
Exploring the Effectiveness of Library Services and Resources in Academic Libraries in Lebanon from Users' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study assessed the nature and effectiveness of library services and information resources provided at four academic libraries in Lebanon from the users' perspectives. The study employed a quantitative research method and a survey design approach. A total of 1100 survey questionnaires were distributed to students at Beirut Arab University (BAU), the Lebanese University (LU), the Lebanese American University (LAU) and the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK). A total of 865 questionnaires were returned or 78.63%.

Findings of this study will be useful to professional librarians, staff, and administrators in Lebanon and the Arab World who wish to develop user-centered library services and resources and to identify problem areas where improvements are needed.

Keywords: Library Services and Information Resources, Academic Libraries, Lebanon, Assessment, Users' Perspectives.

Introduction

The traditional way of measuring the effectiveness of an academic library's services and resources in quantifiable terms is no longer the sole acceptable evaluation metric. With academic libraries continuing to evolve as service organizations (Millson-Martula & Menon, 1995), increased demands for accountability have fostered new ways to measure the effectiveness of library services and resources. More than ever before, such evaluation is based on the extent the library meets user information needs and expectations (Abdallah, 2002). In fact, assessment has played a major role in evaluating academic libraries for a long time. Historically, the evaluation criteria put forth by the Association of Research Libraries

(ARL) emphasized objective descriptions of collection sizes and expenditure-driven metrics (Franklin, Kyrillidou, & Plum, 2006). Some researchers have argued that library clientele requires librarians...not to equate quality' merely with collection size (Heron & McClure, 1990). Meeting the information needs of library users requires conscious effort to provide timely and actual information resources and services that will satisfy their needs. Heron & Altman (2010) note that "libraries are now engaged in much more than the preservation and transition of the cultural history and having a nebulous role in meeting the needs of society and the institutions they serve" (p. vii). Most recently, the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) issued a summary report that described 19 strategies for demonstrating library value to the academy (Oakleaf, 2010). This report was followed by a toolkit designed to provide academic librarians with access to a variety of resources (e.g., best practices, assessment tools, journal articles, and websites) (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/issues/value/valueofacademiclibrariestoolkit>). Assessment practices are evolving in all types of libraries. In academic libraries, emphasis has been placed on student learning outcomes and success. However, as Oakleaf (2011) notes, academic librarians are moving to a larger scale of assessment to demonstrate library impact on parent institutions.

Problem Statement

Most college and university libraries in Lebanon are engaging in some form of assessments to articulate and demonstrate library value to stakeholders and constituencies. However, we know very little about the value of academic libraries from the users' perspectives. To what extent does the library contribute to students' experiences and satisfaction? The purposes of this study are to: 1) explore users' perceptions of the effectiveness of library services and information resources at four academic libraries in Lebanon, 2) determine how users access and use these services and resources, and 3) assess the overall quality of the library's contributions to students' experiences.

Results gained from this study should provide understanding of users' experiences, expectations, and information needs, as well as identify problem areas where improvements are needed.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. How do users perceive the effectiveness of library services and information resources at the selected academic libraries in Lebanon?
 - a. What is the quality of services and resources provided in these libraries?
 - b. How satisfied are users with services and resources?
 - c. What's the quality level of library facilities?
 - d. What's the students' level of exposure to or awareness of library instruction services?
 - e. How often do students visit or use the library and for what purposes?
 - i. For what reasons did students visit the library?
 - ii. How were students introduced to the library?
 - f. How effective are library staff in providing services?
2. What's the library's contribution to the students' experiences?
3. What expectations do students have of the library to meet their information needs?

Background

There are 46 universities in Lebanon. Though privately-held universities are abundant, only the Lebanese University is a publicly-held institution supported by the Lebanese Government. Private universities have a long history spanning over 151 years (since 1866) and established by different entities such as charitable or religious societies. The private universities used in this study represent these societies. This includes Beirut Arab University (BAU), Beirut campus; Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Main campus; and Lebanese American University (LAU), Main Campus. The Lebanese University (LU), Faculty of Information in Beirut is also included in this study.

