

Perceptions of university librarians and students regarding library visits of high school students

Richa Thapliyal¹, Dr. Mandakini Sharma²

¹HSS, Graphic Era Deemed to Be University, Dehradun

²Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts, Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India,

ABSTRACT

The study seeks to report about the perceptions of university librarians and students regarding the library visits of high school students. Using a qualitative approach following a case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 librarians across university libraries in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Qatar. Besides, interviews were conducted with 43 high school students who visited the university libraries. The study shows that librarians perceive the visits of high school students as beneficial because these visits serve as a means to motivate them for further scholarship. Besides, there are gender differences among students who interact differently during their visits. While most of the academic studies are focused on the West, the present study is based in four of the six Gulf countries. Also, none of the previous studies has chosen to seek the views of the stakeholders regarding the visits of high school students in university libraries. The present study plugs both the gaps.

Keywords: Libraries, Visits, High School, Students, Librarians, Universities, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Case study, Academic libraries

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries espouse unique vision and mission objectives to emphasize upon serving different needs in terms of catering to the information and knowledge requirements of all (Meacham, 2008). Besides, academic libraries allow visitors to avail membership or temporary services on payment of a suitable fee which is indicative of the economic value generation as well (Imholz and Arns, 2007). They are regarded as a "place" for availing different kinds of services including soliciting reference of books, periodicals and other information resources (Knight, Hight and Polfer, 2010). They also serve as promotional avenues for the higher educational institutions where the institution's knowledge repositories are showcased (Michnik, 2014). Therefore, the visitors tend to visit the libraries to meet different purposes. For instance, such purposes could be related to tourism, genealogical research or family visits (Ross, 2011). Visitors may include students of other schools, colleges or universities; guests; colleagues or a general reader. Tours and visits are arranged by schools, colleges and universities for visiting the libraries of leading universities or institutions of higher learning. The manner in which libraries are used by visitors plays an important role. For instance, it is also probable that libraries play a considerable role in the success of the students. While this may be one of the motivating factors, there are other reasons as to why library

visits are a part of the academic programme in many schools and colleges.

The intent of this study is to appreciate the perceptions of the librarians and students regarding the visits of high school students in four of the six Gulf countries (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and UAE). Conceding the consistent performance of these countries in terms of primary education and higher education and training as per the Global Competitiveness Report, 2016 (WEF, 2016), the present study holds significance in terms of the facilitating factors which impact the movement of students from school to college/university. For instance, female enrollment in higher education has been higher in comparison to male enrollment (Doha News, 2014; Times of Oman, 2016; World Bank, 2017). We have picked the visits of the high school students only for our purpose and we interviewed librarians of select universities (including public and private) and the visiting students in the four Gulf countries to seek their views. The structure of the study is as follows: we will provide a brief review of literature first; thereafter, we will provide details regarding our sample and the manner in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with the university librarians and the students. This will be followed by a conclusion of our findings and then, we will provide a brief about the study's implications, limitations and hints for further research.

Literature review

Academic libraries are considered as the “heart of the academic community” in a university campus (Walsh, 2008) and serve as gateways to information resources (Shah, 2013). They are a means of conveying the mission and objectives of a higher educational institution and they create value by attracting prospective students to join their institution (Kopp, 2013). They try to adopt quality management procedures for providing services in an efficient and effective manner (Cabrerizo et al., 2015). They have their distinct identity and they espouse the vision of providing knowledge and information to the students and those interested in availing their services. Libraries are often considered as symbolic of a university's infrastructure and its penchant for higher learning and academic excellence (Lombard, 2012).

There are variations regarding the purposes for which students use the library services (Langer and Kubo, 2015). For an effective use of the library, it is important that students possess the desired information literacy skills, understand the typical technical terms of the library, appreciate the norms of the library and assess the manner in which interactions with the professional librarians is to be encouraged (Morrissey and Given, 2006; Schomberg and Bergman, 2012). Besides, the cultural background of the students has a marked impact in the manner in which they use library resources (Zhuo et al., 2007). Therefore, students should be provided adequate training for the purpose of deploying library services (Wang and Frank, 2002; Curry and Copeman, 2005). Finally, there should be collaborations among the librarians of different universities to audit and assess the challenges and opportunities of providing user-friendly library services (Zhang, 2006) for providing the right set of library experiences to the visitors in terms of technology, rest rooms, lighting and the overall ambience (Robert, 2014).

