

The role of Kuwait University libraries in supporting graduate students' research

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Abstract: This paper reports a survey that was conducted at Kuwait University to explore postgraduate taught-course students' perceptions of the resources and services provided to support the research components of their degrees and to highlight their use of their particular college library for that research. A questionnaire was developed containing 29 closed and 2 open questions and responses were obtained from 578 students studying in four colleges (arts, engineering, law, and science). Whilst the students provided generally positive responses to the survey, analyses with SPSS and NVivo showed marked differences between the four subject groups, with the limitations that were identified providing vital information for improving library services to meet the graduate students' information needs.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Information needs, Kuwait University, Postgraduate research, Taught postgraduate degrees

1. Introduction

Kuwait University (hereafter KU) was established in 1966 and is the only public research university in the state of Kuwait. It now offers 85 undergraduate and 48 graduate programmes with approximately 1,500 academic staff and 36,000 undergraduate and 2,500 postgraduate students (Kuwait University, 2014).

The provision of library facilities throughout the university is the responsibility of the Kuwait University Libraries Administration (KULA), whose mission is to provide quality access to information in all formats and to support and enhance teaching, learning, scholarship and research within the university and the local community. There is a total of eight university libraries covering the eleven academic faculties across the various KU campuses and these are linked via a high-speed university intranet (Al-Ansari and Al-Kulib, 2011). The KULA collections contain both Arabic and non-Arabic materials, with over 600,000 monographs and access to over 2400 print and online journals, and the libraries

provide all of the normal facilities and functions to be expected from a university library service. There has, however, been little attempt made to date to determine how the available resources and services meet the needs of about 2,500 taught-course postgraduate students, specifically their needs when conducting the research project components of their higher degrees.

This paper describes one part of a PhD study carried out at the University of Sheffield that sought to investigate: the types of resources and services that graduate students use to support their research; the roles that the librarians play in guiding and supporting graduate students in their research; and the extent to which the library is able to meet the information needs of its graduate students. The survey reported here was designed to address the first of these research questions and involved the design and implementation of a six-part questionnaire that was delivered to students in four of the KU colleges, as described in the remainder of this paper. This provided the basis for a subsequent series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were undertaken with students in these four colleges and that are described in detail by Al Motawah (2016).

2. The Survey

At the time that this survey was conducted in 2010 there was a total of 1162 students undertaking taught postgraduate programmes in KU. Four of the 16 colleges – Arts, Engineering and Petroleum, Law and Science – were chosen for the survey and their 587 students were asked to complete a six-part questionnaire. To obtain a high response-rate, the questionnaires were distributed to the students during timetabled lecture sessions and at the end of mid-term examinations, these approaches resulting in a response rate of no less than 98.5% (corresponding to a total of 578 valid responses).

The questionnaire contained six sections and ended with two open questions. The first section contained questions relating to the demographic and academic backgrounds of the respondents, whilst the remaining five sections (a total of 29 questions) addressed the following topics: the library's provision for supporting research; the types of library materials available to support research; the users' familiarity with the use of library resources and services; the users' levels of satisfaction with these resources and services; and the library's perceived role in supporting research. Each of the questions was posed as a five-level Likert scale, e.g., "The library offers information literacy workshops for graduate students: Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree". The 29 statements comprising the five sections are included in the Appendix to this paper.

In addition to the Likert-scale questions, the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire asked "What makes you dissatisfied with the university library services; and "Do you have any suggestions for improving the university library services in the future?". Of the 578 students participating in the survey, 131

(i.e., just under one-quarter of them) provided responses to these two questions. Their responses were translated into English and subsequently processed by means of thematic content analysis, with the NVivo software package being used to facilitate the organisation, management and coding of the data.

3. Results of the Survey

Each of the sections of the survey probed a specific aspect of the library’s services or resources, and the results are summarised in Figures 1-5 below.

It will be seen from Figure 1 that the students generally approved (Agree or Strongly Agree) of the facilities provided by the library to support their research projects. That said, it is of some concern that there were so many Neutral responses (and, indeed, up to 16% disagree or Strongly Disagree responses). Similar comments apply to the data in Figure 2, with a clear view from the students that the provision of audio-visual materials needs to be enhanced. With the increasing availability of electronic materials, it is important to note here that the students still regard printed materials as being very important for their research. Figure 3 demonstrates some degree of variation in students’ satisfaction levels: while over 70% (strongly) agreed to