Beirut Arab University (BAU)

BAU is a private institution established by the Lebanese El-Bir and Ihsan society in 1960. It has three campuses, one located in Beirut, one in Debbieh (South), and another in Tripoli (North). As of early 2015, BAU had 12,000 graduate and undergraduate students. BAU consists of ten Faculties; its teaching language is Arabic and English.

Currently, the university community benefits from the services provided by eight libraries shared among the three locations (i.e., Beirut, Debbieh, and Tripoli). The total collection consists of 114,268 books and 539 periodical titles, which is augmented with a subscription to fourteen specialized online databases. The collection is mainly in Arabic, yet many items are in English, French, and Persian languages.

Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK)

USEK is a private Catholic higher education institution founded by the Lebanese Maronite Order (LMO) in 1962. It is located in the heart of Mount Lebanon; is multilingual by tradition but mainly a French-speaking institution. Nowadays, USEK enrolls more than 7,500 students across its eleven Faculties, four institutes, and fifteen academic units. USEK maintains three libraries, the Main Library at the Kaslik campus, the library of the Regional University Center of Chekka, and the library of the Regional University Center of Zahle. The collection consists of over 200,000 items and 1,617 periodical titles and is augmented with subscriptions to 119 online databases.

<http://www.usek.edu.lb/UsekLibraryEn/Subpage.aspx?pageid=11834>

Lebanese American University (LAU)

LAU is a liberal arts institution of higher education established by the American-based Presbyterian Church, which is chartered in the State of New York. Founded in 1924, LAU currently has over 8000 graduate and undergraduate students of which 82% are Lebanese citizens and 18% are from the Middle East and other countries. It is administered by an autonomous Board of Trustees.

LAU has three campuses with three libraries, one in Beirut, one in Byblos, and one in New York City. These libraries house over 500,000 items, thousands of microforms, and over 700 periodical titles, and a subscription to 159 online databases. The bulk of the collection in Beirut and Byblos libraries is in English, yet many Arabic and French materials are also available. (<http://libraries.lau.edu.lb/index.php>). LAU has seven Faculties and two special programs in Education Peace and Women Studies.

Lebanese University (LU)

The Lebanese University is the only public institution of higher education in Lebanon. Founded in 1953, LU has 16 Faculties and operates 62 libraries that are home to a rich

collection consisting of more than 750,000 books, 400 periodical titles, various multimedia items and maps, and a subscription to 32 online databases. The collection is primarily in Arabic, English, and French but also includes items in other languages such as Persian. LU enrolls nearly 72, 000 students across its campuses.

In 2005, LU moved 9 Faculties to the Hadath compound (Mount Lebanon). However, the Main office and administration have remained in Beirut. (<http://library.ul.edu.lb/index.php/ar/>).

Literature Review

There is a dearth of literature on library assessment of different types of libraries in the U.S., Europe, and other countries. However, the body of literature on academic library assessment in Arab countries, in general, and in Lebanon, in particular, is scarce. Two bodies of literature are covered in this section, academic library assessment in Arab countries published in the English language, and academic library assessment in the U.S.

Academic library assessment in Arab Countries

Elsayed and Saleh (2013) assessed the value of academic libraries at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia. Return on investments (ROI) was measured in two ways, through article downloads from subscription databases by students and faculty, and through measuring the usage of 52 funded research report citations extracted from library databases in 2011. They found that only article downloads from online databases contributed to ROI. This was conceptualized through high cost the students and faculty would pay for purchasing the articles, if libraries did not subscribe to the online databases. The authors proposed a model for assessing LibValue in academic libraries in Arab countries.

Reporting on the measurement methods employed in academic libraries in Oman, Al Hijji and Cox (2012) conducted qualitative interviews with thirty-five library managers. They found that librarians used different methods for measuring the quality of library services and staff performance. These included surveys, reports, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), statistics, and interviews. The evaluation was also performed by external bodies in some libraries. It is unclear in this study whether library users (students and faculty) were involved in evaluating the quality or effectiveness of library services.