Libraries are visited by academic and non-academic community (Pors, 2010). However, while some academic libraries do not allow public visits, others provide select library services against payment of a fee. Nevertheless, libraries are considered as a cardinal focus of an academic institution where people visit from different walks of life (Robertson, 2006). Besides, there are "virtual visitors" who

access libraries from their location for conducting information searches or accessing digital library services (Waller, 2009). With the increasing impetus upon digitalization of resources, e-resources are being made available to the users for ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in library services (Johannsen, 2012; Madhusudhan and Singh, 2010; Shahwan and Kaba, 2013).

While the cross-section of the library visitors may count a range of populace, of late, academic libraries in many countries have been hosting tours of high school students. There are two-pronged advantages of hosting high school students in the libraries of higher educational institutions. From the perspective of the schools, their students are provided with an opportunity of undertaking an educational tour and for the universities, they are able to showcase the students with their voluminous range of services and the mere size and structure of the library appears to be daunting yet impressive to the young students. Studies have shown that the propensity of young readers to be attracted to libraries is less (Maynard and McKnight, 2001). They prefer reading traditional books and physical library settings where they find avenues for reading-cum-entertainment (Druin et al., 2007). Libraries impact the reading habits of the students as well (Walter, 2003). In this context, it is possible that one of the reasons for arranging library visits of high school students by the schools is to motivate the students to develop reading habits by observing those who are reading or availing library services or through direct and indirect interactions with others in the university library. This is corroborated by the findings of the study set in a Singaporean context where the reading and learning attitudinal differences were captured in terms of the library visitors (Keng, Wirtz and Jung, 2003).

Most of the previous research discusses about the benefits of libraries for visitors from a general perspective where the focus remains on attracting the visitors to the libraries for availing information services. The second strand of research pertains to the challenges encountered in meeting the expectations of the visitors. However, segmented clientele-specific visitor research is negligible (Hawkins, Morris and Sumsion, 2001; Ibraheem and Devine, 2016; Keng, Wirtz and Jung, 2003; Lozano, 2000; Mills, Paladino and Klentzin, 2015; Yi, 2016). In this vein, our study seeks to plug the gap by ascertaining the prospective benefits for the high school students in visiting the libraries of universities (including private and public varsities) from the perspective of the librarians of these varsities as well as the students visiting these varsity libraries. Second, most of the academic literature is contextualized in the West and there are few studies focused on appreciating the nature and scope of academic libraries in the developing countries-specifically, in the Gulf region (Shahwan and Kaba, 2013). Our study has a setting in four Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and UAE) where the emphasis upon higher education and learning has fomented over the years and governments are aiming at furthering their impetus on providing quality education in the public and private universities.

Research method

The present study uses a grounded analysis as we have not consulted any specific theory area to develop our research apart from deploying the general social science research approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Gorman and Clayton, 1997). Grounded theory is not considered as a rigorous methodological procedure (Hense and McFerran, 2016) and is defined as a "family of research methods" where theoretical sampling, inductive analysis and constant comparison between data and emerging theory are used to inform the research (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Grounded theory is

favored among the researchers because it helps to understand people's thoughts and behaviors (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). Finally, it is systematic and coordinated and uses practical observation to understand the meaning of concepts (Robson, 2002).

We deployed qualitative analysis for our study because our study is linked with the human idiosyncrasies and we aim at understanding the interaction of time and space because different classes of students visit the libraries at different points of time (Lee, 1991). A case study seeks to investigate a phenomenon in its natural setting and helps a researcher to deploy a range of data collection methods from entities like people, groups or organizations (Yin, 1994). It helps to deepen our understanding about a phenomenon (Cavaye, 1996). Also, since our study seeks to answer the subjective questions related with the "how" and "why" of a phenomenon, we adopted the case study approach. Further, there is variability in human behavior and a qualitative approach helps one to learn from practice and remain flexible during interviews and observations. Interviews are regarded as the primary tools of data collection in a qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). We adopt a case study approach where academic librarians from Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE universities were contacted. Besides, we interacted with the students who were on visits in these university libraries.

