Abstract

This study explores the quality measurement of reference services in Malaysian public university libraries. Specifically it identifies the quality criteria used for reference service and how this criteria contributes to the mission of the library. An open ended questionnaire was used to gather qualitative data from ten public university libraries pertaining to quality issues in reference services. Most libraries use statistical data such as number of queries received and answered and duration in which a query is handled as quality indicators of the service. The libraries report an increase in the quality performance by libraries since the adoption of the a quality management system based on the ISO 9001:2000 standard.

Introduction

Reference service is an integral part of an academic library. In a university, the academic library is not only considered a warehouse of information resources but competent and knowledgeable librarians are responsible to assist in the teaching, learning and research activities of its community members. It is crucial, therefore, that the academic library is dedicated to provide effective and high quality services to their users. Kuruppu (2007) advocates that as the reference service is the venue in which the public most often interacts with the library regarding information needs, it should be one of the most effective library services. The evaluation of reference service however, has been an ongoing debate among library professionals and researchers. In applying the defining characteristics of service by Schneider & White (2004) as intangible, inseparable and heterogeneous, the measure of quality of the reference service is difficult to be based on a
single method, but it may be carried out in various methods depending on the purpose of the evaluation (Whitlatch, 2001).

The measure of the quality of a service is basically tied to the mission and objectives of the organization. Internationally, the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) has set a list of criteria of performance indicators for reference services and guidelines for digital reference. Furthermore, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA, 2005) has published guidelines for implementing and maintaining virtual reference services and guidelines for behavioral performance of reference and information services providers. In Malaysia, the National Accreditation Board (LAN), a body responsible for formulating policies, procedures, standards and other matters pertaining to the quality of courses of study being offered, has adopted the Conferences of University Libraries and National Library of Malaysia (PERPUN) guidelines which were extracted and amended by LAN based on Library Standards for Private Colleges and Library Standards for Private Universities (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara, 2005).

These professional generalized standards ideally represent the consensus of the profession (Pierce, 1984) and may not reflect the goal-based quality criteria set by individual libraries. Academic libraries exist in coherence with the parent institution and will have its unique commitments and goals to be achieved irrespective of basic standards. Therefore the methods used for reference service evaluation may differ from library to library. Besides the common practice of evaluating the quality and quantity of resources, staffing, answer accuracy and user satisfaction, libraries have adopted specific methodologies to monitor and measure services, may it be the traditional service or the digital reference. Hodges (2004) believes that if the library is to succeed in delivering digital reference service and in defining the roles of reference librarians, it must enhance the quality of service to users in order to have a sustainable, competitive advantage in the provision of information in the digital realm.

In Malaysia it has become a norm for university libraries to acquire the MS ISO 9001:2000 quality management system (QMS) requirements as a formal commitment.
towards quality. In 2006, ten of the eleven public university libraries had adopted this standard to set up processes based on user requirements and measure the performance of these processes on a periodic basis. David et al. (2005) believe that international studies can be valuable in showing different perspectives and improving practices and it should help in embedding sensible and appropriate performance assessment as part of a more evidence-based information practices.

This study explores the quality criteria used for reference services and how it helps the reference services in achieving their goal(s) and mission. It also investigates the procedures and methods used to implement these measures. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

i. What quality policies does the reference department have in place?

ii. What reference processes are monitored and evaluated for quality outcome?

iii. What quality indicators are used to measure reference service outcome?

iv. What are the reference services priorities for continual improvement?

There is a need for research on the current status of quality implementation in university libraries. Obviously, the sharing of information, experience and ideas would benefits the academic library reference services in its quality frameworks.