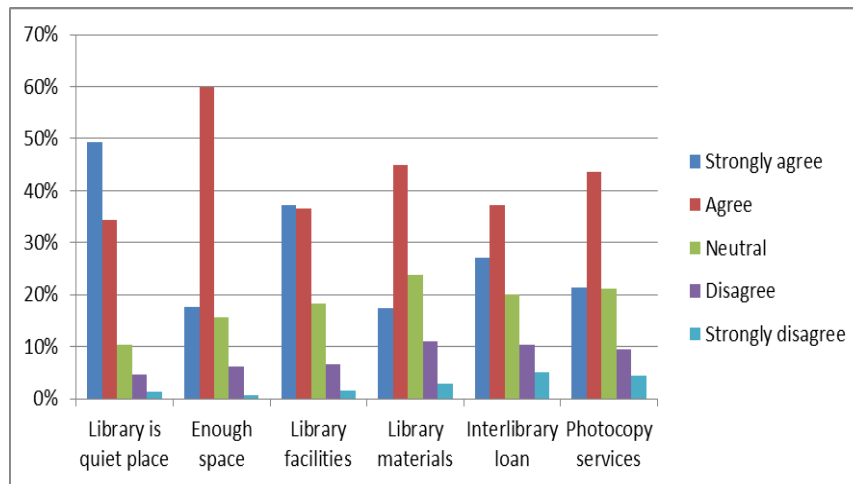


Figure 1: Use of the library and the quality of its provision

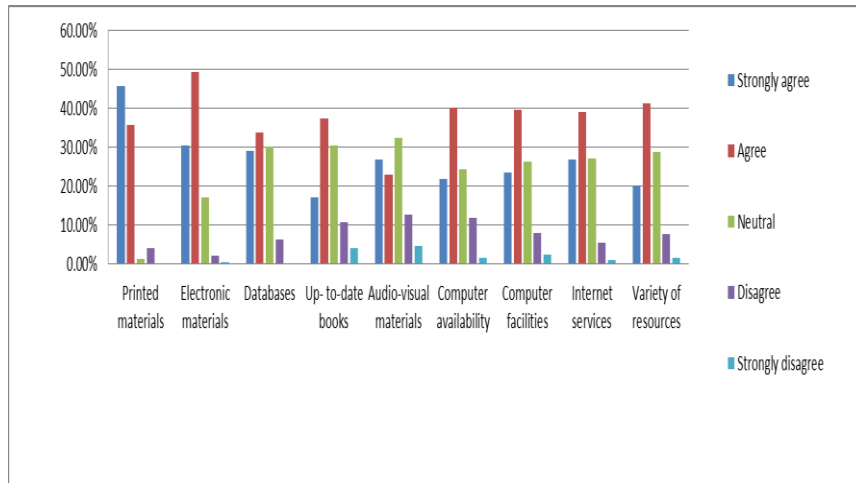


Figure 2: Types of library materials used to support research

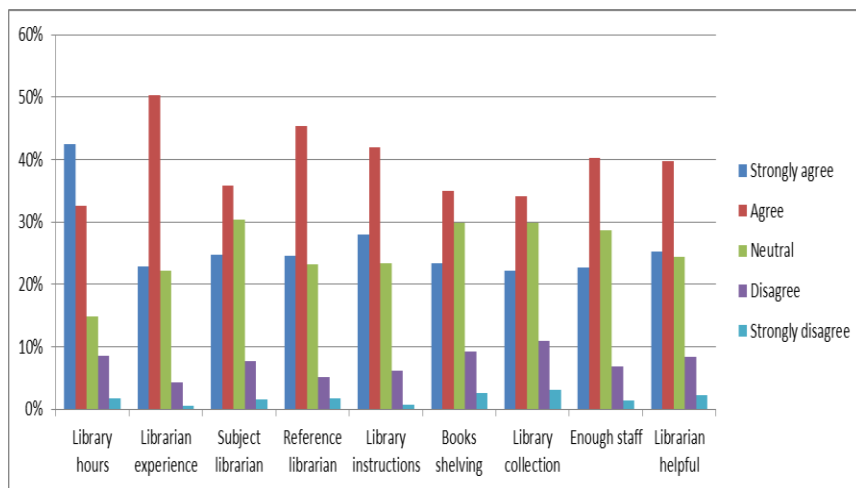


Figure 3: Users' satisfaction with library resources and services

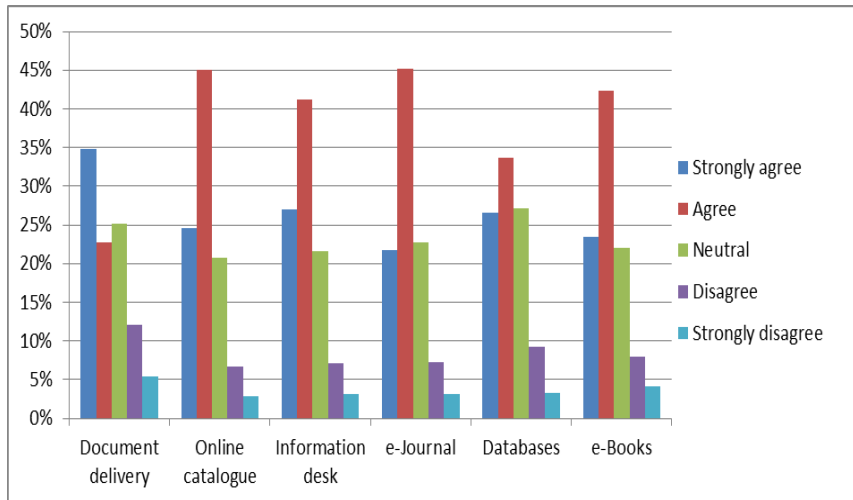


Figure 4: Familiarity with library services provided

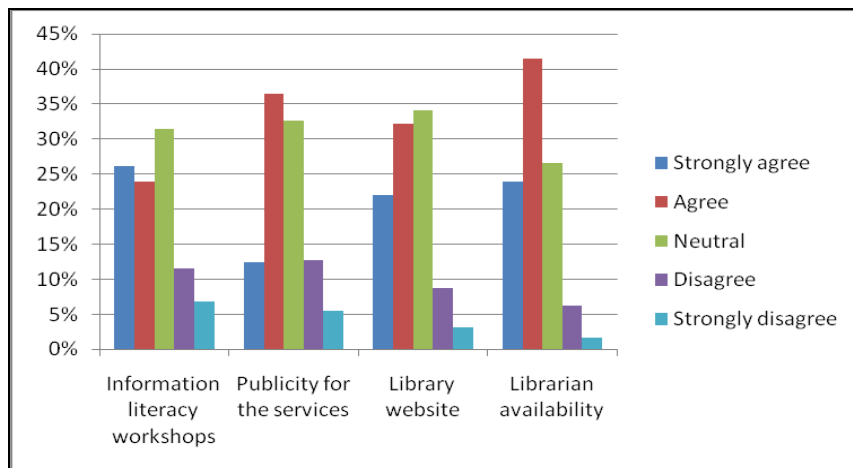


Figure 5: Role of the library in supporting research

the questions about opening hours and librarians’ experience, other resources and services were less highly regarded by the respondents. Figures 4 and 5 relate to the students’ familiarity with specific types of resource and service, and to the extent to which library activities support their research, respectively. Inspection of the figures reveals a clear lack of familiarity with the document delivery and database services, a rather worrying finding given their importance to research, and while the students responded positively to the question regarding librarian

availability, there is clear scope for improving publicity, the website and the information literacy workshops that the library provides.

The discussion so far has considered the students as a whole, without taking account of any differences between students from the four colleges that were studied here. An extended series of statistical tests was hence conducted to determine whether there were any differences in the responses from the four groups of students. These tests are described in detail by Al-Motawah (2016), who shows that many of the differences that were observed were statistically significant (using the Mann-Whitney U test), but the results can be summarised according to the principal themes that emerged. Regarding library services provision, the Science Library was more likely to provide its graduate students with reliable photocopying services and the required research materials than was the Law Library. Science students were also more likely than arts students