The study was conducted in April 2016 and ended in August 2016. A series of interviews were conducted with the visiting students and librarians of the academic universities which included public and private varsities. Librarians from academic universities in Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE were contacted to solicit their perceptions regarding the visits of high school students in their libraries. Likewise, students who visited the libraries of the universities were contacted to give their views about their visits to these libraries. As far as the librarians were concerned, individual interviewees were contacted either face-to-face or through email. For interactions with the students, we solicited the views of the students during their visits in these libraries. While some of the interviews were conducted by the first author during her business visits in universities based in UAE, Oman and Qatar, the other interviews were conducted by the second researcher during his ongoing affiliation with a leading university based in Oman. For contacting the Saudi Arabian-based universities, emails were sent to the librarians describing our research objectives and questions. In all, we contacted 61 academic varsities (including public and private) in the four countries and we got 20 responses. While face-to-face interviews were semi-structured, the ones conducted via emails were structured. Face-to-face interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours. Our interviews were linked with answering the following four research questions:

- a. "What are the perceptions of the university librarians regarding the high school students' visits as far the gender differences are concerned?"
- b. How do university librarians perceive the visits of the high school students in terms of their familiarity with English versus Arabic languages?
- c. What are the perceptions of the university librarians regarding the interactions with the high school students during their library visits?
- d. What are the perceived benefits for the high school students in visiting the academic libraries of the universities?
- e. What are the perceptions of the students who visited the libraries of higher educational institutions?
- f. Did the students gain anything by visiting the libraries of higher educational institutions?"

Interviews with librarians

The librarians pointed out that they had been hosting 10-50 students at the same time. However, in some instances, the librarians averred that permission to allow students was restricted during examination hours or any significant in-house activity. One of the interviewees responded that:

“... When the number of students is large, we suggest hosting them during an open house, where we can accommodate up to 25 students. During the open house, we will only have the students who are doing specific research related to the High School Research Competition, attend the library session.”

Likewise, the universities have their own procedures for hosting school students' visits. In some cases, mere email communication works wherein details regarding the school, prospective timing for visit and student number is provided. In other cases, there are application forms which need to be filled and duly attested by the head of the school to facilitate the conduct of students' visits.

Role of gender of the high school students who are visiting the library

Librarians perceive the significance of the gender diversity among the school students. While some of the interviewees pointed out to the different conduct of the students in terms of their gender, others emphasized upon catering to the specific needs of the males and females. For instance, *“there are two library entrances for the males and the females... Students should be grouped according to their gender while being escorted to the library”*. One of the interviewees responded that there were separate days fixed for male and female students *“the suitable time (which) we have (varies as) Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday mornings (for males) and Monday and Wednesday evenings for female students.”* Regarding the preferred timings for visits by the school students, *“afternoon/evening timings are preferred than the morning hours so that we may make necessary arrangements with the other administrative departments”*.

Therefore, library norms need to be followed by the males and females. Another interviewee pointed out the differences in catering to the individual needs of the males and the females. For instance, *“there are independent reading stations for the males and the females... We provide different spaces as sitting area and discussion cubicles for females and males... Students must abide by these norms even if they are representing a school where males and females study together”*.

The attitudinal differences among female and male students were pointed out by some interviewees. For instance, one of the interviewees pointed out that female students were more *“focused and were sifting through the library stacks... They tend to stop by and look at the books lying on the workstations and desks”*. On the other hand, the male students tend to be *“more casual”* in their approach barring a few among them who tap the portals for accessing the internet. Almost all the interviewees averred that the students prefer visiting the “Children's section” and try to look for the books of their preferences.