The organization of this paper is as follows. The following section will give a brief overview of the literature on reference services evaluation, followed by the details of the study design and data analysis. Then the main findings are presented. Next, the results are discussed with recommendations. Finally the researchers conclude the findings of this study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Libraries have been in the business of providing information services to its clientele and have gradually over the years applied experiences from the business and management sectors to improve customer satisfaction. Librarian are now more receptive towards the
wants and needs of library users and are experimenting with various quality management movements to improve the image of the library in the eyes of its stakeholders, including the library clientele. In Malaysia, the Total Quality Management (TQM) system was introduced in 1992 and was followed by the ISO 9000 standard for quality systems in 1995 (Zaiton et al. 1998). Over the years quality initiatives have matured and the ISO 9000 series has been upgraded in many versions and have been adopted by various of organizations, including academic libraries, in particular, the ISO9001:2000 Quality Management Systems – requirements (superceeding ISO 9001:1994, ISO 9002:1994 and ISO 9003:1994).

Kiran et al. (2005) in their description of the implementation of MS ISO9001:2000 at the University of Malaya Library, state that libraries can successfully apply the standard to increase the efficiency of service, reduce time and resource wastage. In an interview with Chief Librarian from universities with MS ISO9001:2000 certification, Kiran (2007) found that the main reason for the certification was to improve the library’s quality image and unanimously agreed that the implementation has benefited the library. The MS ISO9001:2000 based QMS assists in establishing policies, objectives and a mechanism to achieve these objectives. Customer feedback becomes the focus of on-going planning to fulfil customer requirements. Bawden et al. (2005) in their studies on libraries in three countries noted that there is diversity of approaches to measurement of effectiveness in the libraries and that there is no “right way” to evaluate quality and effectiveness of library services. Their advice for librarians and information specialist was to seek the best combination of old and new methods to provide the most useful assessments of their services. In the case of Malaysia, university libraries have chosen MS ISO9001:2000.

Measures of the library’s productivity is tied to the library’s mission and objectives, as well as the mission and objectives of integrated departments of the library.
Performance measures, which determine the effectiveness of the library’s chosen missions, within a marketing frame of reference, facilitate provision of integrated and effective library services meeting the goal of user satisfaction (Koontz & Rockwoodm, 2001).

As early as 1998, Zaiton et al. conducted a research on librarian’s perspective on ‘quality’. They concluded that quality can be summarised to mean ‘access to well-developed collections’, ‘prompt’, ‘efficient’ and ‘courteous’ service, ‘fulfil clients’ information needs’ and ‘conducive environment and facilities’. In the absence of benchmarking, the definition and character above represent quality as perceived by librarians. The characteristic of the quality must stand the test of measurement. An analysis of the characteristics is therefore necessary so that when the library services are said to be of quality, there are certain indicators that can be used as benchmark.

Anne and Pitman\textsuperscript{10} listed the criteria for performance indicator set by IFLA:

- **Appropriate** (valid) for what it is supposed to measure, used to answer a particular question and results should provide this answer.
- **Reliable** (accurate), devoid of ambiguity, difficulty arises where the performance indicator tries to analyse an attitude or opinion, results of which cannot be numeric.
- **Reproducible**—the same things should always be counted or measured in the same way. This allows comparison of performance in same library at different times and between libraries of a similar type.
- **Helpful** (useful, informative) in decision-making, should allow interpretation of quality, failure and ways of improvement—must be related to the goals of the library.
- **Practical** (user friendly), easy to use.

In Australia, Wilson et al.(2000) state that there are considerable activities occurring in university libraries in the area of benchmarking, performance measurement and best practices but very little has been published. There are also indications of adoption of external quality framework such as Australian Business Excellence Framework, Balance Scorecard and ISO 9000. Quality involves measuring the success of service provided, promote continuous improvement and instill innovation in delivering
service. He suggests one of the quality tools that libraries should consider utilising is benchmarking.

The study on comparison of methods for evaluating the performance of library services in three European countries – Lithuania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom by Bawden et al. (2005) revealed that library gathered quantitative description in a form of statistics of library activity as a tool of management, planning, decision-making and presentation of the library. However he cautioned that library statistics cannot be the only measure of the library’s performance.

