Qatar National Library as a hub for community engagement for young learners: What have we achieved so far as a new public library?

Virgilio G. Medina Jr
Children’s and Young Adult’s Department, Qatar National Library, Doha, Qatar

Hind A. Al-Khulaifi
Research and Learning Services, Qatar National Library, Doha, Qatar

Abstract:

This paper highlights the important role of a public library as a learning space through partnerships for community engagement. This paper focuses on some successful initiatives and programs of the Qatar National Library (QNL), specifically the Young Adults department. This paper presents how the QNL maximized its state-of-the-art facilities and spaces to encourage young learners’ engagement in various community-based programs. By doing so, the library became an integral part of their learning development. This paper explores a wide range of activities that the department has undertaken, which have positively impacted the development of young learners’ personal, social, and academic skills. Official documents, including statistical reports, monthly programs, users’ feedback, and annual report were interpreted for quantitative analysis. A survey on users’ satisfaction with current library facilities and services was used to examine users’ perspectives and recommendations. Departmental heads were interviewed to identify their decision-making processes when organizing programs. Finally, the collected data was integrated to identify patterns and situations in order to further support public library functions. This paper reveals unique perspectives and inspiring stories from a new public library in Qatar.

Keywords: Qatar National Library, young adults, programming, library space

Introduction

The Qatar National Library may have opened its door to the public in April 2018, but it truly began in 2012 when Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, launched the idea of building a state-of-the-art library as a support for a future knowledge-based economy – a project in line with Qatar National Vision 2030 (Office of Her Highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser, 2012). The library functions not only as public library but also as an institution
dedicated to preserving national and cultural heritage, in the best interest of Qatar’s residents. As previously stated, the library officially opened in April of 2018, becoming fully operational to the community. The library’s vision and mission are outlined below (QNL, n.d.):

**Vision**

*To be one of the world's preeminent centers of learning, research, and culture; a guardian of the region's heritage; and an institution that promotes imagination, discovery and the nourishment of the human spirit.*

**Mission**

*The mission of Qatar National Library is to preserve the nation's and region's heritage and enable the people of Qatar to positively influence society by creating an exceptional environment for learning and discovery.*

*The Library will achieve its mission by creating and sustaining an intuitive and trusted information environment in a culturally and technologically exceptional setting and by developing innovative programs and services.*

The library consists of seven areas: Distinctive Collections, IT Operations & Infrastructure, Digital Content, Research & Support Services, Operations & Strategic Planning, and International Relations & Communications.

The Children and Young Adults Services operates under the Chief Librarian along with Research & Learning Services, Reference Services, Collection Development, Access Services, and Technical Services. All departments report to the Chief Librarian under supervision from the Executive Director of the Library.

**A Few Facts about Qatar National Library**

Qatar National Library’s latest annual report highlights statistics on library usage; user engagement with various services and programs, as well as the number of visitors welcomed since January 2018 (QNL, 2019):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library Statistics (Members and Visitors)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Members</td>
<td>63,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books Checked Out</td>
<td>717,009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Visitors</td>
<td>480,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of New Titles Added</td>
<td>41,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Website Users</td>
<td>378,209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Library Website Page Views</td>
<td>4,318,526</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Library Statistics (Resources)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library Statistics (Resources)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Titles Added</td>
<td>41,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Titles in Arabic</td>
<td>29,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Ebooks</td>
<td>380,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Ebooks (Arabic)</td>
<td>17,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Journals</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Library Statistics (Programs and Events)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library Statistics (Programs and Events)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Events</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Registered Participants</td>
<td>21,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Tour Visitors</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these numbers, the report also ranks the frequency of website visitors by country. The top ten are: 1) Qatar; 2) United States of America; 3) Egypt; 4) United Kingdom; 5) India; 6) Algeria; 7) Sudan; 8) Morocco; 9) United Arab Emirates; and 10) Iraq.

In terms of social media platforms, the library’s Facebook account has the highest number of followers (31,744), followed by Twitter (26,012) and Instagram with 20,117 followers.

