



International students and the Chinese academic library: A user survey at Beijing Normal University Library

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Abstract With great increase of international students coming to study in China, more and more challenges occur for Chinese academic libraries to meet their needs. In case of Beijing Normal University Library (BNUL), we conducted a user survey and a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire focusing on the areas of library services, resources and environment was used to explore international students' library usage preference and their perceptions on importance and performance of these three areas. The analysis started with descriptive analysis followed by gap analysis between importance to the users and library's performance, and key findings from suggestions of international students were listed. The main objective of this paper is to know international students' information needs, analyze their assessment to the library, determine where and how gaps exist and find out aspects that BNUL need to improve. The paper finally drew some conclusions on how to improve BNUL service quality to international students.

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a steady growth of international students coming to study in China. According to statistics from the [Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China \(2012\)](#), there are a total of 290,000 foreigners studying in China in the year 2011, a 10.38 percent increase over last year. At Beijing Normal University (BNU), the number of international students has grown rapidly and comprises a large percentage in the total number of students. Most of this increase happened since 2008, when the

university was designated as a National Training Center for International Chinese Language Teaching by NOCFL (National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) and the Confucius Institute Headquarters. According to the statistics from the [Office of International Exchange & Cooperation of BNU \(2011\)](#), the university had 20,000 students in the year of 2011, including 4902 international students from 99 countries (3123 are long-term students and 1779 are short-term). Therefore, it has become an important challenge for the library to accommodate and serve users from abroad.

In this study, the author conducted a survey to investigate the information needs and library usage preference of international students. By determining their assessment on

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the importance and performance of the library and identifying performance gaps, the library can make improvements in the services to international students. This research is quite significant for Chinese academic librarians. It is the first time an effort has been made to measure the service quality of Beijing Normal University Library from the perspectives of international students. It is hoped that this study will trigger more research on assessing service quality in other academic libraries in China and stimulate thought prioritizing library services for international students. Finally, BNUL senior management would benefit by knowing which service area should receive the greatest attention in order to gain competitive advantages.

Literature review

There is little published research on how Chinese academic libraries meet the needs of international students in China. In 2006, [Shuqin, Fu, and Zhou \(2009\)](#) conducted a user survey of international students in Beijing and Wuhan. They used a five-point Likert Scale to assess library satisfaction from four aspects: library staff, services, collection and the physical environment. Open-ended questions were designed to encourage the participants to express their difficulties in using the library or to make suggestions. The survey results showed that international students are satisfied with the new electronic resources and online access, but there is still need for improvement and growth. Besides, the international students expressed difficulties in locating library items and need for longer library hours. The survey also indicated that Chinese academic libraries should add more resources, specifically new printed books, books for leisure reading, and books on foreign languages to meet the needs of the international students. It is a challenge for Chinese academic libraries to staff qualified librarians to meet the needs of international students. This research also highlighted the need for a library liaison or a designated librarian who speaks English well to help international students in their orientations and research activities.

[Fan Aihong \(2009\)](#) reported on an exploration of Tsinghua University Library experiences in helping foreign users overcome the language barrier and make a full use of the library. The paper first describes the large influx of international students and then analyzes the information needs of foreign users by showing the results of a user survey conducted in 2007. According to the survey, foreign users have multiple needs for libraries, and the language need is the most outstanding. Therefore, the library has made a great effort to create a bilingual information environment for foreign users. A full spectrum of practices that address resources, service, infrastructure and the English skill of librarians is discussed.

[Shao Xiaorong and Scherlen Allan \(2011\)](#) assessed the attitudes and perceptions of academic librarians regarding library services for international students and scholars at three university libraries in China: Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, Fudan University in Shanghai, and Wuhan University of Technology. The results support the assumption that academic librarians in China, while interested in improving services for international students and scholars,

continue to find challenges in fulfilling their information needs.

Generally speaking, Chinese academic libraries have just begun to be aware of this special user group, and they are in the initial stage in developing services for foreign users. Only a few of the best Chinese university libraries such as Tsinghua University Library, Peking University Library and Fudan University Library provide special services for international students' needs. For example, they built an English website for the library, provided bilingual signage and a librarian proficient in English. As far as orientation programs, few libraries provide user education programs specifically for international students. Only Tsinghua University Library provides elective courses for undergraduate and graduate students of all majors, as well as international students. In addition, Tsinghua University Library offers custom-designed workshops in English for international MBA students. In September 2011, BNUL first launched orientation courses for international master's students.

Methodology and data collection

It is part of BNUL's long-term strategic plan to provide better services to international students. Since we have realized the increasing information needs of the user group, the library has made efforts to catch up with the developments at the leading university libraries in China. For example, an English website for BNUL is now under construction. In September 2011, for the very first time, BNUL received appointments from both the faculties of the School of Education and School of Social Development and Public Policy to give orientation courses to their international master's students. From these events, the idea emerged to research the opinions of international students at BNU. Soon after, a bilingual (Chinese and English) survey was conducted.

Survey design

The survey consisted of four parts. The first part gathered basic demographic information: country of origin, status, duration in China, subject areas of study. The second part gathered library usage data and user information needs. The third part of the survey consisted of a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire, focusing on the areas of library services, resources and environment. This questionnaire was designed to measure not only international students' perceptions on the importance of these three areas (namely "*importance to me*"), but also the library's performance (namely "*library performance*") of each area accordingly. With this process, the paper planned to identify the services, resources and facilities that are most and least important to them and their perceptions of the best and worst aspects of the library, and then analyze the gap between the importance to the users and performance of the library. The gap analysis can be seen as a simplified method of a SERVQUAL instrument, which some university libraries, such as the University of Hong Kong, apply in their annual or biennial user survey report. The fourth part of the survey was an open-ended question where the participants could express comments and suggestions.

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