There are numerous models previously employed in attempts to demonstrate the worth or value of library services to their academic communities. The studies of these models show promising results in assessing quality in a library as a whole and reference services as a focus division. Although the models are used on a library but the models can be applied to smaller sections of the library. Some examples of business models adopted by library studies are Stalker & Murfin (1996) and Paster et.al (2006)'s study using Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program (WOREP) as a quality model. The study reflected result on reference collections, reference source use and training, reference librarians, architecture, administrative support and effects of time on success. Quinn (1997) adapted service quality concepts to academic libraries using SERVQUAL and SERVPERF as quality model. SERVQUAL measures both customer expectations and perceptions while SERVPERF measures service performance only. The basic tenets of quality service rely on reducing the gap between a customer's expectations and perceptions.

Nitecki (1996) and Haruki et.al (2004) also studied matters relating to the use of SERVQUAL as a quality model. Comparisons of service quality scores resulting from the application of SERVQUAL instrument to different library services offer guidance for developing staff training programmes. Another quality model offered by Association of
Research Libraries (ARL) called LibQUAL+TM was studied by both Vuotto (2004) and
Nozero and Finley (2004). LibQUAL+TM is a suite of services that libraries use to
solicit, track, understand, and act upon users’ opinions of service quality. In the UK
higher education LIS sector there is widespread and successful application of LibQUAL.
According to Rowley (2005), LibQUAL is also used by member libraries of the
Association of Research Libraries (US) not only to generate user satisfaction measures
for individual libraries, but also to generate comparative data, that can be used in
benchmarking processes.

Other models/tools available are Council of Australian Librarians (CAUL) on
implementation of best practice, EQLIPSE (Evaluation and Quality in Library
Performance: System for Europe), EQUINOX Library Performance Measurement and
Quality Management System, CERLIM, the Centre for Research in Library and
Information Management, Chartermark and some which focus on particular aspects such
as the IIP (Investors in People) program.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study is confined to Malaysian public university libraries with MS
ISO9001:2000 certification. Although most universities may have more than one library
in their vicinity but only the main library was selected from each university. The
exploratory study is done using the survey method as all selected universities were spread
out in a wide geographical area and data needed was mainly qualitative in nature. The
survey instrument was created based on the research questions and subjected to a pilot
study involving a private university library that had also received the ISO accreditation.
After some discussion, minor changes were made to three statements to improve the
comprehensiveness. Data was collected using a mail questionnaire sent to the Head of
Reference Services of each library. Since the nature of data required was qualitative,
there is possibility that data was provided by a representative and some of the information required was not readily available. Due to constraint of time, the researcher could not personally visit all libraries for further verification of missing data.

All data from the eight universities that responded, was tabulated and some missing data and ambiguous responses were identified. The data was sent back to the respective universities for final verification. Two weeks were given for any clarification of data and finally the returned data was analyzed for the purpose of this study. Because this study is limited to 8 libraries, findings are not generalizable to other libraries. However, this study can be used to provide guidelines and strategies as lessons for library practitioners who might want to employ a QMS system to improve reference services. In their own libraries.

FINDINGS

Background of the Participating Libraries

Eight out of ten university libraries responded to the survey (Table 1). The eight libraries had acquired MS ISO 9001:2000 certification between 2002 to 2005. Two libraries, PUM and PTAR, received the certification as part of the parent university accreditation, whereas the others had obtained theirs solely based on library processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>No. of years with accreditation (as at 2006)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sultan Abdul Samad Library, UPM</td>
<td>PSAS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tun Abdul Razak Library, UiTM</td>
<td>PTAR</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamzah Sendut Library, USM</td>
<td>PHS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultanah Zanariah Library, UTM</td>
<td>PSZ</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tun Seri Lanang Library, UKM</td>
<td>PTSL</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universiti Malaya Library</td>
<td>PUM</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library, International Islamic University Malaysia</td>
<td>LIIUM</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultanah Bahiyah Library, UUM</td>
<td>PSB</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the types of services reported by these universities are reference desk, reader’s advisory services/referral service, preparation of library brochures and leaflets (services provided by all), library tours, user education, current awareness, indexing services, exhibitions or displays and compilation of bibliographies.

**Quality Policy**

The MS ISO 9001:2000 standard requires that each core process documents its quality policy and have measurable quality objectives that can assists the organization to measure the output of its processes in an objective manner. The Reference Services Division or its equivalent reported on its unique quality policy and quality objectives (Table 2).