Young Adults (YA) Division: An Overview

This paper centers on the initiatives and practices of Young Adults Division, a division that focuses on a strategic and coherent approach to working with young adults.

The Young Adults Division is part of the Children and Young Adults Department. The Children and Young Adults Department is subdivided into two age bracket divisions: Children (0 to 11 years of age) and Young Adults (12 to 18 years of age).

The collection of the Young Adults Division houses different sections: fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels, magazines, CD & DVDs, and a video gaming station. These are available in English and Arabic, with a few selected resources available in Spanish and French. The borrowing limit is set at an allotment of 21 days, but this can be extended up to 63 days through a user’s online account. In addition, library membership cards enable users to access a wide range of popular digital resources geared for students. These include AudioBook Cloud, Brittanica School, eLibrary, Frontiers, Middle Search Plus, Novelist, Overdrive, and Tumblebooks – resources catering to teen students.

The facilities below are also available for YA users:

- **Videogames:** Located on the second floor of the YA section, a space comprising six gaming stations (e.g. PlayStation 4 console, Xbox One, and Nintendo Switch).
- **Computer Software Room:** A space for users to learn different computer software skills such as Microsoft Office, Adobe Photoshop, and video editing.
• Music Studio Room: A space that is equipped with various musical instruments such as piano, guitar, drums, as well as recording equipment.
• 3D Printing and Makerspace Room: A space that allows users to learn about 3D printing and create DIY art projects using various tools.
• Photography Room: A space that provides any photography and filming-related services, and equipment free for use.
• Individual Reading Room: A space that accommodates quiet study or independent reading.
• Devices: YA users are given access to borrow laptops and portable mobile chargers in the library.

Qatar National Library also offers library tours that allow both local and private school students to explore and learn about various printed and online resources available for primary and secondary level learners.

Research Focus

This paper explores the initiatives, locally-based practices and services of the Qatar National Library’s Young Adults division with a specific focus on the first year of operation as a public library in Qatar, and how these initiatives, practices, and services supported young adult development of lifelong learning skills. To that end, the following research questions were developed:

1. What are the programs and initiatives that the Young Adult Division has undertaken for its target audience?
2. How does the Young Adult Division plan and execute its library programming?
3. How do young learners perceive current library facilities, practices, and services offered to the community?

Literature Review

Public libraries have developed various guidelines, programs, and services that cater to young adult learning, literacy, recreation, and personal growth. In 2015, Mount Prospect Public Library created the “Discovery Zone,” an initiative that aims to foster youth patrons’ STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) skills by providing resources and equipment related to their STEAM needs (Barlett & Boss, 2018). Barniskis (2013) highlighted the positive impact of arts and crafts activities in engaging with teens, and how such activities lead to strong and successful partnerships. Pratt Library in Baltimore organized a technology training summer camp for upper elementary and middle school students (ages 9 to 14) that tackled technology skills the library staff frequently found were common one-on-one requests from young adults. The library also hosted a spring Teen Tech Week, a pilot for a gaming program aimed at the same age group (Taylor, 2009).

With regard to guidelines and standards on administering young adult library programs, different international professional groups provide useful information that help library staff design and execute programs in line with acceptable practices. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), established in 1957, is committed to supporting YA librarians by advocating for the library agenda, promoting research, developing staff skills, and identifying best practices and trends around YA library services (YALSA, n.d.). YALSA has created a unique platform that enables YA librarians to share local initiatives and useful
resources that can be replicated at the local level. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) highlights the importance of collaborating with teen patrons, encouraging librarians to co-plan activities with teens and for teens (IFLA Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section, 2015). The report outlines youth positive activities such as book talks, discussion groups on current issues, author visits, filming productions, cultural and recreational activities, personal development workshops, debates, and book promotions. The Australian Library and Information Association supports the development of children and young adult services through literature and professional development at a local and international level (ALIA, n.d.). This includes National Simultaneous Time, Summer Reading Club, the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), the Children’s Book Council of Australia, and the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators.