Role of the language in which the high school students are well-versed with

Since schools vary in terms of the medium of instruction imparted in them and while some of the students are more comfortable in Arabic than English, the engagement levels of the students varies in academic libraries where English is the main medium of instruction even if the library staff are

bilingual. One of the interviewees pointed out this challenge that while hosting students who are bilingual as opposed to those who are comfortable in Arabic only, “*students find difficulty in accessing our Digital Libraries which are mostly rich in English resources*”. Likewise, another interviewee pointed out that there are challenges pertaining to the availability of books in Arabic and English wherein the latter are more curriculum-based and Arabic-speaking students are not driven towards these books.

Extent of interaction with the high school students during their library visits

Proper decorum is called for during students’ visits in the libraries. One of the interviewees pointed out that:

“Students are escorted in queues along with their teacher and two or more staff members from our library... Since we have our own students who are studying in the library, we do not allow students to talk or discuss among themselves during their visit.”

Female students are more inclined to observe the disciplinary instructions than the males. However, such challenges are managed by the library staff with prior instructions to the teachers and the students. In some universities, the students are received post-completion of their tour and their views about the library are solicited. One of the interviewees pointed out that:

“... After the completion of the guided tours, students are welcomed in our discussion room and we offer them sweets and ask them about their impression about the library... They are happy to see the infrastructure and facilities of the library and other students like to ask questions regarding the library processes and routines.”

Perceived benefits for high school students in library visits of the varsities

From the perspectives of the librarians, there are different advantages which may be accrued by the high school students while they are visiting the university libraries. One of the interviewees emphasized upon the savings in time which results by using library services.

“... As an institution of higher education, we are happy to show the students the Library and introduce them to the services and databases we have available to our students. We can discuss the advantages of utilizing the library and how it can save them time.”

Another advantage of school students’ visit pertains to their being motivated to pursue their studies after their secondary education. From a “career point”, visits of school students are important. Therefore,

“... the benefit to school students is that they can see a working university library and will be more inclined to see the University as a desirable next step after secondary school.”

Besides, the university hosts school students to showcase their infrastructure and resources. In a response, the interviewee maintained that:

“... It is a good experience for high school students to visit the library and be familiar with the university library, our library is one first academic library in the country, and we use international

standards and facilities.”

Another interviewee pointed out that students stand to benefit by *“being present in the largest library in (the country), (where there are) millions of theses and electronic & printed books, (and they may) know (about our) facilities and resources, (besides our) nice building with special views.”*

Another interviewee pointed out that the visits of the school students would help them in choosing the same university for pursuing their further studies. Besides, such visits also help the students *“to improve their research skills.”* In our interaction with one of the universities offering a specialized academic programme on medicine, the interviewee pointed out that the students will be able to

“learn about everything new in the field of medicine through databases, periodicals and medical books... Also, the categories served by the Library (were being) identified by them.”

However, another interviewee maintained that while there have been many visits of high school students,

“... We don't really provide many benefits to school students apart from browsing on site... We are a research level library.”

Similarly, another interviewee responded that the benefits are outweighed by the disadvantages at times because:

“A library visit at a university might benefit high school students if it inspired them or it could be just a sightseeing trip with little benefit if it doesn't relate to their possible future.”

To sum up, librarians perceive that it is advantageous to host high school students where the latter may derive motivation for further studies. Students also stand to gain by appreciating the norms governing the library and the significance of inculcating reading habits which would go a long way in developing a penchant for research and learning in higher education.

Interviews with high school students who visited the library of universities

Interviews with students were conducted to know about their perceptions regarding their visits in libraries of universities. Students feel motivated to visit the libraries with their teachers. With proper planning, they visit the library and attempt to draw motivation by these visits. One of the students replied, *“I want to become a math teacher in my life. When I come to the university library, I feel that I have to work hard to achieve my goal”*. Similarly, other students echoed the same perspective that visiting libraries of higher educational institutions helps them to chalk out their career planning. Library visits *“makes them realize as to what we should do in future for our studies... We should be serious in our studies... One day, we have to get admission in this university”*. Students are able to appreciate that there are some weak areas which they need to work upon for getting good grades in schools and to secure admission in higher educational institutions of their choice. Some of the students gave examples of their role models: *“My elder brother is a graduate of this university and he is in the US now. I want to study in this university and get fame like my brother... It is my dream to study in this university.”* Likewise, before coming to the university library, students are provided a background about the library by their teachers and they inform them about the purpose of library in higher educational institutions. *“We have to maintain strict decorum in the library... Our teacher*