Table 2 Reference Service Quality Policy and Quality Objective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Policy</th>
<th>Quality Objectives</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To answer reference queries according to customer needs</td>
<td>• Equal to or greater than 80% queries are answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To fulfill indepth information according to customer needs</td>
<td>• To fulfill request within 5 working days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have a reference services guide, advisory service and counseling and ensure that all services are in order and can fulfill customers request</td>
<td>To increase User Education programme by 2% every year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To provide guidance to nature expertise in information seeking</td>
<td><em>Did not provide a specific quality objective statement</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To provide information packaging to researchers/postgraduates in all faculty/institute/center</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To ensure all hardware and software faulty complaints are addressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To provide effective reference services, loan and return of items</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information Services Division is committed to provide various well planned information services to fulfill the university’s community information needs and to maintain an effective continual improvement of the Quality Management System.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Services Division</th>
<th>Our mission is to provide quality information service and to promote user education services in order to support learning, teaching and research activities in the University.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To forward the course reading list for acquisition within 7 working days from the date of receipt</td>
<td>• To fulfill at least 90% of user’s need on information desk services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To ensure that the Faculty Board Meeting would act as an effective channel of communication in identifying customers information needs</td>
<td>• To provide information services aimed to fulfill at least by 80 percents of user’s satisfaction level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To fulfill at least 95% of requests for information literacy workshops as a means to enhance customer learning and research inquiry</td>
<td>• To create awareness and exposures to Online Access Public Access based on following categories and performance level:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To shelve all or at least 7 trolleys of used books at each level within one working day</td>
<td>o Students 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To notify customers on new titles added to the library collection within 14 working days from the date of receipt.</td>
<td>o Academic and administrative staff 90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Public members 90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| No quality policy stated | • Response time to reference enquiry in 30 minutes |
|                         | • Indepth reference to be answered within 5 days |

| No quality policy stated | • To provide feedback for all quick reference within 24 hours |
|                         | • To provide feedback for all reference queries within 3 working days |

| No quality policy stated | • To ensure 80% request through Information Seeking Card & Inter Library Loan is responded within 3 working days |
|                         | • To ensure 95% undergraduate student & 20% postgraduate are given guidance and training in information skills through scheduled information skill programme |

Only five out of eight libraries have quality policies specific to reference service and one of the library did not provide a quality objectives. Most have mainly focussed on handling of reference queries (quick or in-depth) and user education. Some libraries have
also included awareness service, publication and user satisfaction, though user satisfaction cannot be defined as a library process.

Measure of Quality in Reference Services

Seven of the university libraries reported that the quality of reference services was being measured. They are PSAS, PTAR, PHS, PSZ, PUM, LIIMUM and PSB. These libraries further provided feedback on the quality measure tools employed; data collection methods used; reporting mechanisms and benchmarking.

(a) Quality measurement tools

Even though there are library quality measurement tools available, such as ServQual, LibQual, COUNTER, WOREP or CAUL, none of the libraries use these measurement tools. All libraries report using self-developed tools based on individual library goals. The measure of quality is dependent on the criteria in the quality objectives.

(b) Data collection method

All libraries rely on collection of reference statistics for data to measure the achievement of quality objectives. The most popular measure of reference services performance is ‘statistic of requests’ and ‘feedback form’ as reported by seven of the libraries. However the frequency of monitoring varies. Mainly reference statistics of reference queries are monitored monthly, twice a year or once a year depending on the frequency of the Management Review Meeting. As for monitoring of user education, libraries collect data after every class. Three of the libraries have carried out exit surveys – two libraries do it on a yearly basis and the other library carries out exit survey every two years. Other data collected are ‘statistics of access’; ‘statistics of usage’ and ‘statistics of response time’.
(c) Reporting Mechanism

All university libraries reported the level of quality compliance in departmental meetings and Management Review meetings. Six university libraries (PSAS, PTAR, PHS, PSZ, PTSL and PUM) also reported the level of compliance in the Library’s Annual Report. LIIUM and PSB report the level of compliance using Balance Score Card mechanism.