All of these professional associations share a common agenda – to uplift and empower young adults in becoming effective learners through the provision of useful resources and programming grounded in evidence-based practice.

**Methodology**

This qualitative exploratory study sought to determine how library services, facilities and spaces are maximized when supporting user needs, as well as highlighting collaborative efforts and partnerships with various institutions. The first step involved identifying division and department heads through an organizational chart, and conducting face-to-face interviews to determine the processes and strategies that facilitated programming at QNL. This was followed by an analysis of the annual report and program statistics, that provided information on the list of organized programs including the number of partnerships that were successfully initiated by the Young Adult Division. Lastly, a survey was administered to collect data on the level of user satisfaction with current library facilities and services, and to gather various recommendations on how the library could further be improved to meet user needs.

The following documents were examined to glean important insights, evidence, and data relevant to research questions.

**Organizational Chart**

The authors examined the organizational chart and identified interviewees from management who could provide information on and insight into the planning and decision-making process when organizing library programs. Along with the interview, examination of the chart clarified protocols set by the senior management team.

**Annual Report**

QNL published its first annual report in 2018, highlighting some of the achievements and successes of the library since the day it officially opened to the public in 2017 (QNL, 2019). The report outlines five strategic objectives centering on library roles, development of library services, collection development, preservation and promotion of research and heritage, and QNL as an independent entity. It also discloses statistics on library operations, services, and users, as well as the mission, vision, and values of the library.
**Program Statistics**

At the end of every month, program leaders add to this document by describing their programs, identifying third parties involved, naming the lead facilitator, target audience, languages of design and implementation, and date and time of program delivery. The librarian responsible for the final report ensures that all fields are fully completed, including the number of reference questions received, and number of schools that participated in library tours during the time span of the report.

**User Survey**

For the purposes of this study, the user survey was administered during five consecutive programs held at QNL for young adults. The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions that collected information on user profiles (gender and age), frequency of library visits, reasons for library visits, and a five-point Likert scale that measured users’ overall satisfaction with library facilities, resources and services. The survey concluded with an open-ended question that sought to collect users’ recommendations on how the QNL Young Adult Division could be further improved.

**Findings**

The interviews conducted with different department heads focused on the planning, organizing and promoting of library programs at QNL, as well protocols related to introducing new programs to library users.

**Library Programming from Planning to Execution**

When planning for new programs, it is essential that teams work collaboratively, and that the number of programs to be organized align with the monthly themes set by library management (A. Al Malki & A. Al Mamoud, personal communication, February 1, 2019). Librarians typically begin by completing the “program details sheet”, a form that requests the following information: title, promotional description, date and time, audience, venue, a list of needed supplies for purchase approval, and a photograph from Shutterstock. While the purpose of the program planning sheet is to streamline new program proposal evaluations by the department head, the document also helps staff think through the process of completing the new program step-by-step, including a list of supplies needed. Once ready and approved, approved programs are uploaded to the system where these are reviewed and proofread by the communication team. After this review, programs are finally published to the QNL website for public access and registration.

**Partnerships for Library Programming**

QNL librarians actively pursue collaborative partnerships with other institutions such as schools and universities, local and government agencies, private entities, and even international organizations in order to maximize the impact of library programming, further engage the community, and promote use of library resources. Past and current partners include:
Local:

- Qatar Museums
- Ministry of Education and Higher Education
- Doha Historical Dictionary Arabic Language
- Qatar Traditional Architecture Photographic Collection
- KidZania
- Brain Education Children
- Arts and Craft Center
- Kahramaa
- Translation and Interpretation Institute (TII)
- Aspire
- Qatar Foundation – Pre-University & Community Development
- HBKU Press
- Goethe Institute
- Camp Festival

International:

- British Library
- Bibliotheque national de France
- Koninklijke Bibliotheek in the Netherlands
- The National Library of China
- The National Library of Turkey
- The National Library of Azerbaijan
- New York University

Through these partnerships, QNL has successfully organized various exhibitions and events that showcase the richness of Qatar’s cultural heritage, and its relationship with other nations (QNL, 2019). This agreement enables QNL and other organizations to share local practices and knowledge, further strengthening the library’s outreach to its community.