tells us that we learn many things in library... So, we should make books as our friends", pointed out another student. Implicitly, the significance of knowledge and learning is being underlined and students are impressed upon to adopt reading habits.

There are differences in the manner in which female and male students perceive the benefits of library visits. For instance, a male student pointed out that: "*I like to use the library search software... I can search on robotics and chemistry compounds*" and one of the female students pointed out that she was always inquisitive about the space and solar system and this prompted her to search for geography sections. Similarly, other students pointed out that books on their favorite subjects were available in the library and they would like to read them "*once I grow older*". We also asked the students if they faced difficulty in understanding books which were in English language. For the Arabic-speaking students, understanding of English books was a challenge and they conceded that they need to further their comprehension in English. For others, the vocabulary of the books in these universities was difficult to understand. Some students also browsed "comics" section and "non-fiction" section wherein they looked for some of the classics in English literature. During our interaction with the students, we did not come across a single student who considered library visit as a futile activity.

To sum up, while the main motivating factor for high school students to visit university libraries appears to be inspirational, they are also driven by a desire for learning and knowledge in future. For these students, library visit constitutes an important facet of career progression.

Conclusions

The present study sought to appreciate the perceptions of the university librarians and the students regarding the visits of high school students and a case study approach was deployed to address the research questions. The case study was set in the academic libraries of four Gulf countries (Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE). Following a literature scan, we arrived at the objectives of our study given that academic research on segmentation of library visitors in academic libraries is scant and there are few studies which are set in the developing countries' context. We found that the librarians perceive that the purposes of high school students' visits has a marked variation among the male and female students and this variation becomes more complex among students who are well-versed with Arabic versus those who are conversant with both Arabic and English languages. Besides catering to the specific needs of the males versus the females, librarians need to ensure that proper decorum is being observed during the visits. Besides, the librarians encourage these school students' visits to appreciate the advantages of adopting reading habits and research. Likewise, our interaction with the students underscored the advantages for students to envision their ambitions and goals in life. Students were enthusiastic about the library books and other browsing activities. Our study corroborates the findings of a study based in Danish schools where it was found that gender has a major influence on availing library services among high school students and they were more prone to using the traditional library services rather than digital services (Pors, 2008). Our findings also match the results of a Sri Lankan based study where females expressed more contentment with the library environment than the males and there is difference among students who are bilingual in contrast with those who are well-versed in only one language (Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan, 2016). Overall, our study clinches the utility of visits of school students in academic libraries in different ways.

Study limitations, implications and directions for further research

Our study has limitations in the sense that we picked a qualitative research approach which may not be generalizable. We took interviews of only 20 librarians and 43 students and while the overall research method suits our research objectives, we propose that further research may be done with a larger sample size by deploying empirical investigation. Our study leaves social and practical implications. The study holds relevance for the schools where the arrangements for guided study tours in academic libraries should be furthered. Such tours should be a part of the curriculum so that students do not miss to avail these opportunities. Students should be motivated to develop reading skills and tapping digital repositories for enhancing their knowledge and apply the acquired knowledge in their academic tests. Besides, the universities should encourage visits of school students to propel the students into the higher education surroundings and motivate them to take up focused research studies in future.

The present study leaves a number of research pointers:

- a. Further research should aim to compare the approach of public versus academic libraries in the Gulf countries as well as the Western counterparts;
- b. Studies are required to assess the challenges and opportunities of arranging guided tours across different visitor segments; and
- c. Research is required to involve the perspectives of the other stakeholders (parents and teachers) to appreciate the benefits of visiting the academic libraries of higher educational institutions.

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