All libraries reported that they have met the quality objectives overall. Of the four libraries that had specific quality indicators, only three libraries benchmarked these indicators. PTAR benchmarks against other University (overseas) and IIUML carries out benchmarking via professional discussion and exchange of ideas during visits to other libraries. PHS is in the process of identifying their Key Performance Indicator (KPI), whereas another two libraries (PUM and PSB) plan to benchmark their performance indicators in the near future.

Quality Indicators

The two most popular services, reference query and user education, have both used frequency as a quality indicator; i.e. number or percentage of queries answered and percentage of user attendance for user education session. The number of queries answered and time taken to respond to these queries are indicators of the quality of the service. Percentage has exceeded 80%, whereas in-depth queries are to be answered within 24 hours – 3 days. (Table 3).

Table 3 Quality Indicator, Why it is Chosen and How it is Monitored.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality indicators</th>
<th>Reason for quality indicator chosen</th>
<th>How quality indicators are monitored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Reference query answered (quick reference and/or in-depth reference)</td>
<td>• Customer focus • Statistics easily available</td>
<td>• Keeping record of number of queries received and successfully answered • Recording the time in which a query is answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference query response time</td>
<td>• Statistics easily recorded</td>
<td>• Keeping record of time taken (minutes/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User education</td>
<td>• Customer focus</td>
<td>• Daily attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication</td>
<td>• Statistics easily available</td>
<td>• Feedback forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Awareness</td>
<td>• Customer focus</td>
<td>Frequency of publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Keep users informed</td>
<td>Not given</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reason for choosing the quality indicators varies among libraries. The main reason is ‘customer focus’ as this is the main focus of the MS ISO 9001:2000 standard. PHS and PSB had chosen their quality indicators to be customer focused and to fulfill users’ request. PSZ reasoned that these indicators can be easily monitored and measured using existing statistics. Whereas wants to continuously provide assistance to students so that they could use resources efficiently.

**Priorities for Continual Improvement.**

Only 6 libraries responded to the question of continual improvement plans. The areas that need improvement are staff training (PSAS and PSB); shelving, space and ICT (PTAR); implementing Balance Scorecard, effective counter services and increase customer satisfaction (PHS), address the issues or problems by implementing corrective action and preventive action (PSZ); stack management and usage of online database (PUM).

All university libraries agree that staff training would contribute to increase the quality of reference services. Among the training required is in the areas of information searching skills, ICT skills, communication skills, counter services training, referral knowledge train the trainer, customer service and marketing of library services.

**Quality Initiative and Evidence of Improved Performance**

PTAR, PHS, PSZ, PTSL, PUM and PSB described the quality initiative undertaken since the last review and the evidence of improved performance. They perceive some improvement in reference service quality and contribute it to the quality management
system. PTAR received an increase in budget for physical upgrading, ICT and networking; PHS experienced a shorter response time servicing customers; PSZ experienced an indication of increase in the quality of library skills classes conducted by librarians and higher level of student’s satisfaction. PSTL reported good comments from external auditors. PUM had initiated a “search card” for books not on the shelf and conducted briefing for new students. PSB reported a decrease in user complaints. (Table 4)

Table 4 Quality Initiative Undertaken Since Last Review and Evidence of Improved Performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality initiative undertaken since the last review and evidence of improved performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budget for physical upgrading, ICT and networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorter response time for reference queries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased quality of library skills classes conducted by librarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher student’s satisfaction level recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall improvement on the comments/observations by the external auditors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated a “search card” for books not on the shelf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briefing for new students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased complaints from user.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All university libraries agreed that QMS/ISO 9001:2000 has improved the quality of reference services. Generally, the QMS/ISO 9001:2000 has improved attitude and the way the staff work, provide a yard stick for continuous improvement, provide monitoring based on quality objectives, focus on customer satisfaction, documented workflow and report statistics and stressed on corrective and preventive action for continuous improvement.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

The survey revealed that reference desk, reader’s advisory services/referral service and preparation of library brochures and leaflets are services provided by all the reference departments in a university library. Besides that library tours and user education is also a
priority. These services are core processes of a library. The most popular services in the university library is User Education. This may be so as user education is made compulsory to students in some university libraries.

