

# What do users want? An analysis of enquiries received at the Help Desk

**Goh Wei Haan and Dr Janaki Sinnasamy**

Sunway Campus Library

Sunway University & Sunway College KL

No.5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway, 47500 Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

e-mail: whgoh@sunway.edu.my; janakis@sunway.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Librarians are expected to equip themselves with knowledge of the various information resources available and tips for efficient search strategies before being given the task of helping out at the Help Desk. For this reason, fresh librarians are often paired with senior librarians when on duty. However, the emergence of multitude online resources and the inherent digital skills of the Net generation seem to have a shrinking effect on the need for academic related types of enquiries.

**Objective:** The objective of this paper is to analyse and study the characteristics and changes in the trends of reference enquiries received at the Help Desk particularly in the Sunway Campus Library.

**Methodology:** All enquiries received either in person, phone, email or via social media are recorded in the Reference Enquiries Database developed by the Automation division. Enquiries received are categorised as Simple or In-Depth enquiries. The Simple enquiries are categorised as; Bibliographic instruction, Directional Questions, Computer & IT related; Informational, and Others. In-depth enquiries consist of Literature Search and Bibliographical Verification.

**Findings:** This paper will plot the types of enquiries received for 3 years (2014-2016) and analyse the changes and trends in the types of enquiries received. It is hoped that this analysis will give an insight to the changing needs of library users and help academic libraries to plan, modify, and re-evaluate Help Desk services.

**Keywords:** Reference enquiries; Help Desk

## INTRODUCTION

The Sunway Campus Library serves Sunway University, Sunway College KL and other institutions within Sunway Campus. It provides reciprocal privileges to Monash University Malaysia staff and students. The library is based on the concept of the learning commons. It provides a range of services, resources and expertise for students to write, research and use technology to achieve these objectives. Like any other academic libraries, the Sunway Campus Library provides Help Desk services from 9.30 am until 8.30pm/9:30pm on weekdays, from 10am until 3:30pm/5:30pm on weekends and holidays.

The Help Desk is presumably the heart of library services where library users' information needs are attended. This is where connectivity between user and library services actually takes place. Often librarians on duty assist users to find print and electronic resources needed for assignments, projects, teaching and research. Queries at the Help Desk range from simple directional, to demonstration of a task or skill, to a specific use of resources and search strategy (LeMire, Rutledge & Brunvand, 2016).

It is necessary to track the types of questions asked by the students in order to identify areas which can be improved for enhanced library services and facilities.

## **OBJECTIVE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this paper is to study the enquiries received at the Sunway Campus Library to understand the informational needs of library users, mainly pre-university, undergraduate and postgraduate students. The objectives of this paper are:

- (i) to analyse the categories of enquiries received for the past three years (2013, 2014, 2015) and
- (ii) study the trend in the categories of enquires received over the three years.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Bracke et al. (2007) found a 88% drop in reference desk transactions from 1991 to 2004 in University of Arizona. The reference desk transactions were placed into six categories: Reference, Directional, Technology use (e.g., how to use Excel), Technology problems (e.g., paper jams in printer), Circulation questions, and Questions about non-library campus. They found out that 89% of the reference questions could be answered by students and trained generalists.

Henry & Neville (2009) categorized more than 5500 reference questions for the period of spring 2004 to spring 2005 using Katz and Warner methods to categorise reference questions. Averaging 50% or more of the total questions was "directional" questions, followed by 30-40% skilled based or ready reference questions, while fewer than 10% of the questions were considered "strategy-based."

Calson (2007) reported at Temple University during the 2005-2006 school, the reference desk received more than 4,400 questions. Only 243 involved extensive interaction and research, about 2,300 were simpler reference questions, and more than 1,800 were "directional" questions.

Studies showed that reference questions have changed due to technology, the Internet and online databases. Rieh (1999) found that many users tended to ask more mechanical questions than subject oriented or reference questions in end-user online searching environment. Tenopir and Ennis (2001) noting that more technical questions are asked, including those about equipment, software, printing, downloading, emailing, document formats, networks, and connectivity.