A much earlier study by Ibrahim (2004) on user perception of eResources in the United Arab Emirates University (UAE) revealed that faculty hardly used these resources. Reasons were lack of time, lack of awareness about the availability of these resources in the library, and language barrier. Ibrahim gathered the data through a survey of 140 faculty members at the University. He concluded, among other things, that the infrequent use of eResources was not at the level that would enhance learning and the research process as outlined in the mission of the library. He provided suggestions for improving use of eResources in academic libraries in Oman.

Academic library assessment in the U.S.

Library assessment, in general, has a long history in the U.S. The monumental work of Lancaster in 1977 has served as a guide for evaluating library services from both the collections' and users' perspectives for a long time. Herson's and McClure's (1990) treated evaluation from the perspectives of libraries. Oakleaf (2010, 2011) provided insights into strategies and priorities in evaluating academic libraries, while Matthews (2014) focused on best practices from the perspectives of both research libraries and higher education.

Referring to users as “customers” began in the mid-1980s with the work of Taylor (1986), Hernon and McClure (1990), and Whitehall (1992). This shift was influenced by marketing orientations from the business field, which emphasizes meeting customers’ needs and expectations (Kiran, 2010). It is also supported in the service quality literature, which underscores that only customers judge quality; and all other judgements are essentially irrelevant. In their recent book, Hernon and Altman (2010) reinforced the concept of users as “customers.”

Since 2005, assessment in higher education has focused on student learning outcomes and success. In the past decade, assessment of library contribution to student learning outcomes using LibQUAL+ has become the primary tool for measuring service quality. LibQUAL+ is a protocol with a set of instruments “by which libraries can determine their users’ opinions of their service quality, and also market the library” (Hufford, 2013, p. 15).

Numerous studies and reports have been published on library assessment in the U.S. and other western countries in the past ten years. A study by Thompson, Kyrillidou, and Cook (2008), for example, explored the differences and similarities in library service quality desires across students and faculty, geographic locations, and time. In examining scholarly reading and the value of library resources, Tenopir (2012) found that without access to library resources, academics and their departments would find fewer articles of good quality, and that they would pay a much higher cost for purchasing the articles (<https://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/Reports/ukscholarlyreadingreport/>). Similar results were found in the study of academic libraries in Saudi Arabia by Elsayed and Saleh (2013). In another work, Tenopir (2010) measured faculty scholarly article readings for research purposes. She found that such readings are more valued than readings for other purposes, and that most of the articles were obtained from the library’s online databases than from other sources. Additional studies on library value, impact, and return on investment can be found in the LibValue Database hosted at the University of Tennessee School of Information Sciences (<http://libvalue.cci.utk.edu/>).

Method

A quantitative method using the survey design approach was employed to collect data from students at the four selected universities.

Instrument

An existing instrument developed by the Lebanese American University Library (LAU) in 2013 to evaluate its services and resources as part of a self-study required for American accreditation was adapted for use in this study. A minor modification was made to conform selected questions to the educational system of the three other universities. This instrument consisted of twenty-two closed questions and one open-ended question. It was pilot-tested by three faculty members employed at LAU, three library directors of the other three universities, three graduate students at the Lebanese University, and four undergraduate students, two from the LU and two from BAU. It was administered in Arabic at LU and BAU and in English at LAU and USEK. The reviewers provided feedback on four questions that required clarification. The instrument was revised accordingly and the final version was distributed at the four participating universities.

Population and sample

The population consisted of nearly 17,500 students from the four university campuses. The sample included 1,100 graduate and undergraduate students. Due to lack of access to

students' mailing lists, a convenient instead of random sample was used. In this case, the students at the four universities who agreed to participate in the survey were included.