to rely heavily on inter-library lending services to access research materials not found in the library. There were also marked disparities in the types of materials that the library provides (e.g., arts students were more likely to prefer print documents compared to students in the other disciplines, whilst engineering graduate students were the least likely to do so), and in the level of satisfaction with the services provided (e.g., the Science Library was found to be the most likely – and the Law Library the least likely – to fulfil the research needs of its graduate students through the provision of its resources and services). Conversely, the law students were least likely – and the science students the most likely – to be familiar with the use of specific library services; and a similar ranking applied in the students' perceptions of the extent to which their college library plays a significant role in assisting them to conduct their research. However, all four groups of students noted the limited extent to which their libraries publicised the services and resources that were available. Finally, a relationship was found between physical library visits and the different academic disciplines: the law students tend to visit the library regularly, the engineering students less frequently or rarely, and the science students to make only occasional or no visits at all.

Other tests investigated the effect of demographic variables such as the level of study, gender and age. These showed, for example, that the frequency of library visits decreases in line with an increase in the level of the academic study; that female graduate students are more likely to visit the library regularly than their male colleagues; that full-time students are more likely to visit the library than part-time students (who use it occasionally, rarely or even never in some cases); and younger students (under 26 years old) are less likely to believe that the college library plays a significant role in supporting their research than the older ones (26–35 years old).