With the change to type of questions received at the reference desk, number of studies have been carried out on the usefulness of the reference desk. Ewing and Hauptman (1995) have studied reference interactions and found extremely high percentage for directional and simple inquiries which does not require librarian to answer as these can be handled by high school graduates with a little in-house training.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Sunway Campus Library has maintained a simple database whereby every enquiry at the Help Desk is keyed into the database. They are then compiled and reported at the library management review meeting twice a year. All enquiries received either in person, phone, email or via social media are recorded in the Help Desk Database developed by the Automation division.

There are basically six categories of enquiries in the database. They are: (i) Information Search, (ii) Location of Library Materials, (iii) In Depth Enquiry, (iv) My Library, (v) Technical, and (vi) Others. The category Information Search includes any queries related to the resources in the library and partner library, both print and electronic. Location of Library Materials is when students enquire about shelf location and inability to locate items on the shelves. My Library is enquiries specific to the library system, forms, services, and facilities. Technical enquiries are related to PCs, Self-Check machines, printing, and network account. In Depth Enquiry mainly comes from the Human Resource Department when there is a necessity to verify bibliographic information of publications by the academics. Enquiries from students in this category are usually on literature search and citation styles. The Other category are the insignificant enquiries on stationery, newspaper, mobile services, email, floor plan, student card activation, top-up printing credit, software, and many more.

## **FINDINGS**

(i) The first objective of this paper is to analyse the categories of enquiries received for the past three years. In year 2013, the highest percentage of enquiries was on Information Search (44.92%), followed by Location of Library Materials (26.76%), My-library (12.51%), Technical Issues (10.60%), Others (2.87%), and In-depth enquiries (2.35%). In year 2014, the highest percentage of enquiries was also on Information Search (47.63%) followed by Location of Library Materials (25.48%), My-Library (12.37%), Technical Issues (6.02%), In-depth enquiries (5.81%), and then Others (2.69%). In year 2015, the highest percentage of enquiries was on Location of Library Materials (38.86%), followed by Information Search (30.41%), Technical Issues (15.12%), My-Library (9.19%), In-depth enquiries (3.50%), and lastly Others (2.93%). Table 1 shows the types and percentage of enquiries received for the three years

In the Information Search enquiry, the highest percentage of enquiries received for all the three years was on the use of the Library Catalogue. E resources including online databases and internet search receive a low percentage of enquiries.

In the Location of Library Materials enquiry, the highest percentage of enquiries received for all the three years was on shelf location of library materials. A small percentage was on the inability of students to locate items on the shelf. This is interesting because one of the library's objective quality is to maintain 95% of accuracy in shelving. Perhaps students themselves are unable to locate items even though the items are on the correct shelf.

In-depth enquiry and literature search are seldom received at the Help Desk. The requests for bibliographic verification comes from the Human Resource Department and from the academics which are then input into the Help Desk database.

In the My-Library enquiry, most of the enquiries are on setting up My Library account and on library rules and regulations. The online printer was set up near the Help Desk about a year ago. Since then the number of enquiries received on printing and network issues have increased.

The Others type of enquiry consists of multiple queries ranging from air-conditioning, study spaces, student card activation, photocopying, library opening hours, and many other types.

(ii) The second objective of this paper is to study the change in the trend of enquiries received over the three years (Table 2). Information Search seems to show a decline. The move to incorporate discovery service interface has probably led to the ease of use of the library catalogue and electronic resources available in the library. It has become easier to teach information skills to students as they

are well equipped in digital skills. The enquiries on Location of Library Materials however have shown an increase. The increase might be due to the move to a new library building and the signs to the area were not ready for users. It might be perceived as a positive after effect of the information skills sessions combined with the user friendly interface of the library catalogue and e resources.