Procedures

Students taking classes with the first named author distributed the surveys to students at both LU and BAU libraries, cafeterias, and classrooms. The author's student assistants handed in the survey to students at LAU and USEK libraries, cafeterias, and classrooms in a similar way. The directors' permissions at these universities were sought before the distribution of the surveys. Students who participated in this study did not sign a consent form since such a form is not required. The data collection spanned over one year, from fall 2013 to fall 2014. A total of 1,100 surveys were distributed at the four universities, 865 were returned or 78.63%.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study resides in using only four academic libraries in Lebanon to explore users' perceptions of and satisfaction with library services and resources. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to all academic libraries in Lebanon. Another limitation concerns use of a convenient rather than a random sample of the students. This was due to lack of access to student mailing lists.

Results

The results are reported in relation to the research questions and sub-questions addressed in this study. We first present a profile of the participants to contextualize the results within the various groups of students.

Participants' Profile

The majority of participants from across the four universities were undergraduate students (mean percent=81.37), as opposed to graduate students (mean percent=8.63). The majority of the students' age ranged from 18 to 23 and from 24 to 34 years old. Also, the majority of participants from three universities (LU, LAU, and USEK) were females (mean percent=74), as opposed to males (mean percent=44) at BAU. This is not surprising, since female students nearly outnumber male students at all universities in Lebanon. In relation to educational level, the majority was in junior or third college year (mean percent=31.38), followed by sophomores or second year (mean percent=25.47), freshmen or first year (mean percent =15.5), and by seniors or fourth college year (mean percent=8).

Users' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Library Services and Information Resources

Quality of services and resources

Participants at LU (92%), BAU (82%), USEK (66%), and LAU (42%) rated the availability of laptops/computers as *poor* or *fair*, and that they were dissatisfied with these services. Similarly, those from LU (92%), BAU (76%) USEK (62%), and LAU (45%) rated the availability of photocopying, scanning, and printing services as *poor* or *fair*, and were dissatisfied with this service.

Satisfaction with services and resources

The majority of participants at BAU, LU, and USEK (mean percent=59) were dissatisfied with library resources (e.g., print materials, online databases, e-journals, e-books, and Internet access), and services (e.g., training sessions, opening hours, help with citing sources, and staff attitudes). Conversely, the majority of those at LAU (76%) were satisfied with all of

these services and resources. This is not surprising since LAU has to meet the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) standards in the U.S. (<https://www.neasc.org/>)

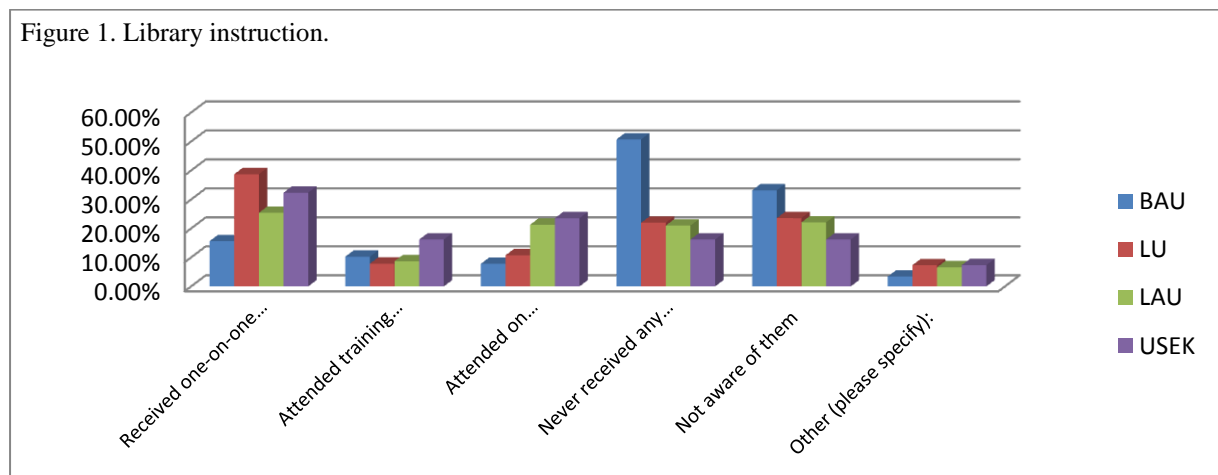
Other services evaluated were library cleanliness, safety and security, and environment (comfortable temperature and atmosphere). These were rated *good* or *excellent* by the majority of the participants (mean percent=64) at the four universities.