Statistical Data

As shown in Figure 1, the Young Adult Division successfully organized 15 library programs during the first month of the library’s operation. In February and April, the YA team decided to reduce the number of programs offered to seven due to other priorities such as collection development, outreach programs, training development and school visits. Another reason for eliminating some programming was that these months appeared to be a semester break for both public and international schools. October was the busiest month, with 15 programs, followed by July and August with 12 activities. Overall, the estimated number of library programs being facilitated ranged from 7 to 11, depending on user demand, staff availability, work load, and existing major projects.
Figure 2 shows the main five categories that the Young Adults staff used to select and organize their programs. Prior to the final selection of library programs, each YA staff member identified the category based on his/her expertise, invited guests, resources, user preference and monthly theme. Lecture and training skills (35% or 30 programs) seems to have been the most popular category throughout the year. This category included a youth and leadership conference, Teen Advisory Group, public speaking, and other personal development trainings that help young adults develop their personal and social skills. The Arts and Creativity category placed second in preference with 25%, or 30 programs. Programs such as jewelry making, teen crafts, English and Arabic calligraphy, and stitching have been repeated more than once because of their popularity among teenagers. STEM had 24% or 29 programs, an area of focus also considered to be more popular among young adults. Examples of STEM programs include Ozobot coding, Snap Circuits (electricity), Hour of Engineering, Teen Tech Hour, and Lego Creators. The smallest category of facilitated programs was Health and Wellbeing (7% or 9 programs). This category included Zumba and Teen Cuisine - both requiring a special dedicated space.
Figure 3 shows the cumulative number of attendees at all monthly programs delivered by the YA Division from November 2017 to October 2018. The figure indicates that October had the highest number of participants (1,326) followed by the month of July which had 785. A number of reasons could be a big event led by the Orchestra of the Filipino Youth in collaboration with the Philippine embassy. It has become one of the main events for October and is quite popular with library users. Also, two sessions of database training for middle and high school were conducted during this month in collaboration with schools. However, April had the lowest number of participants given that only seven programs were facilitated, and that spring break for all schools in Qatar took place during that time.
User Survey Results

Figure 4 reports the level of user satisfaction with QNL services and facilities. The majority of young adults surveyed (46%) indicated a high level of satisfaction with the QNL services and facilities offered to the young adult community. However, a small number (1%) reported that they were dissatisfied with the current services. In the survey questionnaire it was specifically identified that users were highly satisfied with the library operating hours, library staff assistance and the online catalog. A significant number of respondents felt neutral toward notifications of new arrival of library materials.

Discussion

Library Program Planning

It is evident that QNL has an explicit process and strategic approach toward planning and executing library programs as way of connecting to the community. Findings indicate that QNL functions as a decentralized environment, from planning, implementing, and coordinating, to promoting library activities through various communication platforms. Staff are trained to follow certain protocols through a systematic approach in order to ensure the library addresses the diverse needs of its users, serving not only as a physical space, but also as a learning environment for all.

Furthermore, an emphasis on, and a valuing of collaboration with other local and international agencies, is a widespread strategy at QNL. Most of the library programs take advantage of partnerships that help the library to further promote its importance and value as a key player in Qatar’s development. Ultimately, as a non-profit organization with various successful partnerships, QNL can use the data collected in this study to further strengthen these key relationships by making sure goals set by stakeholders are being met.
Cumulative Monthly Programs

The data collected and examined for this study indicates YA Division staff effectively run programs and strategically use their time to achieve the goals and priorities of the Children and Young Adults’ Department. For instance, the procedures QNL has in place for program review and approval provide ample opportunities for staff to plan their programs according to the appropriate month, re-evaluate new workloads, and for have management assess program effectiveness based on set goals. The data examined in this study can be used to strengthen the existing marketing and promotion strategies of the library staff. Examining the popularity of programs, the communications young adults pay attention to or ignore, and reviewing school holidays will help YA staff further reach their target patrons, by assessing the community’s demands and expectations.