The responses to the two open-ended questions in the survey can be summarised under four main headings: the library's information resources; the library's information services; the role of the library and of the librarians; and the library

environment. The principal source of dissatisfaction under the first heading related to printed books (both loan and reference): to the numbers of copies, editions, their organisation and availability. Unsurprisingly, this was a particular problem for the law and arts students, where much less material is available as yet in electronic form when compared to more technical subjects (e.g., one law student noted that *“The reference books in our subject area are not enough, and that’s what makes us order photocopies of most of the reference books we need from Egypt”* and an arts student pointed out that *“The recent or even old books that are essential in my subject area are unavailable in the library, and that is what makes me buy the books I need online from Amazon”*). Turning to the library’s facilities, the main areas highlighted for enhancement were an extension of the library’s opening hours (e.g., *“I am a part-time Master’s student so I have no time to visit the library, since it closes at 9 pm and when I am free at the weekends, the library is closed”*), an extension of provision for student photocopying (e.g., *“The photocopying services are not available all day long”*), and improved ICT facilities (e.g., *“Most of the time, the computers in our library are not working”* and *“The number of printers in the library is not enough”*).

When discussing the role of the library and of the librarians, the most common comments related to the quantity and the quality of the library staff (e.g., *“The reference librarians are not available when you need them”*, *“The library staff are unfriendly”* and *“The library staff are not helpful in guiding the students to find the books they need on the shelves”*), and to the information training that was available (e.g., *“I have no idea whether or not information literacy workshops are offered by the library to graduate students. I have never seen any announcement about that”* – a comment suggesting that better publicity is required, *“The library should offer information literacy workshops for graduate students”* and *“There are not enough (information skills) training sessions for graduate students”*).

The final theme identified in the open-question responses was the library’s physical environment, covering topics such as its organisation, noise level (e.g., *“The noise that comes from other students who are talking and failing to respect their peers”*), lighting (e.g., *“The illumination in the library is very poor”*), location, study rooms, and space (e.g., *“There are not enough chairs and carrels in the library”*). Taken together, these limitations might create a barrier inhibiting graduate students from visiting and making full use of the library and its resources.

The survey discussed above formed the basis for a subsequent series of interviews carried out with twelve students in each of four specialised fields (electrical engineering, microbiology, Islamic history and public law). Each discipline has its own research culture, which in turn shaped the students’ information needs. An analysis of these needs revealed similarities in the use of the library across the disciplines, as well as significant differences. The findings

indicate that cultural elements — such as the nature of the discipline, the mode of study, the external information sources that are available, and financial adequacy — all had a great influence on graduate students' use of KU libraries during the research stages of their degrees. These interviews are discussed in detail by Al-Motawah (2016).

4. Conclusions

There have been few studies to date of the support that academic libraries in the developing world provide for student research. The work reported here was conducted to fill this gap in the literature in the particular context of the support provided by KU libraries to arts, engineering, law and science students. While there was a reasonable level of satisfaction with the facilities provided by the libraries and with the range of materials, responses to the questions about resources and services were more varied. The survey also provided clear evidence of an ineffective marketing programme for the services offered by the library, particularly for the arts and law students. There is hence a need for better promotion of KU libraries' resources and services, e.g., by offering virtual tutorials on the library website about the specific services provided to support graduate students' in their research. Such a focus would be beneficial not only for the graduate students but also for the University itself.

References

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Appendix: the Questionnaire

Use of the library and the quality of its provision:

- The library is a quiet place and encourages me to do my research.
- There is enough space to do my research in the library.
- The library facilities in general are satisfactory.
- The library has all the research materials I need.
- I rely heavily on the interlibrary loans services.
- The photocopying services are reliable.

Types of library materials used to support research:

- The library's print materials are very important in fulfilling my needs.
- The library's electronic materials are very important in fulfilling my needs.
- The library subscribes to a wide range of databases in my field.
- The library provides me with up-to-date books in my field.
- The library offers audio-visual resources relating to my field.
- Computers are available whenever I need them.
- The computer facilities meet my needs.
- The Internet service is efficient as an information resource.
- There is a variety and balance of information resources in my field.

Users' satisfaction with library resources and services:

- The library hours are convenient for fulfilling my research needs.
- The librarians are experienced in the borrowing system.
- The library has specialist librarians who know about my special subject.
- The reference librarian assists with my enquiries about information and resources.
- The library instructions are helpful to me when using the library.
- The books I need are available on the shelves.
- The library collection fulfils my needs.
- The library has enough staff.
- The library staff/librarians are helpful.

Familiarity with library services:

- I am familiar with how to use the following types of services in the library: Document delivery; Online catalogue; Information desk; E-journals; Databases; E-books (each as a separate question)

Role of the library in supporting research:

- The library offers information literacy workshops for graduate students.

- The services offered by the academic library are publicised to the students.
- The library website is very helpful for me in my field.
- The librarian is always available whenever I need.