Quality of facilities

Participants were asked to rate the adequacy of library facilities including space, study rooms, and seating, among other things. The majority (67%) at USEK, and an equal percentage (50%) at LAU and BAU rated the adequacy of space for study and quiet areas as *excellent* or *good*, respectively, whereas only (30%) by those at LU considered these as *excellent* or *good*. In terms of lighting, (77%) from USEK and (63%) from LAU regarded this service as *excellent* or *good*, as opposed to (47%) at BAU and (42%) at LU. In relation to seating, the majority (68%) at BAU and (79%) at LU perceived the number of available seats as *poor* or *fair*, compared to (58%) at LAU and (53%) at USEK. As to the availability of study rooms, (88%) (BAU), 79% (LU), 56% (USEK), and 53% (LAU) rated this facility as *poor* or *fair*. This finding means that despite the differences in the ratings by the participants, the facilities should be relatively improved at the four libraries.

Exposure to or awareness of library instruction services

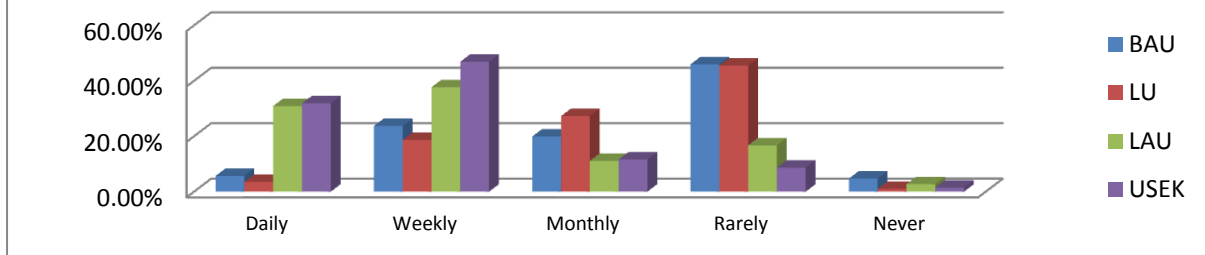
Participants were asked whether they received any instructions on how they use the library. Figure 1 shows that across the four universities, nearly (28%) (mean percent=27.9) mentioned receiving one-on-one assistance from library staff, a similar percentage (mean percent=27.43) never received any kind of assistance, and a lower percentage (mean percent=23.7) were not aware of such service. Only eleven percent (mean percent=10.69) of the participants indicated they attended training sessions, and the rest did not provide an answer to this question.



Frequency of visiting or using the library

As seen in Figure 2, an average of (50%) of the participants at BAU and LU indicated that they *rarely* or *never* visited the library, as opposed to (68.6%) at LAU and (78.76%) at USEK who visited the library on a daily or weekly basis. Reasons for visiting the library *rarely* or *never* include, but is not limited to, lack of knowledge of library staff and inadequate staff help. This is an area that requires attention at these libraries.

