



PERSPECTIVES ON...

International Students' Perception of Library Services and Information Resources in Chinese Academic Libraries

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 February 2012

Accepted 3 November 2012

Available online 23 December 2012

Keywords:

International students

User perception

China

Academic libraries

Wuhan University

Library services

ABSTRACT

With the growth of international student enrollment in Chinese universities, user perception has become an area of developing research in academic libraries. China's policy of opening up has led to the education and economic reforms allowing major universities to enroll international students. These changes have created an increasing need for libraries to be responsive to the information needs of these students.

In order to serve these students better, universities will be expected to further understand how academic library services are currently perceived by international students. This is particularly the case at Wuhan University, which has experienced significant growth in international student enrollment. This study aims to discover the met and unmet needs as well as barriers encountered in library use by international students. Based on the information gathered, recommendations and future strategies will be formulated to improve the understanding of the information needs of non-native Chinese speakers in both the provision of services and the building of collections.

The findings of this study reveal that Chinese academic libraries are considerably well perceived by international students. It also indicates that they have differing purposes, and differing needs for library services and information resources. This paper acknowledges that the study is limited to Wuhan University; however, there is a need for further studies on non-Chinese speakers, particularly, international students to obtain important information on their perception of library services and information resources.

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INTRODUCTION

China's rapidly expanding economy and its rise as a major player in world affairs has ushered in a new China (Wei, 2009). In the past decades, China has made noticeable progress in the education sector, especially with regard to increased immigration of international students. Its fast-emerging academic and information infrastructure, its growing stature in the world of research and its embrace of educational reforms have strengthened the country's impact in that area. Moreover, with established universities and a wide range of courses offered, Chinese universities have become competitive on a global scale, making China a leading destination for many international students.

International mobility is a rapidly growing and evolving phenomenon (Hegedorn & Zhang, 2012). Cheng, Cheung, and Yeun report that the growing emphasis on higher education in many countries since the end of the 1990s has led to tremendous growth in college students' enrollment around the world. Therefore, the number of international students studying overseas has grown exponentially, and is expected to rise at phenomenal rates over the next 15–20 years (Cheng, Cheung, & Yeun, 2010). For example, in 2005,

the total number of international college students was estimated at more than 2.5 million. By 2009, almost 3.7 million students were enrolled outside their country of citizenship, representing an increase of more than 6% from previous years (Olds, 2012). International students have been attracted to China's universities in increasing volumes in recent years. In 2002, there were only 85,800 of these students in China, and was ranked 6th in 2006 as host destination for 6% of international students (Simpson, 2011). In 2007, that number reached 195,000, a rapid increase of 126.7% over five years (Aihong, 2009), a remarkable growth rate that would not have occurred if higher education reforms had not been introduced by the Chinese government (Rovai, 2010).

Data collected from the office of the College of Foreign Students Education at Wuhan University for a period of five years (2007–2011) shows that the number of international students joining the university through study programs, research and other study arrangements has been steadily increasing, with only an insignificant drop in 2011. Despite the increasing number of enrollments, there is scant research that examines experiences and needs of these students.

In spite of the lack of adequate research on Wuhan University international students' experience, previous studies conducted in China show a significant amount of literature on international students, on such topics as information needs, behavior and challenges faced,

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ways to create bilingual library information, services to international students and scholars, etc. However, Aihong argues that libraries in non-English speaking countries can do a lot to help international students with limited language competency to make use of the library (Rovai, 2010). One preliminary area of concern is student perception of library services for non-Chinese-speaking users at Chinese Academic Libraries. Reports have attempted to address students' perception such as the study by OCLC concentrating on perception of college student respondents between 14 and 64 years old and emphasizing how they obtained electronic information (De Rosa et al., 2011). Although college students from across the nations were involved, the OCLC study did not address isolated heterogeneous international students.

A study of special libraries by Thornton states that "customers seem perfectly satisfied and when they are not, they usually blame themselves". In order to validate and explain the significance behind such a statement, there is need for further studies (Thornton, 2005). Aihong asserts that helping international students use the library is a current problem faced by many libraries, particularly in non-English-speaking countries (Thornton, 2005). However, libraries in those countries have room to enhance the use of the library services and resources among international students.

This study fills the gap identified in the OCLC and special libraries studies, asking international students' experiences and their perceptions of the physical academic library, collections and services including use and barriers encountered. Wuhan University Library is the prototype to illustrate international students' perception of library services and information resources in China.