Similarly, the queries on the use of My Library have also reduced indicating the inherent digital skills of the Net generation. However, Technical Issues have shown an increase. This could be the increased use of online resources, applications and gadgets in academic libraries and also among library users. Insignificant queries on Other matters have more or less remain the same and may do so in future.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings in this study reveal that searching and looking for information in the library is always the focal point of students. Information skills sessions and library tours are conducted on a regular basis for students at the Sunway Campus Library. The number of students attending these sessions is substantial since the request to conduct these sessions come from the faculties and departments themselves. Despite attending these sessions, the type of enquiries related to information search and location of library materials are the main type of enquiries received at the Help Desk. This reiterates Mellon's (1986) theory of library anxiety which states that size of the library and location of things can cause anxiousness for students. As students are becoming more comfortable searching the online library catalogue and discovery interface, the location of library materials however still have to be done manually. It is not uncommon for students to feel anxious seeing rows and rows of shelves. Academic libraries can be a bewildering experience since school libraries have closed stacks and are used mainly for studying only (Liu, 1992). It is also worth mentioning that the Sunway Campus Library makes available a number of colourful informational brochures such as How To Search, How To Find, and Shelf Guides. Library staff may have to guide students as and when they need assistance, over and above the efforts taken to conduct information skills sessions and prepare library guides.

The increase in queries on Technical Issues are also supported by other literature. Rieh (1999) reported that reference questions have changed due to technology, the Internet and online databases and many users tended to ask more mechanical questions than subject oriented or reference questions. In another study, Tenopir and Ennis (2001) noted that more technical questions are asked, including those about equipment, software, printing, downloading, emailing, document formats, networks, and connectivity.

In September 2014, the library conducted a survey on Locating Library Materials and found that among students who used 71.9% who used Discovery Search and 71% who used Library Catalogue know how to locate an item on the shelf using the call number and location respectively. For those who did not use Discovery Search or Library Catalogue, 51.1% indicated that they ask a Library staff for assistance, 68.7% browsed among the shelves to find library materials. About 33.6% of the respondents failed to locate items although the Library Catalogue shows it is in the Library. As for the signage in the Library, 66.8% strongly agreed or agreed that signs in the Library directed them to the correct book shelf area while 61.2% respondents strongly agreed or agreed that signs directed them to the specific shelf. As a result of this survey, the content of library orientation and information skills sessions were amended to show students how to retrieve library items physically from the shelves. As a result of the survey, the Help Desk opening hours were also extended from 4:30pm to 8:30/9:30pm on Monday to Friday. From 10am to 2:30/5:30pm during weekends and public holidays. Also, much clearer directional signs were put up in the library for open shelves to be more significant and visible.

Morover during the Library Orientation, the step by step guide on how to retrieve items from the shelf were also shown to the students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Patrons now require reference support in a variety of formats such as face to face, chat, and SMS both on and off campus, and on topics ranging from research to technology troubleshooting. Collecting and employing useful reference statistics is more important than ever. As libraries diversify to offer services such as more web resources, digital scholarship and innovative services as well as technology support, the queries received at the Help Desk are often not easily represented in traditional reference desk statistics scales. Online resources have caused dramatic changes not only in how questions are answered, but also in the questions themselves.

The Help Desk can only be beneficial if the librarians on duty are equipped with the right knowledge and skills. As the trend in enquiries are moving towards technical matters as a result of the online searching environment, library staff have to be trained or increase their knowledge and skills in computer and printing maintenance as well as network troubleshooting. Alternatively, libraries could also employ technical staff and have them on duty at the Help Desk or at least be on standby to assist when the need arises. To better understand the users' satisfaction on Help Desk service, the Sunway Campus library has placed 2 boxes that labelled as "I am satisfied with the Help Desk Service" and "I am not satisfied with the Help Desk Service". Users will be given marbles to put in either box after receiving service from the Help Desk.