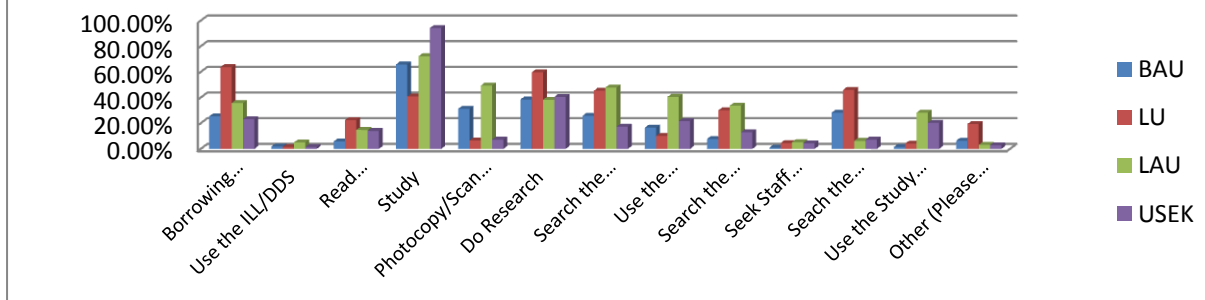
Figure 2. Frequency of visiting the library.



Reasons for visiting or using the library

Figure 3 shows that over 50% of the participants (mean percent=68.23) visited the library for *study*; less than fifty percent (mean percent=44.27) did so for conducting *research*, nearly over one third (mean percent=37) for *borrowing materials*, and a slightly lower percent (mean percent=34) for using the *Internet*.

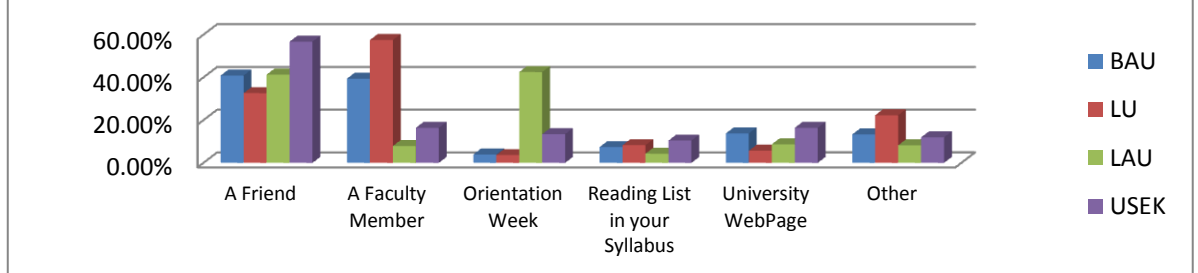
Figure 3. Reasons for visiting the library.



Getting to know the library

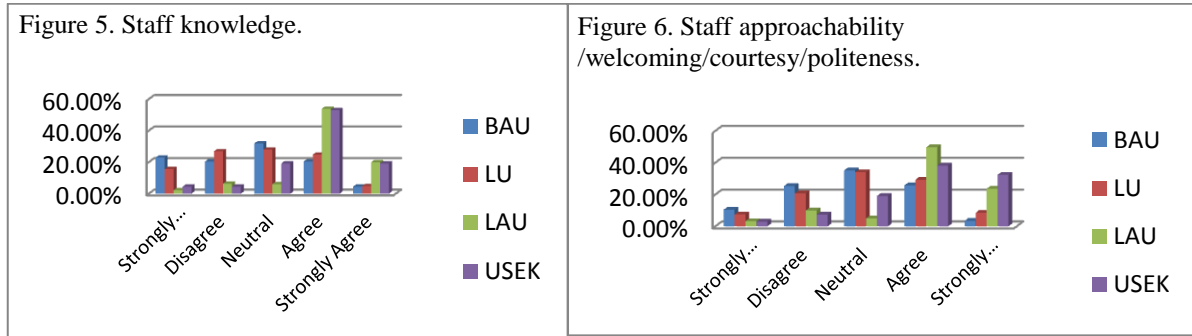
As seen in Figure 4, less than fifty percent (mean percent=43) of the participants got to know the library through a *friend*. An average of (48%) at both BAU and LU, (16.42%) at USEK, and (7.9%) at LAU indicated they were introduced to the library by *faculty members*. Students who learned about the library during *orientation week* varied with the highest percentage at LAU (42.5%), followed by (13.43%) at USEK and (6.63 %) at LU. Across the four universities, an average of (11.15%) mentioned they became aware of the library through the *university webpage*, 11% learned about the library from *other sources* (e.g., classes, Labs), and 7.5% did so through the *instructors' reading lists*.