The result of the study reveal all the university libraries had reference services identified as one of the core process in their QMS. This shows that a high level of importance was placed in reference service. Each reference service divisions has its unique written policy and objectives. As Whitlatch (2001) states, planning good evaluation of reference services requires broad goals and specific objectives. The broad goals of each university libraries are stated in their reference services policy, and objectives are clearly stated and quite specific. The development of details statements on the level of achievement expected permits the level of performance to be assessed accurately and realistically.

The result revealed that objectives of each university libraries reference services division are very clear and measurable. It is notes that although user education is popular in university libraries, there is a lack of quality monitoring of this service. Only four of the libraries have a quality objective specific to user education.

Measures of the library’s performance is tied to the library’s mission and objectives, as well as the mission and objectives of integrated departments of the library. All measures should be designed to provide library management the most accurate assessment of whether goals and objectives are being reached. It is surprising that none of these universities have used any of the available service quality measures such as ServQual, LibQual, COUNTER, WOREP or CAUL. There has been no effort to combine these measuring instruments with the ISO 9001:2000. All libraries use their library’s own developed measurement. The most popular method of measure of reference services performance is statistics of request and feedback form. Rowley (2005) says that the
models and tools developed to inform the measurement of customer perceptions of
service quality are important tools for the collection of data in services departments.
Koontz & Rockwood (2001) suggest that review annually or more frequently, is essential
based upon standardized gathering procedures and definitions. In this study, it is found
that meeting is a most common place to report level of quality compliance in all the
university libraries. The next means of reporting the level of compliance is in annual
reports. Balance Score Card (BSC) is only available in two university libraries and
usually it requires IT system to reflect the compliance level. One of the advantages of
having BSC system is that the compliance level is reflected in alert and real time. Only
three university libraries benchmarked their performance indicators. Benchmark can be
done in various means:

- Comparison with other organisation. For example PTAR benchmark its library
collection, databases, e-journals, budget and web library against international
university libraries. LIIUM carried out study visits that would entail discussion
and exchange of ideas for all areas of services.

- Self-assessment. For example PSZ benchmark against survey they have done on
certain area such as purchases and budgets.

It is good to know that other university libraries are considering benchmarking as part of
their quality initiatives in the future. Benchmark has been used to establish nationally
recognized benchmarks of good practice that can be used to assess the performance and
the overall effectiveness of their organizations and to encourage the sharing of good
practice and the adoption of the best practice in pursuit of excellence.25

In this study, all university libraries reported that they have overall met the quality
objectives. Five university libraries have already plan for changes in the year ahead. The
changes can be in a form of:
• Implementing new features such as Web, reference services online chat, information literacy online classes.
• Improvement on current services such as improves on Reference Desks.
• Training such as training on information seeking skills
• Promotions and marketing of services.

The result shows that seven university libraries use some kind of measurement as a yard stick to measure the quality indicator. Most quality indicator are in the form of percentage, time frame or scale. According to Poll et al. (1996), performance indicators are expected to be appropriate (valid), reliable (accurate), reproducible (measureable), helpful (useful, informative) and practical (user friendly). The indicators used by university libraries fulfill these criteria. Whitlatch (2001) says that it is essential that the evaluation of reference service begins with examining why the service is being evaluated in the first place, and what the organization hopes to gain by conducting the assessment. In this case it would be reflected in the indicators used in the quality objective statements. The choice of percentage and response time were chosen mainly because the reference statistics are easily available and reliable data can be obtained from these figures. The libraries have also included customer focus, measureable quality and continuous service of resources to student as reasons for deciding upon the quality indicators used. Development of in-house indicators has been more widespread than anticipated (Wilson, 2000). Most of the participating libraries use statistical reports to monitor their quality indicator. Only one library uses survey and feedback form to monitor their quality indicators. When compared to Wilson and Pitman’s (2000) list for performance indicators, these indicators used by Malaysian academic libraries are appropriate (number of queries answered); reliable (accurate because numbers are easily recorded); reproducible (frequency of occurrences and number of attendees); helpful (reported figures help decision making) and practical ( easy to monitor ad keep record of).
Whitlatch (2001) says evaluation itself can be conducted in several ways. Some methods are informal, such as the compilation of user feedback, and eBay-type ratings left by users (an approach favored by commercial services). Other, more formal types of evaluation include surveys and questionnaires, observations, case studies, and individual and focus group interviews. The achievement of quality objectives are only measures of predetermined indicators, they do not directly indicate quality enhancement. Since quality of service is often judged by the customers, most libraries judge the quality outcome by survey method, feedback form, and services rendered. Feedback from library users is deemed the ultimate judge of quality.