For the purposes of this study, library services refers to the duties and responsibilities performed by the Wuhan University Library, while information resources refers to the procedures, services, materials, facilities, personnel and technologies that are designed, provided, built, utilized and applied to ensure library users are able to access provided information services and facilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature related to "perception", especially of international students, reveal that there is inadequate information on actual perceptions or experiences using Chinese academic libraries. Shao and Scherlen acknowledge that, although there is a growing body of literature addressing services for international students in English-speaking academic libraries, there is far less literature to date regarding perceptions of library services for non-Chinese speaking users at Chinese academic libraries. However, research evidence from a variety of sources outside China point at key literature on the concept of user perception, customer satisfaction, user needs and challenges (Shao & Scherlen, 2011). This study focused on perception within Chinese academic libraries.

In China, the role of academic libraries is changing and expanding. More specifically, higher education reforms have initiated many changes in the universities (Sun & Rader, 1999). Wang and Bergquist explain that the education reforms were initiated in response to external factors such as socio-economic and political changes in the country (Wang & Bergquist, 2003). This has led to China's opening up to the outside world and to the growth of Chinese higher education allowing for the acceptance of more international students to study in the country (Lianqing, 1996). One important area of change, according to Hegedorn and Zhang, is the setting up of a Chinese government scholarship program to sponsor international students and scholars to undertake study and research in Chinese institutions of higher education (Hegedorn & Zhang, 2012). The Ministry of Higher Education of P.R. China (MOE) is responsible for the scholarship program, although it entrusts the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) to administer scholarships, recruit international students, and manage the Chinese scholarships. Students under this program are enrolled in

Chinese institutions of higher education designated by the MOE, where over 300 subjects including sciences, technology, medicine, economics and law are made available for international students based on specialization (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Eligible students are selected through a vigorous review process in their home countries. Students receiving the CSC scholarship form a significant number of the international student body in China. The CSC serves them in various ways including: assigning students to universities; providing accommodation, food, health, tuition, and research expenses, etc.

Huang observes that the Chinese government manages colleges and universities and is responsible for providing services, funding and making education policies (Huang, 1999). Consistent with these efforts, Chinese universities are building and evolving library services and collections. In their study of multilingual resources and services in Chinese academic libraries, He and Wu revealed that international students require academic libraries to play a role in helping them achieve their academic success. In spite of the expense, they reported that the university library developed electronic resources and web services and improved the English competency of librarians (He & Wu). For example, libraries in Hong Kong are purchasing a wide variety of eBook collections (Hong Kong Public Libraries Leisure & Cultural Services Department, 2012).

The objective of the Wuhan University and the Library Administration is to ensure that the information needs of both international students and Chinese students are met through the provision of credible, current, relevant and user-driven information services and resources. In regard to building library services and collection, the University Library has acquired 13,360,000 books, 6,590,000 e-books and e-magazines, 442 databases and 200,000 volumes of thread-bound ancient books (Wuhan University Library, 2012). This clearly shows that the governance and funding of academic institutions has made immense progress in China.

The growth of international students' enrolling in universities has become a priority in China due to political and socio-economic reasons as pointed out in this paper. Additionally, the development in educational infrastructure is a big attraction. For example, Wuhan University registered an enrollment of 1713 (1.6%) international students in 2007, 1911 (1.8%) in 2008, 2115 (2%) in 2009, 2262 (2.2%) in 2010, while in 2011 they were 2230 (2.1%) of the student body. These numbers indicate that international students are a significant part of the learning community (see Fig. 1). This presents an opportunity to pursue an international students' focused perception study to determine their satisfaction in service and information resource provision. The non-international students (Chinese students) enrollment registered an increase of 47,620 (44.5%) in 2007, 48,744 (45.6%) in 2008,

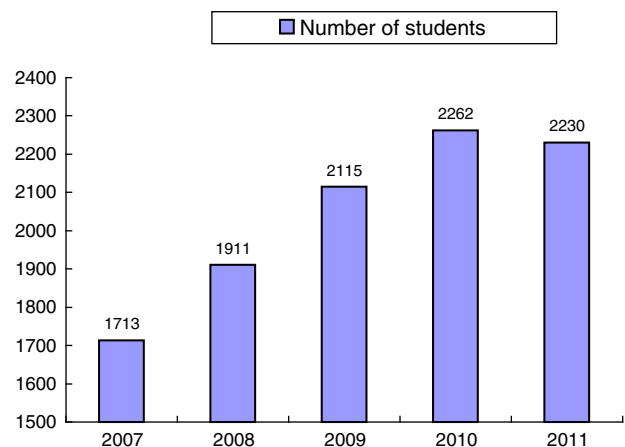


Fig. 1. Enrollment of international students at Wuhan University.

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