Category of Enquiry	2013	2014	2015
<b>INFORMATION SEARCH</b>			
Internet Resources	0.17	0.43	0.41
Past Year Exam Papers	2.52	2.69	0.89
Search All	2.69	4.09	5.20
Use of Subscribed E Databases	5.73	2.58	1.54
Use of Other E-Databases	0.78	1.08	0.00
Use of Library Catalogue	32.15	35.38	22.36
Use of Library Catalogue & Subscribed E Databases	0.78	0.86	0.00
Use of Monash U Catalogue	0.09	0.54	0.00
	<b>44.92</b>	<b>47.63</b>	<b>30.41</b>
<b>LOCATION OF LIBRARY MATERIALS</b>			
Location of services / Facilities	3.56	2.80	14.80
Shelf Location	21.81	16.99	21.06
Unable to Find Items	1.39	5.70	3.01
	<b>26.76</b>	<b>25.48</b>	<b>38.86</b>
<b>IN DEPTH ENQUIRY</b>			
Literature/Information Search	0.26	0.43	0.00
Bibliographical Verification	1.74	4.95	3.17
Citation Styles	0.35	0.43	0.33
	<b>2.35</b>	<b>5.81</b>	<b>3.50</b>
<b>MY LIBRARY</b>			
Form Request	0.87	0.11	0.33
Library Rules & Regulation/Policy	3.48	3.01	2.85
My Library Account	3.74	2.37	3.09
Online Renewal	1.91	2.37	0.49
Online Reservation	1.91	3.33	1.46
Remote Access	0.17	0.22	0.00
Ready Reference	0.00	0.43	0
OBU Theses	0.26	0.54	0.73
Reading List	0.17	0.00	0.24
	<b>12.51</b>	<b>12.37</b>	<b>9.19</b>
<b>TECHNICAL ISSUES</b>			
Software	0.35	0.22	0.16
Self-Check machine	0.43	0.32	0.89
PC/Computer, Monitor, Mouse	0.61	0.00	1.22
Network Account	0.96	0.00	1.38
Printing / Printer	8.25	5.48	11.46
	<b>10.60</b>	<b>6.02</b>	<b>15.12</b>
<b>OTHERS</b>	<b>2.87</b>	<b>2.69</b>	<b>2.93</b>
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

**Table 1: Types of enquiries received for years 2013, 2014, and 2015**

Category of Enquiry	2013	2014	2015
Information Search	44.92%	47.63%	30.41%
Location Of Library Materials	26.76%	25.48%	38.86%
In Depth Enquiry	2.35%	5.81%	3.50%
My Library	12.51%	12.37%	9.19%
Technical	10.60%	6.02%	15.12%
Others	2.87%	2.69%	2.93%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

**Table 2: Change in the types of enquiries received for years 2013, 2014, and 2015**

## REFERENCES

- Bracke, M. S., Brewer, M., Huff-Eibl, R., Lee, D. R., Mitchell, R., & Ray, M. (2007). Finding Information in a New Landscape: Developing New Service and Staffing Models for Mediated Information Services. *College & Research Libraries*, 68(3), 248-267
- Carlson, S. (2007). Are Reference Desks Dying Out?. *Chronicle Of Higher Education*, 53(33), A37-A39
- Ewing, K., & Hauptman, R. (1995). Is traditional reference service obsolete?. *Journal Of Academic Librarianship*, 21(1), 3
- LeMire, S., Rutledge, L., & Brunvand, A. (2016). Taking a Fresh Look Reviewing and Classifying Reference Statistics for Data-Driven Decision Making. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 55(3), 230-238.
- Liu, Z. (1993). Difficulties and characteristics of students from developing countries in using American libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 54, 25-31.
- Mellon, C. A. (1986). Library anxiety: A grounded theory and its development. *College & Research Libraries*, 47, 160-165.
- Neville, T. M., & Henry, D. B. (2009). Reference Classification—Is It Time to Make Some Changes?. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, (4), 372
- Rieh, S. Y. (1999). Changing reference service environment: A review of perspectives from managers, librarians, and users. *The Journal Of Academic Librarianship*, 25178-186. doi:10.1016/S0099-1333(99)80197-9
- Tenopir, C., & Ennis, L. A. (2001). Reference services in the new millennium. *Online*, 25(4), 40