. In general, the students felt that the library had been useful to them in their research (mean score: 3.71).

It would thus appear that the students were satisfied with the resources and services provided by the library, but needed more help in certain areas and that the library could be more proactive in its approach.

Interestingly, 61.8% indicated they would be willing to pay a higher library fee if the library could help them more with their research. When asked to give suggestions on now the library could better help them in their research, most of the respondents recommended

increasing resources, increasing the currency of resources, providing easier access, and using technology to provide better services. A few provided interesting suggestions, such as placing someone with knowledge of research at the counter to understand researchers' needs, creating a unit within the library to help postgraduate students with research, being alert to their needs, for library staff more knowledgeable of research materials, and staff being able to communicate with foreign students.

While these findings should be treated with care due to the small sample size, they do provide some interesting avenues for libraries to re-examine their services in a research oriented environment.

The fact that a majority of the students did not have prior research experience and did not feel they had the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct research suggests the library to take a more active role. The fact that many students felt the library had not been proactive in providing them with assistance for research again suggests a more active role for the library. The fact that a majority of the students indicated they would be willing to pay a higher library fee if the library could help them more with their research certainly opens up many possibilities for the library.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was intended to examine the perceptions of postgraduate students on the role of their university library in helping them with their research. The findings suggest that the students are generally satisfied with the resources and services provided by the library, but needed more help in certain areas, and that the library could be more proactive in providing assistance for research.

The environment is constantly changing, and with universities increasing their emphasis on research, libraries need to re-examine their role in assisting the users with their research. The postgraduate students have indicated their willingness to pay a higher library fee if the library could help them more with their research, and this certainly opens up avenues for increased services.

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