Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Danish Post-Secondary Students Use Public Libraries for Study Purposes

A review of:
Pors, Niels Ole. "The Public Library and Students' Information Needs." New Library World
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Reviewed by:
Julie McKenna
Librarian, University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada
E-mail: juliemileskatie@yahoo.ca

Abstract

Objective – To determine whether and how Danish university and higher education students use public libraries for study purposes.

Design – Online survey.

Setting – Post-secondary programs in Denmark.

Subjects – 1,575 students in university-level programs or other higher education programs (vocational three-to-four-year programs) in Denmark.

Methods – A sample of students was drawn from the national database of students by selecting every student born on the 15th of every month (approximately 4,900 students). A letter describing the study and with an invitation to fill out an online questionnaire was sent to all students in the sample. There were 1,694 valid responses (approximately 35% response rate). Students following short vocational programs were deemed to be under-represented and these subjects were omitted from the analysis of this report, which reflects the response of 1,575 students.

The online questionnaire gathered demographic details (gender, age, educational institution, study topic, study year, geographical location, access to the Internet, etc.) and used 110 questions or statements to gather information about student information-seeking behaviour related to study purposes. These included use of the physical library and satisfaction with services, use of search engines, awareness and use of library Web-based services, study behaviour, and participation in information literacy activities.

Main results – For the purposes of this study, "academic library is used as a generic term covering university libraries, research libraries, educational libraries and all other kind of libraries outside the field of public libraries" (p. 278).

The survey results confirmed many of the previous international reports of student information-seeking behaviour: 85% of students use the academic library for study purposes; fewer than 10% of all students are able to cope without any library use; students in technology and engineering, the sciences and arts, architecture and music have a higher rate of non-use of their academic libraries; a large percentage of students access the electronic resources from home; the physical library is still considered important to students; Google is used extensively and is nearly the exclusive choice for search engine.

The public library is used for study purposes by about 58 percent of all students with the highest use (76%) by students in higher education institutions (HEI); students of education, social topics and psychology are very frequent public library users. Female students in HEI were the most frequent users of the public library independent of study subject or year, or any other demographic variable. Seven per cent of students rely exclusively on the public library for study purposes and first-year HEI students in the subject areas of education, social topics and psychology are over-represented in this group (which additionally has less Internet access from home than the other students).

Students perceive nearly all aspects of service in the academic library as superior; HEI students rate ambience, electronic resources and speed of inter-library loan provision in the public library as higher than the academic.

University students give a low rating to the collections of public library, although the students use the public library principally to supplement the collections available in their academic libraries. Another high use of public libraries by HEI students is for inter-library loans placed through the national resource sharing system. Public library reference services are used often by only one per cent of students and only two per cent use the public library on a regular basis for "study related group activities."

Conclusion – Students use physical libraries to a great extent to support their studies and students have embraced digital access to collections, especially access from home. Google is the most heavily used search engine and is used by nearly all students; use of Google complements and supplements library use.

Nearly 60% of all students use public libraries for study purposes and to supplement the collections of their academic library, but they find that the public library collections are insufficient to meet their needs. The inter-library loan policies of public libraries are more lenient and accommodating to student needs and may drive the high use of public libraries. Students form a large constituency of the public library user population and they generally rate most aspects of service as substandard to those of academic libraries. There is a call for review of the public library's role in meeting the information needs of students, and in particular, those of HEI programs who are most dependent on the public library.

Commentary

This study is an ambitious attempt to define the use of public libraries by post-secondary students in Denmark and will be of interest to both public and academic librarians. The

information policy environment in Denmark is described in this article, and this provides a framework about the nature of library services for Danish citizens and the country's tremendous national resource sharing environment.

The study considers post-secondary education student use of libraries in Denmark and raises questions about how to meet the needs of students within the public library system. These questions are important considerations for all who strive to serve students in a seamless environment of digital and traditional library services that requires cooperation across library sectors.

The research design and methodology of the study are well described. The seemingly simple construct of "study purposes" was not defined in the study and it would be beneficial, especially given the international context, to learn the scope of definition. The report refers to results as "actual behaviour," yet the study utilizes an online survey through which students self-report their behaviour. Without access to the questions and statements utilized in the instrument, it is difficult to assess the potential biases in the survey response.

The percentage of students indicating regular public library use is very high; it would be very interesting to pursue this study in other international regions to determine whether the same rates of public library use exist among students elsewhere.

This research provides an insight into student use of public libraries in Denmark and is an important exploratory study, the results of which could contribute to further understanding about student use and expectations of public libraries.