The result of the survey found that each participating libraries has their own priorities for continual improvement. These include skilled and competence staff, ICT, space, implementing Balance Scorecard and corrective and preventive action. All participating libraries agree that staff training would contribute to the quality of reference services. Information searching skills and ICT skills are training required in three of the university libraries as libraries are moving towards more technology savvy services in line with customer demand for easy, quick and convenient access to information. Communication skills and counter services are highlighted as required training for reference service staff. Bicknell highlighted that communication skills is one of the four aspects of quality identified in evaluating reference encounter.

According to Ennis (2000), a crucial element of a quality approach is the ability to demonstrate the provision of a quality service. This can best be achieved by a mixture of inspection, evaluation and assessment. Six university libraries described the quality initiative undertaken since the last review and the evidence of improved performance. The quality initiatives undertaken since the last review are: i) Budget for physical upgrading, ICT and networking; ii) increase quality of library skills classes; iii) initiated “search card” for books not on shelf; iv) briefing for new students and v) review
of quality objective(s) in a consistent manner. Libraries have experienced evidence of improved performance since the last review such as, i) shorter response time; ii) high level of student’s satisfaction; iii) overall improvement in comments/observations from auditors; iv) less complains from user. These occurrences are considered an indication that library service has improved due to the current QMS.

CONCLUSION

Academic librarians not only manage information resources but are also committed to provide customer service to its clientele. One such integral service in an academic setting is the reference service. As reference service is the venue in which the public most interact with the library regarding information needs, it should be one of the most effective library service (Kuruppu, 2007). It is the onus of the library management to provide services based on customer needs and ensure increasing customer satisfaction. This commitment is often reflected in the mission and vision of the library. The commitment to quality in Malaysian public university libraries is clearly reflected by the efforts of libraries to obtain and sustain the MS ISO 9001:2000 QMS requirements certification. This study explored the quality measures for reference services in university libraries and how it helps the reference services in achieving their goal and mission.

It can be concluded that generally the university libraries have identified Reference Services as a core process of the library and set specific quality objectives for this service. Each library has defined the quality objectives based on individual library mission and customer needs. However, the objectives and quality indicators are self determined and there is no effort to collaborate with other universities to set a common set of criteria. Most libraries have not used any available guidelines for reference service performance and measurement though they agree that they are aware of such guidelines. These libraries are in the stage of finding the best indicators that are suitable to the
individual library and are progressing towards shared criteria in the near future for benchmarking purposes. The reference services are mainly being measured using statistic of request and feedback form. There is a lack of using tools such as ServQual, ServPref or LibQual due to lack of awareness of these tools. It would deem necessary to develop a measuring instrument specific to the needs of Malaysian university libraries.

There is a tendency towards using customer feedback via user satisfaction surveys to be informed about the quality outcome. The next move for these libraries would be to move towards a culture of gathering user requirements of a particular service and identify quality indicators that would help measure the achievement of these objectives and thus ensure the quality of that service.

Lastly, it is concluded that the MS ISO9001:2000 standard has been used effectively by university libraries to provide a quality management system that is able to set priorities and offers a mechanism to measure these achievements and carry out continual improvements for service enhancement. At the same time it is hoped that these universities will review and adopt best practices of other university libraries, with necessary amendments of course and also to review other quality frameworks that have been practiced in business management.

References