Figure 4. Introduction to the library.

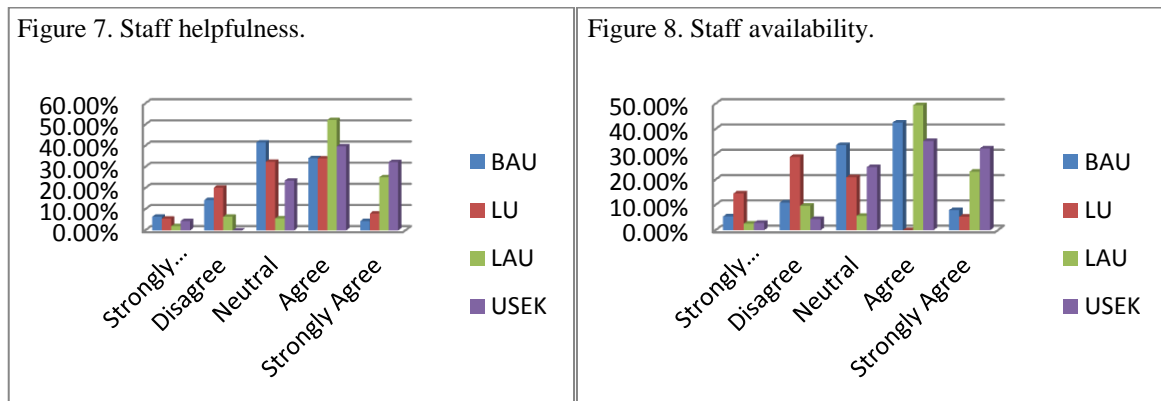


Staff effectiveness

The participants evaluated the effectiveness of library staff (professional librarians and paraprofessionals) on the following factors: Knowledge; approachability, welcoming, politeness and courtesy; helpfulness, and availability. As shown in Figure 5, the majority (mean value=73%) rated staff at LAU, USEK, and BAU as knowledgeable, compared to (42%) who indicated so at LU.



In terms of staff approachability, courtesy, and politeness; an average of (72%) at both LAU and USEK *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that staff had these characteristics; compared to an average of (31%) at both BAU and LU (Figure 6). In relation to staff helpfulness, a high percentage at LAU (77%) and USEK (72%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that staff were helpful, as opposed to (42%) at LU and (38%) at BAU (Figure 7). As to staff availability, (72%) at LAU, (68%) at USEK, and (50%) at BAU *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that staff were available when needed. Conversely, a very low number of participants at LU (5.38%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to that effect (Figure 8). These findings suggest a need to develop effective training programs for staff, especially at BAU and LU, to enhance their skills in providing supportive services to users.



Library Contribution to Students' Experiences

Students' ratings of the library's contribution to their experiences were rated as *somewhat helpful* or *not helpful at all* on the following items: *Finding information for assignments* (LU (70%) and BAU (52%), compared to USEK (30%) and LAU (17%)); *preparing group assignments* (LU (67%) and BAU (57%), compared to USEK (23%) and LAU (16%)); *preparing class presentations* (LU (75%) and BAU (59%), compared to USEK (18%) and LAU (16%)); *feeling part of the university community* (LU (59%) and BAU (55%), compared to both USEK and LAU (16% equally)); *overall academic success* (LU and BAU (56% equally), compared USEK (23%) and LAU (15%)); *making more efficient use of study time* (LU (58%) and BAU (50%), compared to USEK (20%) and (15%) LAU); and *feeling*

prepared for future career (LU (56%) and BAU (47%), compared to USEK (32%) and LAU (18%).

Students' Expectations and Meeting Information Needs

The participants provided comments and suggestions for improving library services and information resources at their affiliated libraries. Six themes were extracted from the coded comments. Some themes do not apply to all university libraries. Therefore, the findings are reported by university(ies) and applicable themes.