It is a challenge to determine the number of programs to be undertaken given the diversity of library users. However, an opportunity exists for YA staff to consider how statistics and feedback such as the information collected for this study, can inform their perspective on how to best support users becoming effective learners and designing programs that nurture and develop various skills for young adults’ personal, social and academic needs.

Program Categories

Determining demand for categories or types of program simplifies the process of planning future library activities by aligning them to user needs and preferences. It also illustrates the current library practices that can be evaluated in comparison to other public libraries and whether the variety in categories should be further developed from a point of view of library management and community engagement. Determining what is in demand enables YA librarians to identify future potential facilitators, speakers, and volunteers, and to consider any possible tie-ins with other organizations.

Additionally, the presented data might help YA staff decide if programming should be delivered as a series versus a single session, which has been the traditional approach of YA staff when facilitating library programs. Another benefit of this study is that its findings allow management to better allocate resources by leveraging the priorities of each department towards the achievement of QNL goals.

Finally, while the benefits of external collaborations and partnerships is recognized among QNL staff, reviews such as the one completed in this study provide the opportunity to collect staff input and address any challenges while understanding the needs of the community in relation to library programs.

Monthly Attendance

As shown in Figure 4, user opinions of library programming and services are indispensable evidence when assessing how well a library program met the needs of its target patrons. This also translates into an opportunity for YA staff to design unique program to satisfy user demands and fill in any missing gaps related to library programs. Additionally, further data could be collected and analyzed to avoid any overlapping programs with other departments, an important consideration since each department has their own way of organizing programs.
The findings presented in Figure 4 suggest management should revisit the communication platforms used to reach out the young adult community, and explore other possible outlets that might strengthen the communication between QNL and young adults.

The significant number of library program attendees in QNL’s first year of operation is considered to be a huge milestone achievement for the organization, and has become a great indicator of its active role in community engagement. It could be seen here that the notion of visiting the library has been an integral part of young adults’ lives, as many respondents indicated “satisfaction” with the existing library facilities and services. This finding suggests that young adults appreciate the value of the library and its printed resources despite of their exposure and interaction with various digital resources.

Even so, study findings uncovered a few missing gaps in terms of services, facilities, programs and other aspects that may hinder the library’s progress with young adults. For instance, users were neutral on the ways QNL communicated new acquisitions or programming. This important feedback helps the library further address some of the information and communication challenges encountered by young adults.

In order to continuously improve, bringing its programming to the next level, it is important that the Young Adult Division incorporate user feedback in its planning and goal setting. Thus, this study recognizes the significance of the data collected, and how it might enable QNL to re-examine and re-structure its role in addressing the needs of a community with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Conclusions

While QNL has been newly introduced to the public, the YA Division immediately recognized strengths and weaknesses in terms of what it can provide to its target patrons, particularly in planning and implementing library programs that seek to empower and nurture young adults as they become lifelong learners in a 21st century learning environment. Furthermore, the library is committed to becoming a hub for community engagement, through its design and delivery of high-quality programs, not only for young learners, but for all ages, in support of the Qatar National Vision 2030. The library’s current achievements are just the beginning of what is yet to unfold in the coming years. To follow us on this exciting journey, and to learn more about the Qatar National Library, please visit us at: www.qnl.qa.

Disclaimer: All programs discussed in this study were organized by the Young Adults’ Division. This study does not address or discuss the more comprehensive list of programs organized for Young Adults by other departments and divisions of Qatar National Library.

References


IFLA Guidelines for Library Services for Young Adults (Revised). (n.d.). Retrieved April 17, 2019, from https://www.ifla.org/publications/guidelines-for-library-services-for-young-adults--revised-


