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The Transformation of Reference Services in Hamzah Sendut Library, Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Abstract

Beginning in the year 2008, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is fortunate to be selected to lead the Accelerated Program for Excellence (APEX) and Research University (RU) agenda. Hence, the USM Hamzah Sendut Library, through reference librarians had to strengthen the public services especially in facilitating the reference services for customers. Since then, reference librarians assigned to Reference and Research Division (RRD), have had to take the challenge to change the traditional services and expect the transference on customer demands. The reference librarians have to review the quality of current reference services and explore additional services that meet the customers' expectation for long period. This study aims to discover the reference services trend at RRD, after the APEX agenda was implemented. The study also investigates whether the services provided fulfill the requirements of the customers. Next, the study also aims to identify the additional services that could be implemented in RRD. The study collected and analyzed the reference enquiries retrieved from the library system within 6 years of APEX establishment. The reference enquiries were based on the interview conducted between RRD librarians and the customers. The main focus of the analysis was the types of customer questions to search the key necessity of customers' needs. Based on that, the important components of customer demand were identified. After that, Blue Ocean Strategies (BOS) was applied to identify the additional services needed in USM's Library. The findings revealed that the trend on customer demands for reference services evolved into various patterns. This study shows that the reference librarians need to stay alert on the changing trend and prepare to reform the services accordingly in order to sustain customer trust and expectations on the reference services.

Keywords: Accelerated Program for Excellence (APEX); research university; reference services; service sustainability

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1. Background of study

1.1. APEX and RU agenda in USM

The Research University (RU) agenda was drafted by Awang et al. (2004) with the aim of enhancing the capabilities of selected universities for traditional to fully focussed research activities. Scholars and students were encouraged to exchange ideas and conduct research in a conducive environment, nurture exploration to discover new knowledge, create wealth, and lead to improve their quality of life. The universities involved were Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). These universities were under the Malaysian Research Assessment (MyRA) every three years, to measure the RU's performance based on specific predetermined criteria; one of which is to research publication performance, under MyRA Section C: Quantity and Quality of Research (Ismail, 2011). All five university libraries, including Hamzah Sendut Library, took part in MyRA by providing analysis of bibliometric's data for their research publication performance, as well as by developing awareness programs to enhance scholarly publishing.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia carried out an Accelerated Program for Excellence (APEX) agenda, which began in 2008. This agenda is one of seven National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NSHEP) thrusts, which aims to empower Malaysian of Institutions Higher Education as a world hub of excellence. The MOE chose Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) to uphold the agenda by implementing global best practices in seven segments. These segments are, accounting for governance, leadership, management, teaching, Research and Development (R&D), enrolment, and fund raising programs. Consequently, USM needed to transform their teaching and learning programmes and their Research and Development (R&D) activities, by strengthening the internal and external services provided to produce quality results that were equitable, accessible, available and affordable (Ramli, 2012). This transformation process included the Hamzah Sendut Library as an internal service department that supports APEX University customer's information needs and learning spaces.

1.2. Reference service in Hamzah Sendut Library

Hamzah Sendut Library sustained traditional roles in terms of providing two service sections. The first service section provides technical support, such as purchasing, managing, and indexing information packaging resources; especially books and research databases. Meanwhile, the second service section focuses on handling customer services within the library, such as providing comprehensive learning spaces, borrowing and returning of books, and notably, a reference service that was handled by the Reference & Research Division (RRD). The traditional reference service consists of two segments.

- First, facilitating customer's information retrieval. This segment emphasizes the reference librarian's role as fact finders and search strategists for customers. The reference librarians also have to assure that customers are able to obtain accurate, complete, relevant and timeliness information through information literacy skill training.
- Second, creating current-awareness services. The purpose of this segment is to publicize the library's products and services to customers. Customers are kept informed of the latest news and announcements related to their research subjects.

In detail, traditional reference services in the Hamzah Sendut Library emphasize the reference librarian's role as personal assistants and consultants to supply scholarly documents for academic needs. Reference librarians also provide quick answers for trivial questions asked by hundreds of customers. They are required to teach customers using printed reference material; especially indexes and abstracts. However, this practice has evolved over time. The traditional reference service has shifted into a digital reference service. Bradford, Costello, and Lenholt (2005) mentioned that digital technology has brought online sources that provide easy access for customers to retrieve research information; and thus, printed reference material has become obsolete. From 2002 onwards, customers at USM were delighted to use online sources; especially Scopus and Web of Science databases, as a replacement for printed indexes and abstracts. However, the number of customers physically visiting the Hamzah Sendut Library slowly decreased over several years. Customers were less engaged with the reference librarians, and in 2007, only 218 customer enquiries were received by the reference librarians (Md Shaari, 2008).