BAU and LU

Six themes were generated from the comments provided by the participants at LU and BAU. These included: *Library hours*. The participants desired an extension to service hours at both libraries. Currently, these libraries offer limited service hours, between 33 and 48 hours a week, which is insufficient for meeting the needs of the users, especially since no remote access to the library's collections exist. The respondents also expressed a need for *Remote Access* to library resources, including the online catalog and e-Resources. At LU, this service is currently not operational. In addition, they requested an updated *Collection*, such as new book titles, increased subscription to periodicals, and *Technology Improvements*. The latter includes fast and stable internet access, availability of software applications for word processing and other computing tasks, additional computers for use in the library; as well as printers, photocopy machines, and scanners. Moreover, the respondents indicated that library *Facilities*, such as space, study rooms, and quiet areas, among other things, were inadequate and did not meet their needs. As to *Staffing*, they mentioned that additional staff was needed to attend to and support their information needs.

USEK

Three out of the six themes were shared by the participants at USEK. These concerned an extension of *Library hours*, *Technology Improvements*, and *Facilities*. At the time of this study, USEK library was open 60 hours a week. The library is planning to increase its service hours in the near future. As to *Technology Improvements*, the participants requested additional computers for use in the library, printers, as well as fast and stable internet connectivity and speed. In addition, they indicated that access to the online catalog and eResources was inefficient. In relation to *Facilities*, they asked for additional space, seating, and study areas.

LAU

The comments of the participants at LAU fell within the same three themes as those at USEK. The participants requested 24/7 hours of service. It is noteworthy that LAU library has the longest hours of service among the four libraries (97.5 hours a week). In terms of *Technology Improvements*, they asked for additional laptops to checkout and increase in printing quota. As to *Facilities*, they needed additional library space, group study rooms; and comfortable chairs and couches. It appears that LAU participants have much higher expectations for library services than those at the three other libraries. This is attributed to the higher level and quality of services the library provides to its users, as evident in the findings of this study.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed more differences than similarities among the four university libraries. This is not surprising, especially since these libraries vary in terms of the educational system with which they are affiliated. Libraries at both LAU and USEK are perceived as important entities by the university administration, unlike those at LU and BAU.

Due to the fact that BAU has recently received accreditation from a European accrediting body and is planning to migrate to a new library system (discovery service platform) in the near future, it is expected that not only access to the system will be improved, but also internet connectivity and information discovery.

Based on the findings of this study, both BAU and LU and to a certain extent USEK contributed the least to their users' experiences in terms of learning outcomes and planning for future careers. This is due to inadequate staffing, lack of informational professionals, dated online catalog, weak library collections, poor technology infrastructure, and absence of information literacy programs. These problems also seemed to be at the crux of the users' dissatisfaction with the quality of services and information resources.

Despite the many differences among the four libraries, the qualitative data showed similarities across the participants in relation to the need for extending library hours, improving facilities, and enhancing information technology.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Academic libraries in Lebanon should build a culture of assessment. As Ennis (2010) notes, "culture" is code for not just doing assessment, but [also] liking it." (p. 1). Academic librarians should use "traditional means of assessment in new ways ...[and] think outside the box and traditional boundaries." (Jackson, 2012, p. 68). Libraries that seek accreditation have unique opportunities to think creatively about the needs and expectations of their users. They should develop assessment strategies to measure the quality of services and information resources, and should move beyond assessment from the library's perspectives to determine the effectiveness of the library from the users' perspectives (Johnson, 2014). Libraries may be able to improve their performance by putting a greater emphasis on the services they offer to their users, whether it is through providing greater numbers of staffed service points and public service hours or providing greater numbers of instruction sessions and outreach opportunities.

Research in the area of library assessment from the users' perspectives is highly recommended. Future studies should uncover faculty and staff perceptions in addition to those of the students. Findings from such studies could assist in creating an integrated, holistic user-centered framework for evaluating library services and resources. This framework can also be established by adapting existing instruments such as LIBQUAL+ and SERVQUAL.

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